

# NEWS LETT ER

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The success of this newsletter relies on contributions from **YOU!** If you've been on a trip, in a race, or just have an opinion or some news you want to share, please send it to [newsletter@maidstonecanoeclub.net](mailto:newsletter@maidstonecanoeclub.net)

Articles can be long or short (between 250 and 1500 words) and will ideally be accompanied by some pictures. The deadline for submissions for the next issue is 10th February, 2019.



Mark Corti, Editor  
[newsletter@maidstonecanoeclub.net](mailto:newsletter@maidstonecanoeclub.net)

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Hard rapids on the Urik River. Siberia expedition paddling - full story inside.

## CHRISTMAS PARTY!

**15th DECEMBER, 7pm**

It's that time of year again! The Club will be transformed into a Magical Winter Wonderland, with snow and elves and a free pony for everyone! But you'll still have to bring your own booze.

Tickets cost just £5, which will include a light buffet. Please book in advance on the website so we've got some idea of numbers. There will be a Pre-Party Paddle at about 5:30pm to work up an appetite - it's always a fabulous evening and we'd love to see you there!





Clear Access, Clear Waters

# A campaign for fair, **shared, sustainable** **open access**

British Canoeing **will** do the following:

1

Champion the case for fair, shared, sustainable open access on and along inland waters to be confirmed in law.



3

Commit to inspire more people to be active outdoors; connecting people with their environment and promoting the benefits on mental and physical well-being.

2

Continue to act to protect and improve the health of our rivers; working to protect, preserve and enhance the natural environment.



**Clear Access**  
**Clear Waters**

Clear Access, Clear Waters

# British Canoeing's commitment to fair, shared, sustainable open access



Access on English waterways has been disputed for more than 60 years. British Canoeing believes there is a strong case to demonstrate an existing right to navigation on rivers, other parties disagree.

The growth of canoeing and the enjoyment levels of paddlers rely on access on and along rivers and waterways, in clean, healthy environments.



At a time where our waterways face greater threats than ever before - from pollution, invasive non-native species and climatic pressures - the public must be fully engaged in protecting them. Clear waters can only be achieved with clear access for all.

British Canoeing would like to see the outdoors open to all sustainable recreational pursuits to responsible users, enabling everyone to enjoy the health and well-being benefits of being in, on or beside water.

Inactivity is causing all sorts of problems for young people – diabetes, obesity and other health issues – many of which can be solved by exercise and being outdoors.

Access to the environment, specifically our waterways, has the potential to create a deep and lasting connection with nature, encouraging pro-environmental behaviours. But just 4% of English waterways are uncontested leaving tens of thousands of miles of river open to dispute and disagreement.

Few of us live near the coast; however, the majority of the population live near a river, canal or lake. It is not right that these spaces are often 'off limits' or closed off from the public and more must be done to enable greater access to waterways.

Everyone has a responsibility to take reasonable measures to help safeguard the environment for both

the present and future generations. Through its pledges, British Canoeing is committing to leading the paddling community towards a clearer position on access and a brighter future for the environment.

English waterways are a fantastic resource that should be available for everyone to enjoy responsibly, without prejudice or exclusion.

If future generations are to respect the natural environment and be engaged in its protection, then there must be clarity over rights of access.

**Fair, shared, sustainable open access, it's not too much to ask for is it?**

Find out more at [britishcanoeing.org.uk/access](https://britishcanoeing.org.uk/access)



## From the Editor

**A**s you may have noticed, British Canoeing launched their "Clear Access, Clear Waters" campaign last month.

This marks the beginning of a sustained push by for fair, shared, and sustainable open access for all responsible recreational water users. It's fair to say that river access has not been high on the list of priorities for BC for many years, with the focus being primarily on competitive disciplines, particularly those likely to lead to Olympic

success. It's therefore fantastic to see British Canoeing devoting resources to recreational paddlers - who, after all, make up the majority of canoeists and kayakers in the Club.

