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Up the Creek with a Paddle

Kayaking is a valuable skill for any would-be adventure type and it's also great fun to mess about in a boat. Maxwell Roche grabs a paddle and heads to the Lee Valley White Water Centre for some thrills and spills.



The calm before the storm

HANDS ON THE side of the kayak I push. Deep breath, I push again. Nothing. I'm stuck.

I'm racking my brains trying to think back five minutes when I'd nodded and smiled confidently whilst being run through the capsizing drill. So I try again. Hands on the side of the kayak, push. Still stuck. Ermm... In the dark, turbulent and disorientating darkness I'm quickly running out of breath. I plummet upside-down over the next rapid and something unknown thumps me in the teeth (probably my recently abandoned paddle), I can feel the icy fingers of panic stretching out to take their grasp. Oh God, think man!

Hands on the side of the kayak, push... no wait, lean forward, grab the spray deck release handle, pull and now push. I'm free. The world flips on its axis and I break the surface into the sweet spring air, gulping it down and spluttering in my euphoria and relief and squinting like a newborn calf at the blinding sun.



WATCH THE VIDEO
<http://of.gy/X0yBe>



So how at 10am on a Saturday morning did I come to be the wrong way up in a tempestuous river in a kayak, when I should've been slumbering slack-eyed beneath the safety of my duck feather duvet? Well, weeks earlier when I pitched my idea of a "river adventure" story to editor John Shepherd, my proposal was entirely different..... In my head the adventure was more a Ray Mears-esque Canadian canoe trip, gliding carefree down a serene waterway, spending balmy summer nights by a campfire with nothing for company except cold beer and blissful solitude. Somehow though I managed to let him talk me into an activity that takes place, although on water, light-years away from my romanticised imaginings. He suggested I try my hand at white water kayaking. It was something I'd never tried, yet something that I'd always wanted to have a go at, so I agreed, and where better to try it than the Lee Valley White Water Centre in Waltham Cross, North London. And before you ask, the answer is "yes", you can find world-class grade 3 and 4 rapids in North London; so there's really no need to book tickets to North Alaska, for the time being at least.

OFF I GO....

The £31,000,000 facility at Lee Valley, built to host the 2012 Olympic white-water canoe slalom events, is truly something to behold. The purpose built rivers, 300 metres and 130 metres in length are fed by a system of five monstrous pumps, which lift naturally occurring water five and a half metres above ground-level into two starting pools. Once in

"If you're not getting wetter, you're not getting better," heckled Jess my instructor

these pools the water is then forced at a rate of 13 cubic metres per second down the course, giving birth to the rapids. For some perspective, each cubic metre of water weighs one-tonne so that's 13 tonnes of H₂O moving over the startline at any given second. A scary prospect for most of you I'm sure, but for me - a keen surfer of 15 years well used to stormy and consequential waters - no more worrying than a Tuesday night bubble bath. How wrong could I be?

"If you're not getting wetter, you're not getting better," heckled Jess my Level 2 instructor as I

snatched at the safety line for the second time in as many minutes and was hauled humiliatingly ashore.

"Which way were you looking?"

"I'm not sure,".

"Always look where you want to go, always keep paddling and never lean up stream!"

Unexpectedly, my first day on the rapids had been spent paddling up rather than down the river. We were practising a technique called ferry gliding where the idea is to paddle upstream towards the rapids pointed at 11 o'clock, letting the angle of your kayak carry you slowly across the river from right to left. Once close to the rapid we were required to turn the kayak back downstream and "break in" to the current, letting it carry us back down the river. Sounds simple, doesn't it? But all the time the angry water wants to tip you over. If like me on my first few attempts, you're tense and twitchy, the likelihood is you'll be caught unawares by a slight increase in flow speed or direction and flip.

"It's all in the hips", says Jess with a wink as I surface gasping like a freshly netted trout for the third time that morning, I must remember

that.

