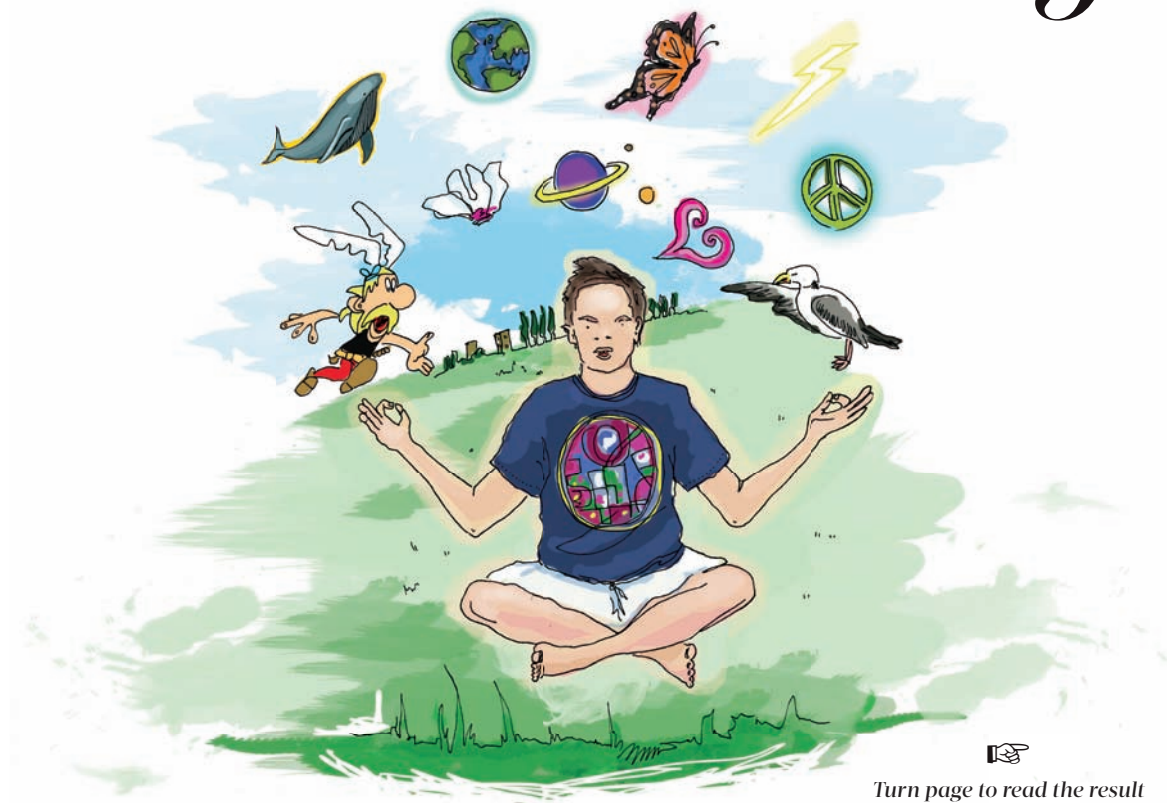


THE CHALLENGE

*Each month we're sending a
writer on a different travel
adventure*

Task № 04 February 2013

Join a **COMMUNE** in northern Italy*



Turn page to read the result

WORDS ► CHRISTIAN KOCH ILLUSTRATIONS ► JO BIRD

**and try to unlock the secrets of time travel*



It's Saturday morning and the plants are singing...

Inside a flower-festooned chamber 40 minutes' drive north of Turin, a white cyclamen – electrodes clipped to its leaves to relay its electrical conductivity through a synthesiser – is trilling away.

Admittedly, the warbling is less Adele, more a tinny series of bleeps sounding not unlike a Casio keyboard being thrown down the stairs. But, if you were to ask the plant's backing singer – a middle-aged chanteuse called Monkey – or her fellow experimenters, they'll tell you their plants really can hold a tune. According to the members of the Italian commune of Damanhur, the shrubs learn they are moving the synthesiser and start to harmonise when music is played. Mozart makes them go wild, apparently, heavy metal makes them wither. And, when one of their stems is squeezed, the 'music' mysteriously stops...