Paddling on the Medway, as we frequently do, we may not think about access as an issue that affects us too much. But how many of you have paddled the West Rother recently? Or the Medway above Leigh Barrier? Both these sections of river used to be paddled regularly, but in recent years local angling clubs have been instrumental in preventing this. Nationally, only 4% of our rivers have undisputed access, where kayakers and canoeists can paddle

without fear of litigation or conflict. In Wales, only 13 of the estimated 300 paddlable rivers have access agreements.

The 2000 CRow Act gave walkers the right to roam over most land in the country, but anglers successfully lobbied for rivers to be excluded. It's time this changed, and rivers were made accessible to everyone. Go to the British Canoeing website and see how you can help make it happen.

*By Mark Corti*

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*There was definitely enough water this weekend to paddle on. Water in the streams, in the rivers, down the roads ...*

## Exe and Barle Camping Weekend

**I**'d been kayaking for about a year, mostly on the Medway on the Sunday paddles, and by now was very comfortable with most of what that body of water could offer me.

So I thought to myself what should my next challenge be? Looking through the club calendar there it was - a camping weekend in Devon with an introduction to white water on the rivers Exe and Barle.

I spoke to those who must be listened to (Geoff) and was told that I would probably be OK despite the fact that I'd not been on moving water before - the encouraging words were that someone with my experience had gone the year before and they only capsized 3 times on

the first day and none at all on the Saturday. The thought of capsizing at all on moving water was not appealing at all but I persuaded myself that it would be a great experience. All I needed was a pair of neoprene trousers to keep me warm, so once purchased I was all set.

I put out a call to see if anyone else who was going would like to double up on a lift and Steve kindly volunteered not only to drive but also to pick up a club kayak and other equipment for me. This clearly highlights the helpful nature of the club members and one of the benefits.

The hope was that the weekend weather would be kind to us, but as we got closer it was clear that Storm Callum

was going to be hitting the UK at the same time we were going to be in Devon. No news of a cancellation was sent out so off Chris and I ventured to the campsite in Bridgetown.

A good few hours later and having taken detours round Stonehenge we arrived at a wet campsite just before dark to see many others already there and set up. Once camp was pitched we headed off to the excellent Badgers Holt Pub for some first-class ales and a hearty dinner with the other club members. Much of the talk was of previous kayaking adventures as well of what was expected the following day. It sounded like I would be getting wet, but with a warning that the poor weather might mean that it could be too dangerous to go on the river I headed

*cont'd on page 6 ...*



# Phantom of the River

**T**he first new boat from Dagger in a couple of years has finally arrived in the UK, so I had to take one for a spin.

The Phantom is aimed to be a race boat at 9ft and there have been lots of new race boats around recently, some are great boats that are also fast and some are a little bit of a tank but fast, this is definitely the former!

It's first run out was on a low Upper Dart run, so well known and a pretty good all round test for it, not huge water and a little rocky which is pretty typical UK. I shifted the seat all the way forward and tweaked everything to fit. It has the normal dagger outfitting so super comfy.

## Initial Thoughts

Very good, it feels traditionally Dagger but just everything a little bit better, like a Nomad GTI. I paddle a large Nomad usually and I'm around 90-95Kg. I had plenty of room and sizing felt perfect which is rare because I'm usually between M and L so that was nice. It felt faster, sharper and more controllable than the Nomad, it was a more nimble boat all round which was really nice, it even surfs, which Nomads just don't want to do! I like the way dagger boats paddle and feel, they can be a little heavy but they are tough, and they can be a bit numb but that makes them more predictable and feel like they want to look after you down the river. Dagger boats can have their issues, if they decide to carve off somewhere it is often hard to stop them and they can be a bit dull, but lots of people like their boats for that reason. The Phantom improves on both of those, it is faster, sharper and more

controllable, almost what the Mamba should be, a fun and nippy but still forgiving river runner. So for anyone who has tried Dagger boats in the past and found them dull, try the Phantom. It feels more responsive and just that bit sharper but still familiar, but for those people that liked the Nomad for it's forgiving invincible feel this does lose that, just a bit. It does have an edge on the back which you can catch, this isn't a bad thing and you can use it for nipping in and out of eddies, because the secondary stability is so good you can really edge it hard in and out of eddies and that little edge at the back helps out. There isn't so much as to make you worry, it won't punish any error with instant power flips, just occasionally when you get it wrong it just gives you a little wobble.