When you arrive at Lee Valley - which is just a half hour tube ride from central London for the start of your course, the cheery staff will sign you in and direct you to the kit room where you'll be given a nice thick wetsuit and buoyancy aid. Once you've donned this gear in the squeaky clean and modern changing rooms, you'll head out into the courtyard where your instructor will size you up with a glance, and fit you with a boat, paddle and spray deck, to keep the water out. In a matter of minutes you'll find yourself, together with a small group of equally apprehensive individuals, fully furnished with all the necessaries and out onto the invitingly turquoise, slightly chlorinated, waters of the lake, ready for business.

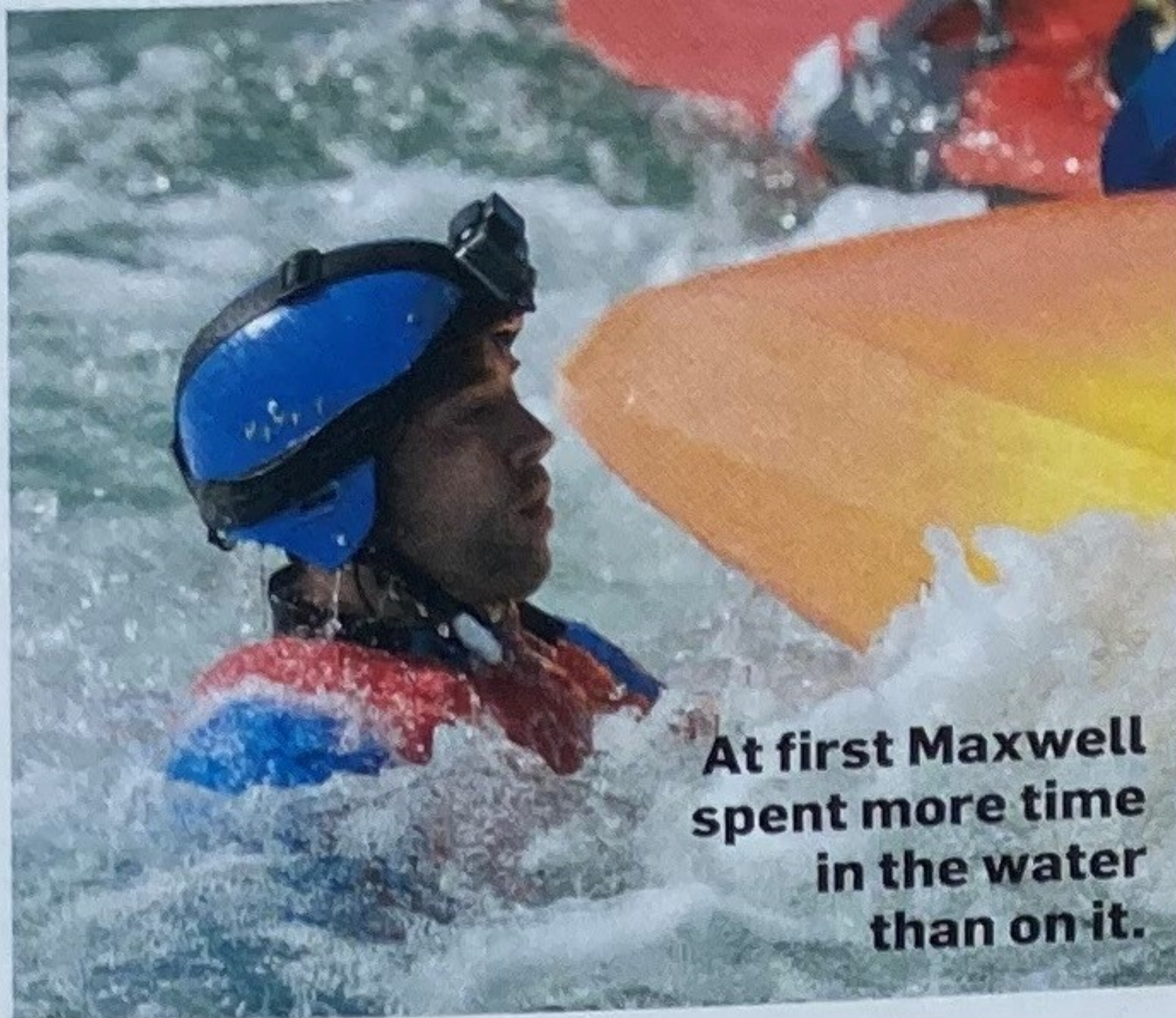
WEEK 4

It's week 4 of my Level 2 course and I'm decidedly more confident. Now I find myself able to slide off the bank much further up river, break into the fast flowing current, control the boat's speed and course, smash through the larger rapids and break out of the current into the safety of the calm areas of water called Eddies (not a guy called Eddie!). I'm more relaxed, having come to terms with the not so life threatening consequences of a capsize and most important of all I'm learning to use my legs, hips and torso to generate speed through the water and turn with balance and control. Despite my preconceptions, kayaking is far from just an upper body workout. Apparently when proper form is used, your core muscles are those primarily responsible for the stability and propulsion of the kayak and it's actually your abdominals, hips and back that are most active, not your arms. I was also surprised to learn that as the legs provide the connection with the kayak and the water they are also quite heavily involved. As you become more experienced and learn proper technique, the intricacies of how the legs, in conjunction with the hips, help to turn, stabilise, brace and roll the kayak become more evident.

Jess: "You're so much better today Max, what's happened?" She shouted this out as I swung the boat deftly and daintily alongside the bank; a figure of new-found poise and proficiency against the boiling waters. "Did you change kayak, have you been practising in secret?" I smiled wryly up at her. "I'm not hung over!" I said this with a shrug and a grin (Friday night drinking had been curtailed before this Saturday - note, seriously, it's best to arrive with a clear-head before charging down the rapids!). She laughed and I stroked back into the flow letting the current carry me away downstream.

TESTING TIMES

In order to be deemed capable of taking on the 300 metre grade 3/4 Olympic course at Lee Valley any would-be kayaker must first enrol on and complete a series of qualification courses. Each course costs £90 and consists of six sessions of one-hour, each week either in the evening or on the weekend. The courses range from levels 1-5. Level 1 is designed for first-timers and is taught on the lake. You don't need any prior experience to enrol. Level 2, which I completed, serves purely as an



