

GENE17 FUNDAMENTAL WHITE WATER WEEKEND



WORDS AND PICTURES: ZOE NEWSAM

IT'S 5.30AM, AND THERE'S SNOW ON THE GROUND OUTSIDE. THE ALARM GOES OFF BUT MY BED IS WARM, AND I DON'T WANT TO GET UP. THEN I REMEMBER I HAVE TO DRIVE TO DARTMOOR: THIS IS THE WEEKEND I BEGIN TO LEARN TO UNDERSTAND HOW RIVERS WORK...

I am a Sea Kayaker (actually I'm not, I'm an Air Traffic Controller, but humour me for a while...). I've been kayaking on the sea as often as possible for just over two years, and have in that time racked up a few thousand miles and several hundred hours in a narrow, 18-foot long boat. This year, however, I've discovered 'the dark side'! I've started paddling on the sea with several people who are very good river boaters, and watched in awe as they transfer their precise and beautiful boat handling skills to sea kayaking. I've watched this sort of white water ballet played out on a TV screen, in tide races, and on one or two rivers whilst they baby sit me on Grade 2. Now I want to enter their world and learn how to look after myself.

I arrive at the River Dart Country Park just in time to manage a bacon butty before meeting the coach for the weekend, Ed Cornfield, and my fellow 'numpty', John. A tanned young guy spots me looking lost and heads over to introduce himself - this is Ed, freshly arrived back in the UK from Uganda. He's already found John. We get the small talk out of the way, then move on to 'What have you done before?' and 'What are your aims for this weekend?' John seems much more experienced than me on rivers (I can still count my river trips on one hand). I hope I won't hold him back.

We change, run the shuttle, and get on with the business of the day. First, at my request, we look at safety. I know little, if anything, about river safety kit and, sitting on our boats in the snow, Ed makes it all seem

very easy and uncomplicated - what he carries, and what it's used for. John has all the basic gear; I have nothing.

On the water, we warm up a little on a flat section just above Newbridge. John looks very comfortable and confident; I feel like I'm in an alien boat - too short, too fat - that won't do what I want it to. No matter, Ed observes us both, and begins to teach me the basics of handling a short boat in moving water, and to help me to unlearn or adapt habits developed to handle a long boat. That, after all, is why I am here!

Below the bridge at the put in, we practise ferry gliding, and breaking in and out using different techniques. I feel wobbly and uncertain at first, but gradually I begin to understand what I am trying to do, and I begin to feel the water work beneath me in this ▶

still unfamiliar boat. Slowly I gain in confidence, and Ed decides it is time for us to move on down the river.

Despite the freezing weather and low water level, the Dart is busy - as always. There are paddlers everywhere, enjoying the winter sunshine. Even at these levels it seems there is fun to be had.

We work our way through the rocks, with me finding a large number on the riverbed and occasionally getting stuck! Ed says nothing - just laughs with me, helps me unstuck myself if necessary, shows me how to stay upright (hug the rock!) should I get really stuck. He encourages me to lead the way and pick my own route through the maze.

We pass through the otherworldly forest at Spitchwick Common, and stop in the large eddy at the bottom for tea and shortbread, courtesy of John. This is a great place for practising eddy hopping - I'm feeling more confident all the time. I nail a particular break-out, and turn around to see Ed smile.

Next we move on to the Washing Machine. This is the first real rapid on this section of the river, and Ed

wants us to inspect and run it as though we'd never been here before, although we both have. John and I decide we need to get to the two-boat sized eddy on river right, just above the horizon line in order to see the line properly. Now that will be a challenge! 'No problem, just make your plan and go for it' says Ed. Trouble is, I know from being here before that in low water you have to run this on river left, the opposite side to that eddy. I don't really understand why yet, but I know that what's beneath the eddy doesn't look pleasant!

Ed heads for the eddy, and instructs me to follow, with John behind. I make my plan...I'm heading for the top end of the eddy line, but drifting left, paddling hard to make it back upstream, and I've missed it. I pop over the edge and land harmlessly on a rock just over the lip, but I am stuck! Thank goodness for the low water today. I can't push myself off, so Ed jumps out of his boat, and gives me a shove - I break out into the next eddy below, cursing myself.

So what went wrong there? Well, wrong angle, timing slightly out, and just not quite aggressive enough.

No worries, this takes time. Relax and enjoy it, and it will come.

We move on, all the time looking for eddy lines to practice with. John is looking confident and controlled, and in need of a challenge, so when we get to Lover's Leap, he eddy hops his way down the bouldery rapid. I lead the way down picking out my line and working to stick to it, dodging some boulders and glancing off others, and breaking out river left at the bottom. I'm beginning to feel more comfortable in this boat, not so much of a passenger anymore.

Now it is John's turn to jump onto the learning curve, and when we reach the top of Triple Drop, Ed decides to begin teaching him how to boof. I've heard the expression before but don't really understand it, so I listen and watch with interest. I simply run the three small drops as they come, breaking out between each one, picking my line carefully, while Ed devotes some time to John.

We pick our way down the rest of the Loop, mindful of the time, as we want to fit in two runs today. Spin





Drier and Holne Weir pass without incident, but as we approach the small weir at the take-out (the Anvil), Ed explains why it can be particularly 'sticky' in low water, and right on cue a paddler from the group ahead of us swims in the towback at the bottom! They extricate him, and we run it carefully, instructed to 'land' with edge already on, close to the Eddy.