## Compared to other race boats?

That all depends what you want from a race boat. The Phantom feels most like a general purpose boat of all the race boats i have tried, it is still fast, very fast, but they haven't made it too unmanageable for every other time you want to go boating. It is possibly the easiest thing in the world to roll and not a tank on more technical lower volume.

Now comes the bad bit, the price ... it is the most expensive plastic white water boat around, RRP is £1299, and even with any kind of discount you will be paying comfortably over £1000 for it. So is it worth it? That isn't easy for me to say for you, but if you are looking at a new white water boat and you are around 75-100kg then you should try one if you can. They are a well made, tough, comfortable, fast and all round great boat and maybe it's the boat for you.

*By Sam Heaton, Kent Canoes*  
<http://www.kentcanoes.co.uk>





# Exe and Barle Camping Weekend

... cont'd from page 4

off to bed looking for a quality night of rest. Unfortunately, the 40 mph winds and the horizontal rain meant that that was not possible so I drifted in and out of sleep all the while expecting my tent to blow away.

Luckily when morning came no one had been blown away and the river Exe, although faster than expected, was declared good enough for us new comers so off we set to The Anchor Inn in Exebridge which was some 7 miles south of the campsite it had plenty of parking and more importantly was a good place to launch ourselves. After ferrying cars to the lunch stop and the drivers returning we were split into 2 groups and we set out – the first under the watchful eye of Richard and the second under John.

Given my lack of moving water expedience the launch itself turned out to be more daunting than I expected – just getting to the other side of the river required moves I'd never heard of and there was talk of breaking into eddies and then breaking back out again. On top of this there were signals that had to be learnt. All this made me tenser and less confident – but the old hands were rightly encouraging and Catherine told me to sing a song in my head. All of which helped.

The next couple of hours passed by extremely quickly and much of the detail of where we were passed me by as I was concentrating on staying upright but we practiced the new skills for breaking into eddies and out of them and there were a couple of substantial weirs that all in my

group managed to navigate safely – I'm not entirely sure how looking back, but following a skilled kayaker definitely makes the process a lot easier. We also had a few bridges to navigate and that is where I learnt what a cushion wave was. Needless to say, I found myself upside down with my kayak pinned against a stone bridge pillar. After recovering myself and getting back into my kayak I felt a lot happier as I now knew that capsizing in moving water was not that bad!

I had imagined that the lunch stop would have been somewhere picturesque – maybe with a café and toilets nearby but I suppose that's just not what kayaking is all about and we had to make do with an empty field. I've obviously got to lower my standards!

The afternoon was more of the same beautiful scenery but there was increasing discussion about 2 weirs – Washfield and Bolham with the latter sounding as if it would be impossible to navigate.

When we got to Washfield weir it looked as if every local canoe club was using it – there were dozens of people just practicing this stretch again and again. The water was flowing fast and it had 2 stages. I summed up the courage and managed it in one go – it was such a sense of achievement and was one of the highlights of the trip for me.

Next it was on to Bolham weir which as it turns out was close to the end of the trip – I can't help but wonder why such a large feature is at the end of a day's kayaking rather than at the beginning

when you are fresh and full of energy but again maybe that's just the way it is with kayaking.

I followed the words of wisdom from those that know and went down the 7 fish steps on the left-hand side which I managed fine but there was something called a 'stopper' at the bottom which I hit and fell out on. My kayak, paddle and I all went different ways and as I bobbed down the river I saw 2 other kayakers come a cropper in the same place. It took 10 – 15 minutes or so to gather all the equipment and bodies together and there was only 1 casualty – a broken paddle. I was so impressed that Norman was carrying a spare for such a situation.