You may laugh – you may think them slightly mad – but the Federation of Damanhur has been going strong for 38 years. Spread over 500 hectares in the verdant beauty of the Italian Alps, the commune has its own currency (the credito), constitution and Sistine Chapel-like underground temples. Its thousand-odd citizens, who are all assigned animal

names (their founder is an ex-insurance man now called Falcon), aim to live a spiritual life in peace, harmony and self-sufficiency.

Your correspondent's mission? To infiltrate this crazy cabal and find out if someone who feels as spiritual as a heathen jellyfish can burrow deep into the mystical chambers, participate in rituals and hopefully awaken a hitherto non-existent esoteric side. There's also one bolder ambition. Rumours abound that there's a time machine hidden here. Have they really unlocked the quantum conundrums that baffled HG Wells, Stephen Hawking and *Back to the Future's* Marty McFly? I was about to find out.

Located in the northern Italian municipality of Baldissero Canavese, the commune is dotted with ladybird-and-poppy-frescoed houses, each shared by 'nucleo-communities' of 12 to 20 people. My accommodation is in a €25-a-night dorm (private rooms are available in an 'eco-house' on a Damanhurian farm), which I shared with a Spanish yoga teacher and a German Zen expert. The payphone in reception and signs advertising Wi-Fi assuage my fears that this might be a cult, and Damanhur *grande formaggios* 'Stambecco' (Ibex) and 'Formica' (Ant) take me for an introductory stroll.

Around 6,000 tourists pass through the doors here each year, many of them spiritually seeking types. Imagine Asterix the Gaul copping off with Florence Welch and you'd half-grasp the New Age bonkers-ness. It's got a Grecian-style 'Open Temple' with Corinthian columns, amphitheatre and ancient god statues. Brightly coloured stones are arranged



in spirals and there's a mini-Stonehenge. Along the way, we meet Anaconda, a teacher at the commune's primary school; Falcon, the aforementioned founder; and several wheelbarrow pushing, middle-aged women, all of whom seem inhumanly relaxed and dispense beatific greetings. I'm also introduced to Porcupine, Formica's 16-year-old son, who emerges from the House of Community of the Children (when Damanhurians reach 15, they live together with other 15 to 22-year-olds, learning how to run households).

Damanhur is big on other kinds of education too, offering courses in astral travel, astrology, communication with the plant world, past-life research and more. To get a taster, I opt for a 'sacred dance' lesson with Parrot. This consists of learning 300 different gestures, so that you can build sentences through your movements. Bowing your head means 'I', looking above denotes 'others', while a clenched

