

**January/February 2022**

**Meet the crazy GOAT PEOPLE**

***For years the American Sara Stout few around the world for her work as a model. But deep in her HEART she knew: that’s not who I am. Together with her family, she decided to start a campsite in the middle of the FORESTS and on one of the many lakes in Michigan. Where their lives revolve around rubber boots, sitting still for hours and FOREST WALKS with goats.***

*Interview Alja Baker, Photography Rober Neve, Creative Linda Gumus Gerriesen, Production Trish Neve*

Pine trees that seem to reach for the clouds, the steamy air of a rainstorm that has just lifted. The smell of wet wood, damp moss and thick layers of autumn leaves on the ground - winter is coming. With a bit of luch, a bald eagle soars through the skies high in the treetops, with its shrill call nothing less than an American icon. Especially in the state of Michigan - affectionately called the Wolverine State and known for the many large lakes and fishing - where we are guests of Sara Stout and her family. “Pooh, the house is finally empty and quiet after the morning carousel,” Sara (40) sighs, “Time to talk.” It's nine o'clock in the morning, daughters Avery (12) and Maya (8) are at school, husband Jarred (44) has just started his daily inspection of the plot of land around their house and Sara is slumped in a thick layer of pillows on the couch, a steaming cup of coffee within reach. The reason we speak is Detach, the nature campsite that the couple just opened on their estate. Sara: “It all started with my brother-in-law Steve. When corona broke out, he asked if he could come and live with us temporarily. There was plenty of room, so of course we said yes, but I also thought: this could get interesting. Because we were all home too. The girls were educated online and Jarred and I worked from home. In order not to be on each other's lips, we have set up a yurt, a large tent, on our land, where my brother-in-law lives to this day. It turned out to be a great solution and the start of Detach."

***Alone on the world***

For a year, Jarred camped outside every week, getting to know the terrain from top to bottom and finding out the best places to stay. “Uninviting? Not at all," Sara bellows, "are you kidding me? After a year in lockdown it was wonderful to have some time to myself. I spent evenings in the bath with a glass of red wine and devoured one book after another. I can recommend it to anyone.”

 Together with their business partners, the couple erected seven large tents. At the moment two ‘hobbit homes’ are also being built: houses that are dug into a hill. “There is no WiFi, no running water, no electricity,” says Sara. Fire is made the old-fashioned way and guests bring their own bedding. The aim is to make people fully part of nature. Our site is large, about twenty-six hectares, and the tents are very far apart. So you don't have to meet anyone if you don't want to, except deer snakes and birds of prey. In Michigan you have a long biking trail, an old railroad that crosses the entire state. That path runs right through our area. We hope that backpackers will put Detach on their route, arrive on foot or by bike, camp for a few nights and then travel on again.”

 It's about recharging, to have the idea that you are alone in the world. “And above all to experience nature,” Sara says, “and escape to the hectic pace of everyday life.” A hectic one, she knows better than anyone, that if you're not careful will just run off with you.

***Modeling***

Because how different her life is now, than it was twenty years ago. Where the days today are about long walks in the woods with their four goats (“You've got the crazy cat lady, we are the crazy goat people”), homework and the cures of a prepubescent, they used to revolve around fashion shows for brands like Ralph Lauren and Brooks Brothers. About cover shoots for demanding clients and one trip after another, from New York to Milan and Paris and all kinds of tropical destinations for the many bikini shoots in which Sara played the leading role. Modeling started when she was 12 “I was already six feet at the time, so I was almost thrown down the catwalk” - and picked up steam at 17, the age when she moved to New York on her own and started working full-time. She finished school by post, as online education did not yet exist. Sara: “In retrospect I realize how terribly young I was, but at the time I just did it. I've walked countless shows mainly for classic American brands, worked with photographers like Richard Avedon and at one point hung on a billboard in Times Square, in a campaign for Perry Ellis. My agency didn't say no to anything, so I worked day and night. Whether that was good for me and whether I actually liked it were questions I didn't ask myself.”

 The turning point came when her agency went bankrupt. 'Fine, I thought, time to go home. I didn't mind at all, because I had a bad taste in my mouth from that modeling work.” Were it not that her mother had other plans. “It wasn't until much later that she told me that she then called the Elite modeling agency, one of the leading agencies at the time. Secretly, because she knew I would say otherwise: don't interfere, I'll do what I want. She told Elite, ‘My daughter is a perfect fit for you, she just appeared in Vogue and hung big in Times Square. She shouldn't know I'm behind this, so make an excuse and approach her.’ They did. They supposedly ‘found’ me one day while I was walking in a park in Washington Heights. It turned out to be a golden move: working with them.' enjoy twenty years.”

***Mud on my clothes***

With pleasure, yes, but it was still buffalo. “People often don't realize that models work really hard. I officially lived in New York, but was hardly ever there. For years I lived out of a suitcase and sat alone in airplanes. Even after I met Jarred, it went on and on. Even when I was getting married, my agent called, ‘Yeah hey, I know you're getting married on the 30th, but I'm getting an offer that you really have to say yes to, can you reschedule the wedding?’ It was an insane amount of money, more than I could imagine, but I didn't do it.”