We all arrived shortly thereafter at Tiverton where we changed and loaded up the kayaks. We stopped off at The Anchor Inn for welcome refreshments before heading back to the campsite and then again to the Badgers Holt in the evening. Everyone ate together and there were more stories and even a folk song from Norman given the high spirits. I however left early as my sleeping bag was calling me to rest my weary body.

The next day 1 group headed off to do the first third of the Exe again while the more adventurous crew did the top end of the Barle.

All in all it was a very enjoyable weekend with good camaraderie and I would encourage any new kayakers to go along next year.

A big thanks goes out to Geoff for organising the event but also all the instructors and the seasoned members who turned up to ensure that the weekend went smoothly

*Fraser Easton*





# Interview with a Paddler

*Felicity has become a Wednesday night stalwart, and is usually out with the group on the Medway. We chatted to her one wet Wednesday in November, just before she headed out.*

**Mark:** So, how long have you been paddling?

**Felicity:** Eighteen months. And eighteen months with the Club as well.

**Mark:** And what kind of paddling do you mostly do?

**Felicity:** Just river paddling from the Club, mostly. I've done a couple of trips, but work doesn't always let me do what I want!

**Mark:** Speaking of trips, what's been your favourite so far?

**Felicity:** Best trip was doing the Wye river! That was the first consecutive-day paddle. And then a couple of weeks ago I did the Stour, and I'd never been on the Stour either. That was just beautiful, just a lovely experience! And it was a lovely day, with a pub in the middle!

**Mark:** Do you have a favourite piece of paddling equipment?

**Felicity:** Not particularly! Until I get my own kayak, then I'm just quite happy with whatever I get!

**Mark:** Why do you paddle?

**Felicity:** I don't know! I do seem to be attracted to water. I used to go diving, and I used to love going diving. But diving's quite expensive, and I only do warm-water diving – I've never done English lakes and stuff. So I thought "if I can't do that, then what can I do?" and I just had the inkling to do kayaking or some sort of paddling, canoeing or something. I didn't really know what, so I came down and found out about it, and just thought "This is it!" And it's nice and close, it's handy and it's affordable – even if I don't have my own equipment it's all here and people let me use whatever, so it's fantastic in that way.

**Mark:** And what paddling would you like to be doing in five years time?

**Felicity:** Taking myself off or going off in a group and doing different rivers. I thought I wanted to try white water but I've kind of veered away from it. Only because I just love being out there, I'm so nosy! Even though some people think I might want to go and do racing, I don't! Because I'm too nosy, I like gazing about, just taking it in – it's the wildlife and all that stuff that you see, from a completely different angle. It's just mind-blowing to me!

**Mark:** Thanks so much for talking to us!

*Mark Corti & Felicity Pope  
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*Leadership starts on the bank: Mary briefing the group in Switzerland.*

## Looking at Leadership

**I set out at the start of this year wanting to improve my skills of river leadership, after a good friend asked if I could lead a group in North Wales in November, and I confidently said "yes" but thought "oh my god what have I let myself in for".**

I did my BCU level 3 inland coach in 2010 and I had used my qualification as head coach at an outdoor centre, but I hadn't really used it in the whitewater sense, having done very little leading in the last 8 years.

On a course early on in the year the coach asked the group (who were all grade 3 / 4 paddlers) about leading and there was a lot of hmmm....I'd prefer to be tail end Charlie. I needed to get over this and become a confident river leader.

In May I went on a BC whitewater safety and rescue and this was covered to a certain extent and the term CLAP was a memory jog, to make sure when I am leading to communicate (through explanation and signals), have line of sight of the group, remember to avoid danger spots and obstacles and position myself where I am the most use.

We were on the Dee which I know very well, which although helped to practice and re-visit the skills and theory behind river leadership, it didn't really give me a challenge, or made me feel I could do it on an unknown river.

A trip to Slovenia came and went without practicing this skill, then I went out to Switzerland. The group was a mismatch of friends from various parts of the UK, some I knew and others I didn't. I didn't really know what to expect, where I would be (skill level) in the group, or what kind of rivers we would be paddling.