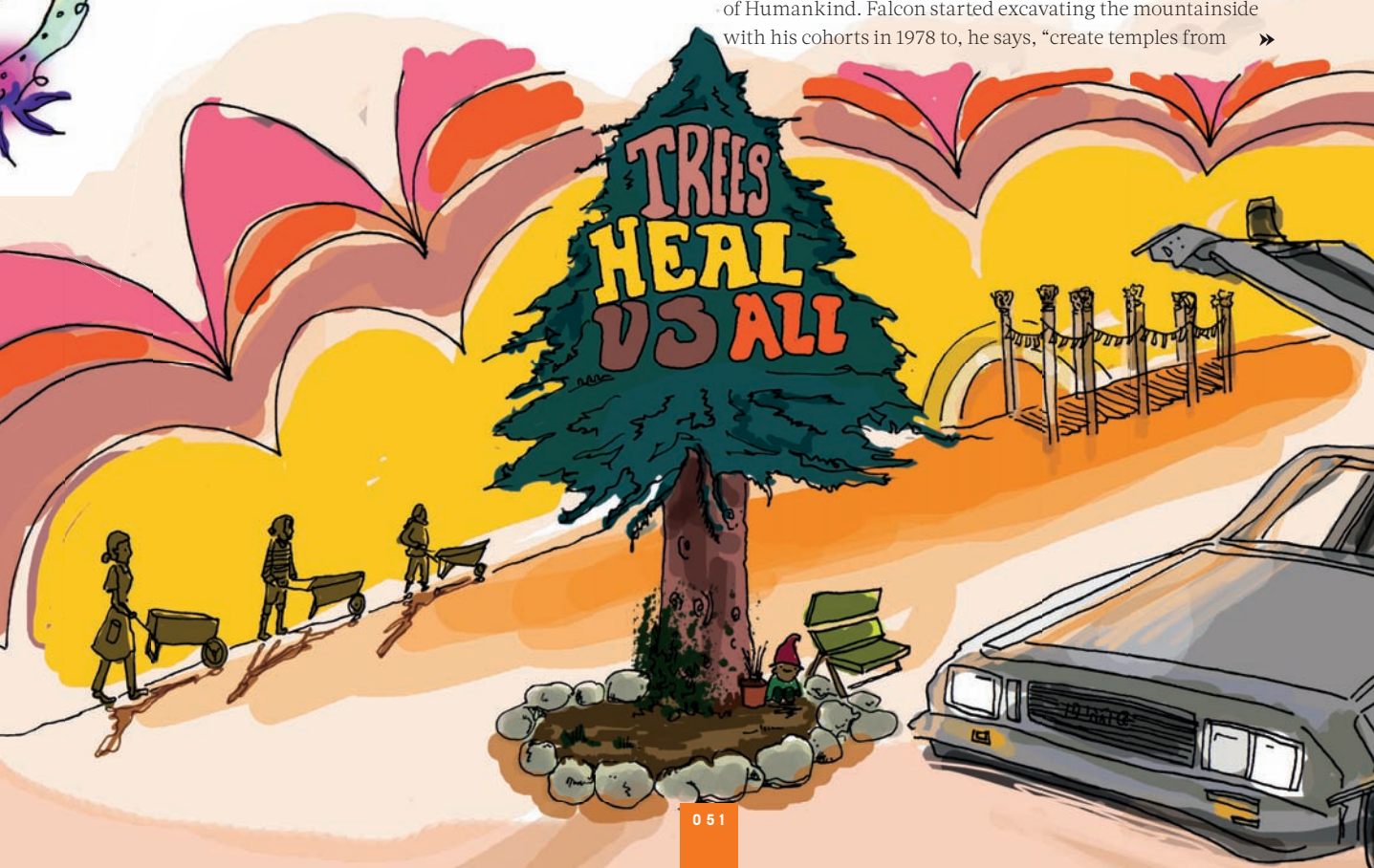
Rumours abound that Damanhur has its own time machine. Have they really unlocked the quantum conundrums that baffled HG Wells, Stephen Hawking and Marty McFly?

fist translates as 'future'. By the end of lessons, the average tourist can communicate the sentence: "With dance, I develop positive energy for myself, the world and others." My ungainly moves, however, have as much eloquence as the gibberish gabblings of an average one-year-old. Parrot looks on as if I'm mentally ill.

The Tree Village provides a welcome escape from my embarrassment. This arboreal network of wooden huts is inhabited by friendly folk who say things like, "Trees heal us. When we come down, we feel light and energetic." Dreams are big in Damanhur – you're frequently asked, "What did you dream last night?" – and the tree people believe nocturnal reveries become more vivid the higher up you are. To facilitate this, they've built a 'dreamhouse' in the higher branches, replete with two mattresses.

All very interesting, but still no time machine. Indeed, Damanhurians remain tight-lipped on this. "I have travelled [back in time] to many places," Falcon had told us earlier. "Scientific things are going on, but we don't talk about it." Later that day, we meet the superbly named Gnome Barley, who works at the commune's art gallery (there's also an all-organic supermarket, hairdressers and jewellery shop). He says the time machine looks like, "a telephone cabinet". I can't work out whether he's joking.

My hopes rise when Formica informs me that I've been alluded to see the shiny jewel in the crown here: the Temples of Humankind. Falcon started excavating the mountainside with his cohorts in 1978 to, he says, "create temples from



[his] visions", working by night and blasting loud music to foil authorities. However, by 1992, the local *Carabinieri* found out. With a magistrate threatening to dynamite the caves unless he was allowed in, Falcon let them have a peek. What they saw defied all expectations...