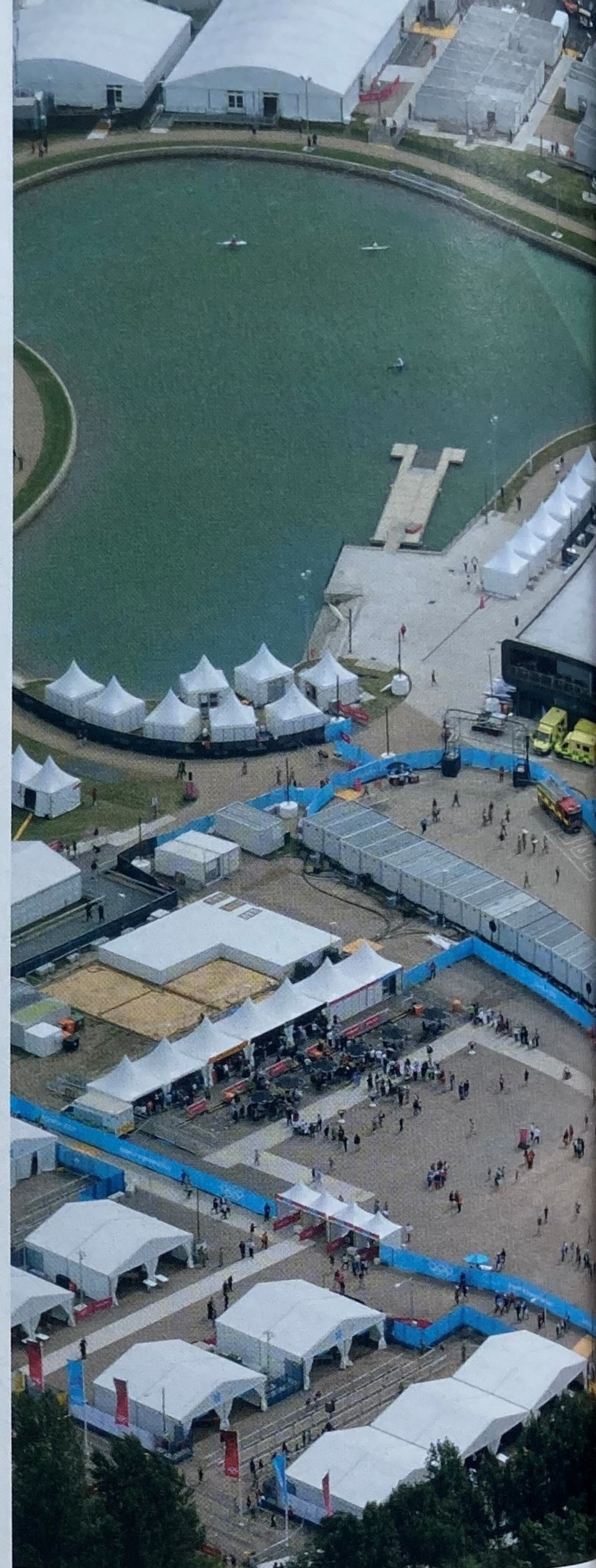
At first Maxwell spent more time in the water than on it.

introduction into the white water world, and takes place at the bottom of the smaller 130m Legacy course. Levels 3 and 4 will see you a little higher up the Legacy course in the grade 2/3 rapids, with Level 4 seeing you fully qualified to book into public paddling sessions on the Legacy course. Finally Level 5 is about progressing onto the grade 3/4 rapids Olympic course. This is where you'll prepare for an assessment, which on passing will give you an "Olympic" membership, and means you can book onto public paddling sessions on the Olympic course. As Lee Valley is home to the British kayaking team you'll likely be surrounded by world-class athletes during these sessions and given the congenial nature of all who participate, integrated quickly into the community.

Despite my initial fear and instability after six sessions I'm finally getting the hang of it and being rewarded significantly for my efforts. The feeling of being swept along aboard 13 tonnes of H₂O; cool spray across your face, paddling deftly, then powerfully where necessary, smashing through the frothing waves and hand-brake turning out of the flow into the darker swirling pools of calmer water is like no other. I can only imagine the satisfaction and physical rewards that must be gained from learning to skilfully negotiate the Olympic slalom course. You'd need to pirouette beneath the gates, whilst using every sinew to slide and glide balletically from bank to bank before plummeting over waterfalls and into the standing waves. After a Level 2 course, like the one I did, you're sort of peeping your head out of maybe the second story window, but once you've got your Olympic membership it must be like standing on the roof of a skyscraper!

So what does all this boil down to? Well, if you're looking for a challenge, something both exhilarating and invigorating, that will sprinkle a pinch of spice onto any evening or weekend, and wake you every session like an air horn to the ear hole, call off the search! White water kayaking at a facility like Lee Valley is not only great for your core strength and fitness it's also relatively cheap to learn, not weather-dependant and easily accessible. Provided you progress accordingly, in as little as 30 hours you can become a fully qualified British Canoe Union 4 kayaker, run the Olympic rapids and hone the skills that will take you safely from the confines of the centre and into the natural environment. I'm planning my real-world adventure right now. Have paddle, will travel.

■ With thanks to the Lee Valley White Water Centre, visitleevalley.org.uk



"Now pay attention Maxwell", says my excellent instructor Jess.



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Roche