The first day was a little bumble down some grade 2 on the Lower Hinterrhine to get used to the water and see how we all paddle. After a while I just ended up at the front and did the very easy route finding. It was a lovely very Swiss little paddle and a good warm up.

The next day on a very low, Upper Hinterrhine (grade 3) we split the group in half and we had 4 in our group. About a 3rd of the way down I asked if I could lead as I wanted to take photos of everyone. I continued to lead until the end with some excellent coaching and hints and tips from others, I managed to get myself and the group to the get out in one piece.

So where I said I wanted a bit of a practice of leading, this actually meant that nearly every day I got to lead large sections of these lovely grade 3 rivers, with the help and guidance from my fellow experienced paddlers.

The Swiss paddling was excellent for grade 3/ 4 paddlers and we paddled a good number of sections of the Hinterrhine, Vorderrhine and a few on the Inn. Talking of the Inn, 6 out of the 9 went and had a day paddling the Gairsun Gorge, an awesome grade 4 and the most technical and full on paddle I have ever done. I didn't lead this one, as I was definitely out of my comfort zone but what a brilliant paddle and at the end of it realised I'm actually ok at this paddling malarkey.

I went from being nervous, and unconfident in my ability not just as a river leader, but as a paddler, to someone who relished leading the group and route finding.

Back in the UK, a chilly August weekend I was away with West London Whitewater, there was a distinct lack of water on the Saturday so some playing

*cont'd on page 8 ...*





*Droplets on paddles / And neoprene mittens / Bright plastic kayaks / And paddlers from Britain / Tents in the sunshine held up with string / These are a few of my favourite things!*

# Looking at Leadership

... cont'd from page 7

on the Dee was in order. Sunday was going to be a Tryweryn paddle but fate got in the way and the dam broke (I mean what are the chances). Other options were put on the table, one being the Conwy ... I love this river ... so with a coach, 2 of us headed there ... I was hoping to get some more leading practice ... lucky for me the other participant just wanted some confidence building, so I got a chance to lead most of the section with some excellent coaching thrown in. So now ... how am I feeling about

leading in November ... looking forward to it, and feeling fairly confident. I am also looking at running and leading some beginner whitewater trips. So thank you to all those who have taken the time to encourage, coach, give hints and tips and guidance - not only have you improved my leading skills, but also my confidence.

By Mary Cutts

<https://mizmzmozkayak.wordpress.com>



*When I'm in a hole / And the boat won't roll / When I'm feeling sad / I simply remember my favourite things / And then I don't feeeeeeeell / So bad*

# River Wye Trip

**W**hitney Bridge Campsite on the River Wye hosted Maidstone Canoe Club for the third time, under new ownership.

A small group set up camp on Friday afternoon and enjoyed a camp fire with our own BBQ.

Saturday morning we enjoyed our first paddle of the weekend which took us from Whitney Bridge to Bredwardine . The river was mainly grade 1 and some small sections of grade 2.

Saturday afternoon we arrived back at Whitney Bridge Campsite and enjoyed a lovely BBQ which was organized by the



*Tranquil waters on a typically lovely stretch of the Wye.*



*The Wye valley has plenty of lovely camp-spots, both on campsites and (in the off season), wild-camping on the beaches.*

campsite owners.

Sunday we paddled from Bredwardine to Byecross. The final stretch of the River Wye was finished by Bennington falls which turned out to be very uneventful. We were off the river by 1230 ready to head home.

Overall the weekend was enjoyable and relaxing even though the journey was approximately 5 hours.

A big thank you to Lee for organizing the trip and Nick for towing the trailer with most of the kayaks on. A video of the trip courtesy of Jonathan Cowdock "Return to the River Wye" is available on Youtube.