 Four weeks after the birth of daughter Avery, Sara was back in front of the camera. “After a year it broke me. I could not hold on any longer. Neither could Jarred, for that matter, because he was alone with the baby the whole time. Get a nanny, my agency said, but I'm not going to give birth to children and then not be with them. I didn't want to pump in a toilet on the other side of the world while my child at home got the bottle. no thanks.” Today, Sara still does the occasional job, but only on her own terms.
“I take the currants out of the porridge and that's delicious. Working now is a welcome change. It's great to have a nice make-up after weeks with my family and to feel like a woman again for a while, instead of mother and partner. But to be honest, it's not and I am. After such a job I am always really myself again when I have unpacked my bags, put on my rubber boots and stand outside among the trees and the

animals. Surrounded by Jarred and the girls, with mud on my clothes—it's who I am.”

***Water as clear as glass***

Jarred met them in Brooklyn at a mutual friend's party, where he told her he was a great snowboarder. He turned out to have grown up in the neighborhood of Sara's hometown in Michigan. “I finally took the plunge and asked him out. I sent a non-committal message, something along the lines of: ‘hey, do you want to go snowboarding and be my date at my grandma's New Years’ party?’ He responded with ‘I'll be there in an hour!!’ It soon became apparent that he couldn't snowboard, haha, but I did fall in love.”

 The couple has now been married for seventeen years and they live close to their parents again. Sara:
“I always wanted a simple life. The American dream of the white picket fence, with a husband and children. I don't know why, but it suits me. Western society is currently focused on the individual and it is not considered cool to move back to the place where you were born, to family. But I believe in the saying ‘It takes a village to raise a child. It is nothing short of a blessing to have our parents so close. On weekends we can often be found in the family log cabin in the hills, where we all ski together. My parents babysit regularly and my sister and brother-in-law are also very involved. It makes life easier, but also just nicer and healthier. You just need help to cope with the overwhelming experience of parenthood.”

 The couple moved back to Michigan, near Grand Rapids City, when they were two years old. Jarred found the house with the plot of land online. “What turned out was right next to the house I grew up in! I still remember when I secretly explored the neighbours' property. There was a large pond that attracted me immensely. I used to sneak there to throw rocks into the water and then the neighbor would come out and yell for me to get out. We bought it blind, without seeing the house. We didn't have to, because for us it was all about the place and the ground. And that wonderfully romantic lake. The water comes straight from a spring in the forest so it's clear as glass and as cold as ice.”

***Fikkies in the forest***

Sara and Jarred hope to pass on their love for the environment to Detach’s guests. There is no staff here: the idea is that everyone is responsible for themselves. “You take as little as possible and clear everything behind your ass or That's how we live ourselves. We don't do social media, except for a modest Instagram account for Detach, we burn in the woods, go canoeing and sometimes sit quiet for hours on a rock, hoping to see special birds. We live with respect for nature. It is the least we can do in return, because there is a healing, almost magical power emanating from the environment. When I walk around here, with only the trees for company, all the stress disappears. In those moments I feel that this is what people are made for: living in and with nature.”

 In addition to the hobbit homes, there are three regular tents on Detach, two yurts, originally from Central Asia, and three teepees. The latter are especially special: Jarred and their business partners each designed one, all of which were painted by hand. Sara: “My favorite is turquoise and features a red cardinal, a local bright red bird. We ourselves do not have a Native American background, but we are sure that people have lived here in the past. We are currently delving into the history of the plot of land and are investigating who the original inhabitants were. The history of the indigenous Americans and the role that France, England and modern America have played in this is of course painful. And it's not our culture, I realize that. But I admire the culture of the native people. Especially the respect she had for nature and that she also attributed magical powers to her. A good friend of mine is Cherokee and helps me with my research. For the shoot I was allowed to borrow a few pieces of clothing from her, including the white embroidered poncho. A great honour.”

***Open heart and home***

Sara's children also experience the benefits of living with nature and its slow pace: “I don't know what it is like in the Netherlands, but in the US everything is a competition. Even just walking on the sidewalk is a struggle, with everyone fighting for a place in the crowds. Children can't just play football for fun, no, it has to be at a competitive level right away. It's hard to escape that mentality. We make sure that our children have enough time to mess around. To have a dance party after dinner, instead of just doing homework. Avery and Maya swim in the lake and build fortresses. When Avery comes home from school, she throws her bag in a corner and takes the goats to Uncle Steve's yurt, where she plays and does homework. Nothing makes me happier than seeing her scurry around like this. It's a freedom she would never have known in New York.” It brings Sara to a dream she's been working on for the past year: “Jarred and I just got our foster parent certification. America is facing a refugee crisis. The situation is particularly pressing for unaccompanied minors from Guatemala and Venezuela. In many cases, they initially travel with a parent or other relative, but that adult must spend weeks or months in detention centers after arriving at the border until all paperwork is completed. During this period, the children are separated from them. The situation is horrific and goes against all that is human. Our certificate has just been completed, so we can get a call any moment that a child is coming to live with us. We all speak Spanish, including the girls, and are ready to open our hearts and homes to children who need help. It will not be easy, especially saying goodbye can be difficult, because you will hear a maximum of 24 hours in advance that the child will leave again. But I've had a heavy heart about this matter for so long and hope to be able to contribute something like that.”