



LEGAL HIGHS

Emma Freud gets a buzz out of beekeeping

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Marvin is a beekeeper master. In the sacred realm of his garden in California, he offers a three-hour spiritual, meditative encounter to learn about the ancient wisdom of the bee. Whereas we've lived on earth for six million years, he explained, bees have been around for almost 100 million. And they clearly know more than we do.

To appreciate their complexities, Marvin gave us some facts. Each hive has a queen, he said, which will leave the hive only once in her life to make a solo flight in search of some lads. When she finds them, she'll have mid-air sex with one, snapping off his endophallus once he's finished, and then on to the next. After around a dozen pops, she will return to her hive with ten million sperm inside her, which will last her the rest of her life. She'll have about 1.5 million babies in total, only one of which will be chosen as the next queen. That hitherto ordinary egg will be fed Royal Jelly, secreted from a gland in the worker-bees' heads, for 16 days, which will transform it from a regular bee into the hive's next Lady Superhero, which will be twice the size of the rest of the bees and destined to live 12 times as long.



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Reeling from this miracle, we went with Marvin to meet his colony. He bowed to the hive before asking their permission to show his guests around their home and we had the full guided tour. We held the bees, listened to the bees and watched them explain to each other, via dance moves, precisely where the best pollen could be found nearby: a form of disco sat-nav. We observed worker bees changing temperature by vibrating their bodies, and glimpsed nanny bees keeping the queen's eggs at exactly 96F (about 35C) by sealing their cells with an antiseptic bee glue called propolis, which they make by mixing their saliva with tree resin. We didn't see the queen; she was busy producing that day's 2,500 babies.

Where is the high in all of this? For some of my fellow students, it was the meditative prayer accompanied by Marvin's gong and drum followed by a big group "ommm". But it struck me differently. As I write this piece, war is raging in Ukraine. What I saw in Marvin's garden was a complex but peaceful colony of 50,000 beings living inside a wooden box, creating communal honey to feed each other, co-parenting a new generation in harmony and coexisting as part of a bigger race who are collectively pollinating a third of the world's food.

My high was the awe and wonder in witnessing a level of collective responsibility and functionality that, despite all our knowledge and impressive technological breakthroughs, we can only dream about. We're still at entry level as beings. It's bees that have nailed life.

A wonderful UK organisation that showcases the beauty of bees is beesandrefugees.org.uk