By Lisa Taylor

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# Siberian Whitewater Expedition

**S**iberia's got a certain reputation amongst paddlers.

Hard whitewater. Remote wilderness. Atrocious weather. Boulder-filled gnarlfeasts run by vodka-fuelled lunatics. It was, therefore, with some trepidation that I said "yes" when Neil Cox (<http://www.neilcoxmisadventures.com>) mentioned he had space for another team member on an expedition there. After all, I don't really like vodka!

After some discussion about the group's skill levels, and a fairly hair-raising scouting mission on another river by the advance party (a tale for another time), we settled on the Urik. The reports we could find described it as a fairly remote multi-day trip, running at about class III(IV) as it dropped out of the Sayan mountains, and then flattening out for the final days to the take-out.

Neil had found a local fixer who arranged the permits needed to travel in this sensitive border area, plus transport to take us to the put-in. It was a full day's drive from Irkutsk, much of it over unmade track, so we needed a 4WD vehicle of some kind. The "transport" turned out to be the most fabulously pimped-out minibus I'd ever seen, riding high on giant monster-truck wheels. If you remember the Tamiya "Lunchbox" radio-controlled van from when you were a kid, you'll know what I mean! Driving out from Irkutsk, the modern city centre gave way to crumbling Soviet-era housing blocks, and then to traditional wooden houses and barns, often still arranged around the kolkhoz, the collective farms created by Stalin. The road deteriorated in sympathy: from a 3-lane motorway to single-land blacktop, becoming more potholed and dishevelled until finally petering out into a rocky track. We stopped at a picturesque waterfall with a beribboned shrine, to propitiate the local deities and ask their blessing on our trip, drinking vodka and bowing our heads.

The monster van did well to start with, but despite the valiant efforts of Oleg, our driver, it was no match for the terrain and it finally sank up to the doors in a bog – luckily only a few hundred metres from the river. It took a good few hours to extricate it, and the sun was just settling onto the horizon by the time it was freed – much later in the day than was prudent to be putting on to an unknown river. Our fixer was adamant that it wasn't safe for



us to camp this close to the road – armed bandits from a nearby village had apparently robbed a previous expedition in this area – and he wouldn't leave until he'd seen us safely on our way.

Somewhat against our better judgement, we packed hurriedly before full dark fell, and the lengthening shadows saw us floating down a tranquil stream in search of another camp spot. In the event, it was a lovely evening paddle – the hills reflected in the still water of the gently-flowing water, the rocks glowing in the soft golden light of evening. On a quiet bend in the river we pulled out the boats and made camp in the pine forest. A large colony of Siberian hamsters had made their home in the rocks around camp, and their soft squeaking was the soundtrack to our sleep.

The morning came bright and clear, the sun quickly melting last night's frost. By the time we'd re-packed after the rush of last night, the sun was climbing quickly up a cloudless sky. The river meandered

through a pretty valley, wide and shallow. Very shallow, in fact. Soon we were wading through it, floating our boats alongside us, slipping and sliding over the weed-covered rocks which made up the riverbed. It looked idyllic – brightly-coloured boats, clear water, blue skies and green hills – but it was surprisingly hard work, with the gaps in the rocks and the fast-flowing water providing numerous foot-entrapment opportunities. Eventually, imperceptibly, the hills closed in, the river narrowed, and the boats, mercifully, began to float. We were paddlers again.

Once we were floating, the river picked up surprisingly quickly. From a fast-moving class II, it swiftly became a bumpy and continuous III, lots of fun with no let-up. I'd had an enforced last-minute change of boat, and with no time to replace the rusted bolts I was unable to store any gear behind the footplate. This meant that all the weight was in the back of my kayak, making it extremely stern-

*cont'd on page 10 ...*





heavy and pretty unwieldy in the water. Paddling a laden whitewater boat was a new experience for me anyway, and it took most of the morning for me to get used to the handling. Even then I was working pretty hard to get the boat where I wanted it to go. It was definitely not my most elegant paddling day!

I wasn't the only one making heavy work of it. The river was a grade harder than we'd been expecting and was higher than anticipated for the time of year, and that had led to a couple of swims as things hotted up. Max (a fantastically enthusiastic young paddler from Austria) was making everything look easy, but Neil had discovered the repair he'd made on his split boat wasn't as waterproof as he'd hoped, and after Leanne head-ruddered down a long stretch of class IV we decided to set an early camp at about 4pm and make a fresh start in the morning.