To view the temples, I'm taken by car to the top of a forested hill, where sits a nondescript villa. Formica unlocks a door and we're taken down a white tunnel plastered with Egyptian hieroglyphic-like ideograms (Damanhur's 'sacred language'). A matchbox-sized lift ferries us 30m underground, where we enter the first of the Temples' nine chambers: the Hall of the Earth. It's jaw-dropping stuff. The rotunda-style room is dominated by a wraparound mural showing forests, volcanoes and savannahs. Pandas climb trees, whales swim in the sky. Gambolling through this Edenic scene are joyous, people. But hang on – isn't that a wheelbarrow woman from earlier? And that's Stambecco... Surely? Yes, I'm told, most of the commune is painted here.

Suddenly, a stained-glass window open-sesames to reveal a secret stairwell. We enter the Hall of Metals, dedicated to the evolution of human life (a bespectacled old man is depicted as a flying cherub). Deeper into the catacomb we go, snaking down tunnels and pushing brick walls, Indiana Jones-style. If there is a time machine here, it'd take an eternity to find it. After passing through the Labyrinth (a subterranean multifaith cathedral representing everything from Christianity to Polynesian deities) and the Hall of Spheres (a gold-leaf chamber with eight eerily glowing crystal balls), we wind up in the Hall of Mirrors.

Underneath a huge cupola dome, the glass reflect our anatomy from every angle. If that wasn't discomfobulating enough, Formica hits a gargantuan gong that produces an ear-perforating din. It sounds like Armageddon, the Book of Revelations and the Mayan apocalypse all rolled into one.

Frustrated in my attempts to find the commune's flux capacitor, I opt for travelling of the astral variety instead, signing up for meditation – a lifetime debut for me. The 'inner harmonising' session takes place inside the Temples. After half an hour spent making vowel noises and pretending to be a seed, it happens... A gigantic sensory kaleidoscope opens up. We see a wizened, bearded, old man; blazing chariots scything the night sky; humanity standing on an ocean of glass... Actually, I see none of these things, acquiring only a sore bum from sitting. So, when I emerge into the frosty night, I'm rendered breathless by the Temples' scale, but earth-shattering spiritual nourishment? Sadly not.

It's just like any other dinner party until somebody mentions past lives. Suddenly, the room becomes crowded with former Zulu chieftains, French barons and Irish peasants



Then again, I'm probably not quite the commune's target audience. Since opening in 1975, it has attracted all manner of visitors – including celebrities such as Sting. Most come to escape the bustle of the real world, or just gawp in wonder – you can even pop in for a day visit.

I was staying over, however. That night, I'm invited to a nucleo-community for dinner. En route, we pick up a small, older lady, *Vongola* (Italian for Clam). A crimson moon hangs above and Vongola sits in the back nattering about late-1970s Damanhur – an era when Falcon was into psychic research. Levitations were commonplace, she claims, and she herself discovered that she had previously been a librarian in Atlantis. As the car careens past hairpin bends and precipitous don't-look-down gorges, I can't help feeling this drive is a horror movie waiting to happen.

When we finally arrive at the house, 20-odd people are gathered around a long table, including one chap taking a

vow of silence and an American couple interested in "time research" (they relinquished Hollywood/Broadway careers to move here). Nucleo-communities are self-sufficient, so we dine on vegetable soup made from the garden.

Damanhurians were early adopters of ecological living, and were using solar panels and recycling 30 years ago.

It's just like any other dinner party until somebody mentions past lives. Suddenly, the room is crowded with former Zulu chieftains, French barons and Irish peasants. Before leaving, I ask to be anointed an animal name. "I think you're a seabird," says Monkey. Like a gannet? "Yes."

Gannet. Not Eagle, Kestrel or even Osprey (admittedly, Falcon has possibly cornered the bird-of-prey thing here), but a bird most famed for greedily guzzling large quantities of fish. Crestfallen, I head for home, spiritually as bankrupt as ever, but slightly missing the maverick folk who revel in dreaming to much... damanhurwelcome.com

Turin need to know

(10)

number of days of Cioccolatò, Turin's chocolate festival, from 22 February



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(1899)

year the *Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino* (Fiat car factory) was founded here



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