Lunch in the warmth of the café, and the talk is of Norway, Uganda and Tibet, recent and future expeditions, plans and ambitions. I can see the door to a whole new world opening...

Back in the car park after lunch, John wants to learn how to do a back-deck roll, so Ed demonstrates and they practice it - in the snow!

We run the Loop again in the afternoon. This time I avoid most of the rocks I hit this morning, and that eddy on the Washing Machine is mine!

We push on down the rest of the Loop for the second time, and the light begins to fade as we run the last couple of kilometres. I'm already visualising that hot shower...

Day 2

A more relaxed start this morning, and we take a look at the design and setup of some of the boats in stock at the on-site shop. Ed explains to me how the different features affect their handling, and why certain boats might be more forgiving than others.

Kate Donnelly is joining us for the day, and we decide to warm up a little by trying some throwline practice in the car park, during which I pick up lots of tips on the best throwlines to buy. Kate says the larger bags are difficult for smaller hands - her bag seems ideal.

On the water, I feel in control today: a wonderful feeling. I am relaxed and enjoying myself, and manage plenty of break-outs for practice. John tries his back-deck roll and gets oh-so-close...but not quite! I ask him to try it again for the camera - please? Not today!

At a small play wave en-route, Ed teaches John how to use the flow of water to turn his boat through 360 degrees on the wave. Ed moves his boat around with effortless ease, every movement precise and controlled:

body, boat and blade at one with the water around and beneath them. White water ballet, played out in a way that I am beginning to understand. I can see the paddle blade working with the water instead of fighting against it, and although this performance is not for me, I watch, fascinated, and store away the patterns and movements for future reference.

John's turn, and in the beginning his blade fights the water. Slowly, slowly, though, and with plenty of encouragement from Ed, he begins to feel the way the water is working his blade, and it begins to allow him to achieve his goal.

At the Washing Machine I am a little nervous, but make the eddy without any problems. Breaking back in though, I wobble slightly and although I recover ok, I hit the bottom of the small drop at a funny angle, and flip. I stay in my boat, and before I am fully immersed Ed's bow is beside me and I pull up on it. My God, the water is FREEZING!

Kate and I lead the way down Lovers' Leap while ▶



the other two try to make as many eddies as possible on the way down: Ed manages twelve and stops counting...

John is still practising his boof, and is trying to rock-spin. He's now getting stuck on more rocks than me! At the bottom of Triple Drop I practise breaking in and out in the faster water, and John tries it with no paddle strokes, just using the boats' angle and edge. I couldn't have dreamt of feeling this much in control here, only yesterday morning. The river feels less rocky, and although I still get it wrong some of the time, Ed assures me that my line is simply better chosen. That's a very good feeling.

Back in the café in dry clothes and with hot tea all round, Ed gives us each a 'plan of action'. John, he thinks, is capable of having a go at the Upper Dart. He looks pleased. I have improved immensely, apparently, and he writes me a list of things to practise when I next go paddling. We chat for a while and, having turned what could have been a very difficult weekend in far from ideal conditions into a very successful one, we go our separate ways.

Driving home, tired and aching but satisfied, I replay in my mind some of the events of the weekend. I've made my plan, and I'm paddling hard towards the small eddy on river right directly above the Washing Machine.

I head for the white patch as I'd planned, hear Ed's shouts of encouragement, edge my boat, feel the eddy line bite, plant that last stroke on the inside of the turn, and Yes! I've made it, and I'm sitting next to Ed, the water dropping away behind and to my right. Maybe it's not quite white water ballet yet, but that world feels a lot closer than it did yesterday.

Postscript: one week later.

We drove to the Dart Park this morning, having planned to meet friends to paddle the Loop again. It's been raining a lot this week, and I've been watching the weather reports and the 'Dartcam' almost obsessively, hoping for a little more water than last weekend, but not too much. I've been dying to show off my newly learned skills and confidence to my paddling buddies, but I didn't want to be pushed too hard, just yet. In the car on the way over my heart was in my mouth - there had been talk of high water levels and I was very nervous, and fully prepared to stay off the water if the river was too high.

When we arrived the level was perfect, and we put on as soon as possible. I nervously tested my ferry-glide and breaking in and out... and of course it still worked! As we ran the now-familiar rapids at a lovely, bouncy level I felt like jumping up and down in my boat, and yelling

how good it felt to be in control. The feeling of confidence I associate with my sea boat was beginning to appear, and I was aware of the actions and whereabouts of the rest of the group, and beginning to make decisions for myself. One or two people commented on how much my paddling had improved, and for once, someone else in the group swam, whilst I came out unscathed, and with a very large grin! I was still being watched, but from a little distance, and without concern. Flying solo for the first time: what a wonderful feeling! ☺

Thank you to: Simon Westgarth and Gene17 for providing the tailor-made course, plenty of assistance and guidance, and going ahead with the course despite far-from-ideal conditions; Ed Cornfield, for being incredibly patient; and John Jenner, for providing good company, and being a very good model!

Useful Contacts

Gene17 Kayaking
www.gene17.com/kayaking
River Dart Adventures
www.riverdart.co.uk
UK Rivers Guidebook
www.ukriversguidebook.co.uk