After an evening of cooking (successful), boat repair (moderately successful) and fishing (entirely unsuccessful), we got back on the river bright and early. The gradient had steadily increased throughout the previous day, and the river was a stiff and unrelenting class IV, occasionally interspersed with harder drops. While inspecting one of these drops, we could see the river churning into a metres-wide slot between sheer cliffs just below us, before dog-legging out of sight. Previous trip reports had spoken of a narrow gorge completely blocked by rockfall, so we were keen to inspect the canyon before attempting it. There was a huge eddy on the left just below the drop, and we agreed to stop there and take a look from the bank. I can't stress enough how big this eddy was. Gigantic. Enormous. There were even a couple of eddies behind it, in case you somehow missed the first one. It was therefore with considerable chagrin that I sailed past them all after completely fluffing the line, fighting my unwieldy kayak in the swift water as I headed into the gorge. There may have been some bad language. In desperation I threw the boat into a fissure



in the sheer cliffs, a half-an-eddy of surging water below a slimy rock chimney to which I clung grimly. I could still see the rest of the team, gesticulating at me from the eddy - fortunately their words were lost in the roar of the rapids! The water in the gorge wasn't hard, but it was extremely fast-moving with no eddies at all. I couldn't see far downstream, and with the knowledge of a possible river-wide syphon in there somewhere I wasn't keen to run it blind. I sat in my slimy chimney, the boat surging beneath me in the not-really-an-eddy, clutching at the cold rock and reflecting that, on balance, I really would have preferred to be in the big eddy above the gorge, in the sunshine with my friends.

After half an hour - a very long, lonely half-an-hour - boats reappeared in the eddy above. Max, the strongest paddler in the group, paddled confidently into the canyon, and I gratefully followed peeled out behind him to make an eddy and beach a short distance downstream. They'd inspected from the top and located the rockfall. A huge rectangular

boulder had fallen from the cliff and completely blocked the river - almost the whole mass of water disappeared beneath it with nary a gurgle, before emerging a few metres away into a wide, calm pool.

Once we'd negotiated the blockage and emerged back into the sunshine, the river resumed it's previous character - long, sloping rapids and powerful water, pine forested slopes to either side - and we pushed on until dusk, portaging a couple of nastier drops, before finding a camp spot for the night. It had been a long and eventful day.

We'd dropped about 550m in 40km over the last couple of days, but from this point on, the river widened and the gradient eased off as we left the mountains behind. The final feature was a magnificent waterfall, the entire river cascading into freefall and disappearing into a cloud of spume. The ever-enthusiastic Max was keen to run it, but after a long time peering into the roaring depths, discretion prevailed and we all portaged to the calm waters below.

Despite the drizzle, we made good time through fun but easier rapids for the next few days, and started to see more signs of habitation - hunters and fishermen for the most part, but we also saw a couple of rafters, riding a cataraft they'd made themselves. They had a pair of inflatable pontoons, lashed together with saplings and old bicycle inner-tubes, with paddles made from aluminium sheet riveted to poles and inflatable life-jackets. We shared a bothy with them one night, swapping slugs of our whisky for salami and cheese, and talking around the fire in broken Russian and English, as well as a fair amount of sign language and charades. It turned out that one of the rafters had actually leaped off the waterfall on a previous trip here, but since he'd broken both legs while doing so we didn't feel too bad opting for the portage ...

By the final day, the split in Neil's boat was fully open, despite his best efforts each night with the stove and a hot knife, and we were stopping every hour to empty it. It must have been exhausting work, but the river was still flowing at a reasonable pace, and we made the take-out as planned on the final day. The monster van arrived on schedule, and in a few short hours we were sitting in a good restaurant in Irkutsk, freshly scrubbed and slightly discombobulated, swapping stories of our adventure and planning the next.

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