

Paddle power

Before tackling white-water rapids in a kayak, you need to get your basic skills sorted

'I guarantee you'll be getting wet today,' says my kayaking coach, Sarah Lind. I've come to the Bala Watersports Centre in North Wales for a crash course in white-water kayaking. If anyone knows what they're talking about, it's thirty-five-year-old Sarah. Having started her kayaking career at the age of eleven, she went on to win a gold medal for Great Britain. For years I've dreamed of paddling white water and this is my big opportunity.

The sleepy Welsh town of Bala is the white-water capital of Britain. Local residents include Matt Cook, who once came fourth in the freestyle world championships, and former European freestyle champion Lynsey Evans. **(1)**..... These create a natural playground for paddlers. One of the toughest sections of white water lies on the Tryweryn river, which cuts straight through Bala. Graded four out of six (six being impassable), it is a swirling mass of furious white water, interspersed by slippery rocks. Used for the world championships, it's where the world's best paddlers pit their wits and strength against nature. And later on today, it will be the venue for my first white-water voyage.

Before allowing us near any white water, Sarah insists that we head out onto the calm waters of Bala Lake to learn a few basic skills. **(2)**..... As I paddle my first few strokes, it causes my boat to bob about alarmingly. I'm having trouble simply going in a straight line.

The most important thing you need to master before going out into white water is the 'low brace turn', which breaks down into three main elements. The first is the 'sweep stroke'. **(3)**..... While doing this you need to 'edge' – or cause the kayak to tip slightly towards the side that you wish to turn. This is achieved by straightening the leg that corresponds to the direction in which you wish to turn, while bending your other leg and bracing it against the top of the boat.

Finally, you need to put your paddle into the 'brace' position: bar held against your stomach, arms parallel with your shoulders. The idea is that if at this point you find yourself tipping over too far, you can use your paddle to prevent the kayak turning over. (4)..... I flounder around in the freezing cold lake like an ant stuck in a puddle, and my breath is snatched away.

After we eventually master the basics, it's time to tackle some world championship level white water, on the Tryweryn. (5)..... I can hardly hear myself think. The first section of the course involves crossing a segment of high-speed water punctuated by slippery stone slabs. This is where the 'edging' technique I learned earlier comes into play.

The next section involves traversing an even angrier patch of white water. All I remember is paddling frantically through a narrow corridor of rocks, as the water splashes up in my face and my boat bounces its way through the swirling torrent. (6)..... Eventually, things slow down slightly and I'm able to take stock. This is it. I'm off and running: racing down the river at ridiculous speed. Awesome!

- A** A stiff breeze is blowing across this massive open space.
- B** Basically, you use the paddle to turn the boat sharply in the opposite direction.
- C** Despite my understandable trepidation, Sarah is confident that she can get me to complete it in one piece.
- D** Despite my best efforts, however, I end up in the water almost immediately.
- E** Only a shout of 'Right paddle!' from Sarah saves me from going over again.
- F** Standing on the bank, psyching myself up, the sound of the raging water crashing over rocks is deafening.
- G** They're attracted here by the huge number of rivers that cascade down from the surrounding mountains.