

Kayaking the Thames

(a very cultured event or an extended Pub crawl)

The Thames is a very famous river, especially when you consider that it is just 215 miles long, but British history (and a lot of the basis for western culture) was made along most of its path. From tiny thatched roof villages to the largest city in Europe the Thames starts from an underground stream 170 miles west of London and ends flowing into the North Sea. I have spent many days over the years watching the river from a friend's flat overlooking the Thames, and for some reason I decided to kayak the length of the river, at least 170 miles of it.

Well actually I know the reason. My wife's family decided on a reunion in their home country of Scotland and we rented cottages and toured around Scotland for 4 weeks. I did all of the driving and while I am a pretty nice guy - 4 weeks of being tour guide and driver took its toll – the reward was 2 weeks kayaking and camping down the Thames. I may also mention that the banks of the Thames have some of the best Pubs to enjoy a pint of beer in after a days paddling. I wouldn't say it was a 170 mile Pub crawl – but you could make it one!

We rented kayaks mid way between the start and finish in Reading. I made the arrangements by e mail and a phone call. Paul Ralph from Marsport drove us, and the kayaks, to the put in point in the honey colored limestone village of Cricklade on the edge of the Cotswolds. The kayaks came with the required license to be on the Thames, (each river has its own license). Cricklade is about 10 miles from the source but there is not enough water above this point to float a kayak, even here it is only 10' across and almost solid reeds and overhanging thorny Hawthorne trees. The sun is out and it is a hot English July day, the river (really a stream) is clear and cool. We pack our kayaks and set off to the goodbyes from a mother and infant paddling in the water to keep cool. The first 10 miles turn out to be a combination of dodging hissing swans (we nicknamed them "battleships") and avoiding the thorny Hawthorn bushes. The first day is more struggle than pleasure that ends with our first river lock at the village of Lechlade. We portage around the loch (as it is closed for the evening and we have not worked one yet) and look for the campsite listed on our map. We can't find the campsite but we do locate the traveling circus on the bank of the river, complete with tents, horses, and caravans, next to the pub, and decide to inquire about the campsite. We find out the campsite is taken up by the circus but we are welcome to camp alongside. We start the tradition of a beer at the pub after the days paddle. Tired we pitch our tent between the river and circus tents and figure it may be a sleepless night as the circus folk gather around a campfire between the tents and start to drink beer. They soon drift off to the trailers and we drift off the sleep in the surprising quiet of the surrounding rolling English countryside clouded in a green evening mist.

In the morning we start with a walk across a field past the limestone church through the graveyard and into the village to gather more supplies for the trip and then eat our morning pastries in the village square. Back at the campsite the circus starts to practice their acts and we load the kayaks and then drift down the mirror flat Thames. The river never gets very wide. For the next hundred and sixty miles it contracts and expands but never gets more than 100 yards wide (and that is in last 20 miles through the city of London). Over the next 2 weeks we will pass through a couple of cities, Oxford and Reading, and one of the most densely populated regions in Europe - the 12 to 14 million in metropolitan London. Most of the time, however, we see only trees, lush grass lined banks, rolling hills, and village spires in the background - even to the edge of central London. The boat traffic is mostly canal barges and cruise boats, both are intended for leisurely cruising the Thames (speed limit 8 kph) and mooring up along the banks for the evening. We paddle an average of 4 miles mph and often keep pace with the canal barges.

Most are surprised to see kayaks and judging from most people's reaction – those padding the whole distance are fairly uncommon. The most common comment is that they have always wanted to do it. We average 15 to 20 miles a day and take several days off to enjoy the villages, country walks, and campsites.

The daily routine breaks down to a series of short paddles broken up by the locks. There are a total of 45. All of the locks on the Thames are manned during the day. As you approach the lock area a big arrow shaped blue sign says LOCK. The river path to the weir is a big square red DANGER sign, so navigation is pretty self-evident. If your timing is good the lock gates are open when you approach and you paddle in under the direction of the Lock Keeper. If the lock gates are closed you paddle off to the right next to a dock (half the time it was just us) and wait for the signal from the Lock Keeper, this is usually after the lock gate opens and the boats within leave the lock. After you enter the lock you approach the concrete side and grab the hanging chains that keep you from drifting around as the water lowers. The river falls about 300 feet over the 170 miles so the locks average 5 to 8 feet of water fall. The locks offer a rest, a visit with the lock keepers and other boaters, lovely English gardens that the keeper tends in between operations, and the best part is camping at several of them (oh, and some have bathrooms and afternoon tea). The evening ritual is pitching the tent, relaxing, then heading to the local pub overlooking the Thames; or asking the Lock Keeper what's the best pub in the village. The biggest challenge is to paddle past the lovely pubs during the day, and what is even harder is to stop into the pub for lunch and not wile away the afternoon sipping beer in the warm sun.

The other activity in the long daylight of the evenings is to go for a walk into the surrounding villages visiting centuries old churches and manor houses. You can really slow down and enjoy all of the surrounding sites; Major Sites - museums and colleges of Oxford, Hampton Court, Windsor Castle, Kew gardens, the minor ones – World War II pill boxes on the Thames, Celtic Wittenham Clumps (Iron Age fort site), double clotted cream tea in Cookham, Dorchester Abbey, reading the Sunday paper and sipping beer in the sunny Pub garden – the list is endless. According to a guide book I found on the Thames Walking Path (a long distance foot path that mostly follows the Thames) virtually every foot of the river is associated with some literary or historical figure. Shakespeare, Dickens, Henry VIII, the Rolling Stones, and my favorite association north of Oxford where Alice in Wonderland was conceived from stories told on picnics taken on its shores.

There were only 3 challenging periods on our trip.

The first was passing through Henley. Henley on Thames is best known for the Henley Regatta – huge floating gin palaces (Motor Yachts) in a solid flotilla of fiberglass pretending to watch rowing races but mainly watching each other and almost never looking out for 2 tiny insignificant kayaks. Most of the river is partitioned off for the rowing races. A quarter is left for two continuous lanes of boats where you virtually have to use a turn signal to get across; it was a taste of the Thames in London. You also have to watch out for the rowing teams that are not on the course – they are the equivalent of a river going cruise missile.

The second was the Sunday swimmer that just decided to blindly dive at my kayak just as a hissing swan appeared along side my elbow. Timing is everything. I swerved to the right as the swimmer came up on my left, his backside turned to an already arched necked hissing swan which struck his butt. I continued to hear his howls and his friend's laughter as I paddled off.

The third was the trip through central London on the tidal Thames. Teddington is the last river lock on the west side of central London. From here east the Thames is a tidal river, with a 21 foot differential tide! This basically translates to either you are going with the outflow at 7 to 10 knots, if you are paddling or you are going backwards with the incoming tide at 3 to 6 knots. The final 2 hours through central London was similar to running Deception Pass at full flow with just a few added features; Police boats, Tour boats, waterman ferry barges, high-speed inflatables, river barges, and bridge supports (with frothing white water on the leading edge). The river at this point has 10' to 20' vertical stone wall banks with looped chains hanging down for those that fall in the water to hold onto while awaiting help. And the most exciting part of all was the wake echo off the walls from all of the river traffic. Two weeks of quietly paddling and pub crawling was cleared from our memories in the last 10 miles.

We hauled out at our friends flat just a couple of miles short of Greenwich, where we beached on a freshly exposed mud flat and hauled our kayaks up the stone steps and stored them in a marina. We had one last item to take care of – a pint of beer at the local pub, the Wibbily Wobbily – an old river steamer in one of the old dockyards. Gail actually decided to forego the beer and go straight for a double gin and tonic.