

Rapid Progress

A foot injury sustained while hiking gave Simon Birch the perfect excuse to try out a new type of active holiday

Aren't Welsh river meadows spectacularly colourful in mid-summer I thought to myself as I gently glided down the river on my back.

I should of course been bobbing down the river in my kayak, but I'd lost count of the number of times that I'd capsized forcing my instructor to frantically charge after my runaway boat.

I'm in - rather than on - the Afon (river) Llugwy in the heart of the Snowdonia National Park mid-way through a week's introductory course to the increasingly popular sport of kayaking.

Earlier in the year I'd badly clobbered and sprained my left ankle in the Scottish Highlands. The result was that for the time being at least, my summertime passions of mountain walking and back-packing were out of the question.

However, always eager to find the silver lining in any cloud - no matter how dark and drizzly - I'd decided to try my hand at a sport that under normal circumstances I'd never think twice about doing and one which preferably didn't involve my left foot.

Which was why one Monday morning I found myself on the edge of the swimming pool at the Plas Menai Watersports Centre on the shores of the Menai Straits in North Wales.

Lined up on one side of the pool were me and my five other kayaking-virgin buddies whilst behind us was a neatly stacked pile of kayaks.

"Right the first thing you've got to learn is to how to get into the kayaks," said Jo our ever smiling and encouraging coach.

As I was soon to discover, most things about kayaking are to begin with alot harder than they first look and it took a huge amount of concentration just to wriggle into the kayak without tipping it over.

Once we'd all managed to get safely into our kayaks, Jo then got us to get use to the feel of the kayak and discover just how easy they are to move about in the water.

Now if only Elvis had stayed off the burgers, pies and pills I'm convinced that he'd have made a champion kayaker, as according to Jo, "It's all in the hips."

Sure enough a wiggle here and waggle there made a huge amount of difference to the way in which the kayak moved in the water, a consequence of their high-tech design.

Rather than being long and pointy, our kayaks were part of the new breed of kayak that have helped to revolutionise the sport.

Being short, stubby-nosed and flat bottomed, our plastic kayaks were designed to be fast and fun, nippy and virtually indestructible - in short they had va-va-voom in spades.

In the space of a few short hours we'd all learned enough - including how to cope when we capsized (top-tip: don't panic and hold your breath) to leave the warmth of the pool for an afternoon session on the open water of the Menai Straits.

Even though it was mid-summer it was hardly St Tropez, but we weren't going to freeze as the centre provided all the wet-suits, wind-proof cagoules and buoyancy aids to keep us snug, warm and safe. All we had to provide were thermal underwear - and a determination to enjoy ourselves.

Thanks to Jo's limitless laughter, enjoying ourselves was probably the easiest thing we did that first day as we charged about in the shallows practising our new-found skills, shouting and generally carrying on like overgrown schoolkids.

After another day of practising, this time on the dark, still waters of the nearby Lynn Padarn, we were ready for the real thing, a real live river wild.

Moving water is the term that paddlers (the name that kayakers give to each other) call flowing rivers and our particular piece of moving water was the Afon Llugwy.

For its first two miles from its source at Capel Curig, the Llugwy is a pussycat of a river with easy rapids of grade 1 and 2. However within a very short space its character completely changes and it becomes a roaring man-eater of grade 5 and 6.

A new environment required another set of new skills to master and Ian, our moving water coach set about showing us the basic technique of how to safely paddle your way out of fast moving water - the low-brace turn.

Ian of course made it look simplicity itself as well as being as graceful as any choreographed dance movement. Grace and elegance were not much in evidence as we all tried it out, but after much capsizing,

swearing and laughing, Ian decided that we were ready for a trip down the river.

Following Ian like a flotilla of ducklings behind their mother, we set off bob-bobbing behind Ian. Whenever we approached a rapid, Ian would gather us in an eddy - a piece of quiet and safe water - whilst he raced ahead.

Upon a set of pre-arranged hand signals - hand-on-head, arms out left or right, that sort of thing - one by one we'd peel off from the safety of the eddy and shoot down the rapid.

For those of us left upstream in the eddy the growing sense of anticipation and mounting excitement was almost too much to bear; suffice to say that whenever it was my time to head out my heart was in my mouth and I swear that I flew down the rapids on a surge of pure adrenaline.

So whilst kayaking on moving water gives you more than enough thrills and er, spills, sea kayaking, the other form of kayaking, is something completely different.

To begin with a sea kayak is much longer and slimmer than a moving water kayak and crucially it's got a slight keel underneath. This means that generally a sea kayak goes in just one direction - forwards - which is really all you need when you're out on the open water.

Paddling in a sea kayak is I must confess, deeply satisfying; you get a real sense of power and movement as you effortlessly slice your way through the waves and eat up the sea miles.

Plus the views from the kayaks were magnificent with vast skies and ever shifting light and we were able to get close to the local wildlife and sneak up on the oystercatchers and curlews as they fed by the waters-edge.

We'd set off from Plas Menai and had headed south to the mouth of the Menai Straits and with a rapidly moving outgoing tide we soon reached the point where the Straits broaden out into Irish Sea.

Thanks to the low-tide we landed our kayaks on an exposed sand-bank for lunch which we'd stowed away in the water-tight compartments at either end of the kayaks.

It was a real thrill to eat our sarnies in a spot that nobody else could reach and which would soon slip back under the rising waters of the incoming tide.

It was easy to understand why they call sea kayaking sea rambling and why it's becoming especially popular with former hillwalkers as sea kayaking holds the possibility of extended trips to some of the most dramatic locations in the UK and beyond.

Paddling back to the promise of a hot shower, I glanced up at the angry looking cloud that was now swirling around the tops of Snowdon and shuddered at the thought of the swarms of walkers stumbling around in the clag, somewhere but for my dodgy foot I could well have been.

Here though down on the open water the sun was just breaking through and there was an exhilarating salty breeze accompanying the tide.

It was then that it occurred to me that I'd not just found the silver lining in the cloud of my ankle injury, I'd actually discovered gold.

Learn to Kayak is a five day course run by Plas Menai National Watersports Centre and costs 350 for residents and 250 for non-residents. Details: Tel: (01248) 670964 www.plasmenai.co.uk

Five of The Best

Once you've mastered the basic skills of kayaking a whole world of adventure is yours to discover - check out these top five trips:

Anglesey Expedition

The towering sea cliffs and sandy bays of Anglesey provide the perfect introduction to sea kayak expeditioning. Five days costs £350. Details: Plas Menai National Watersports Centre Tel: (01248) 670964 www.plasmenai.co.uk

Into the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest

Grizzlies, whales wolves and wilderness await for those sea -kayaking amidst the coastal rainforest of British Columbia. Eight days camping costs £1,285, flights extra. Details: Tel: (001) 250 639 2346 www.klemtutourism.com

Introduction to Alpine White Water

Learn white water kayaking in the perfect environment of the French Alps.

One week costs £560. Details: Plas y Brenin National Mountain Centre Tel: (01690) 720214 www.pyb.co.uk

Magic of the Hebrides

A week of sea-kayaking around the wild and remote Western Isles.

Catered £345, self-catered £315

Details: Tel: (01871) 810443