

Thames Challenge 2008



I'm not one for long periods sat on a beach. After 15 minutes I'm itching for something to do, reading is fine for a bit, but the continual distractions make it a bit of a chore. I have taken my Enterprise dinghy before, which is fine provided you have someone to crew for you or the wind is such that you can take it out on your own.

Last year I hit on the idea of buying an inflatable canoe or kayak. I could use it on my own and transport and storage would be easy. I looked at some in the local town centre, but £100 bought a boat with the puncture proof qualities of a lilo - not at all what I was looking for.

On returning from holiday life turned upside down when my father lost his eight year battle with prostate cancer. He spent the last couple of weeks of his life in The Greenwich & Bexley Cottage Hospice where they made him as comfortable as possible and gave my family as much support as we needed. Having experienced such compassionate care I was determined to raise money towards the £2 million they need from the community every year to keep this essential service running. I wanted to do something different and for some reason kayaking along the Thames finishing at Greenwich seemed like a good idea. Somehow I managed to rope my sister Karen in.

A bit of tide planning and guesswork on how much ground we could cover in the 6 hours the tide would be with us and we had a date, 10th August, a start point, Chiswick and a name for the event, The Thames Challenge. Domain names were purchased, website build and we were away.

Now we needed a kayak and I wanted to borrow one rather than buy. My last kayak trip had been a few years earlier along the Drome in France in an open topped kayak, but prior to that some 20 years earlier in the Scouts endured in



solid but uncomfortable vessels from which scratched legs and glass fibre splinters due a mismatch between the length of my legs and the size of the "hole" were a dead cert. I did some research and discovered the inflatable Advanced Elements Convertible tandem kayak. This seemed ideal, the lack of fibreglass edges appealed to my shins and the compact nature of the inflatable craft meant easy transport and storage. I



approached Advanced Elements directly and they were very helpful, offering the use of a Convertible but getting it from California to the UK proved a stumbling block.

So I tried some local kayak manufacturers, however they were unable to help. I really liked the idea of the Advanced Elements, so I thought I would try the UK dealers before giving up trying to borrow one. Letters were sent on Friday just before going to Longleat for a weekend. We returned late on Sunday to a ringing phone and a very enthusiastic Nick Pipe from Vortex in North Wales. Nick was very keen to support our event. So much so he had spent the weekend hunting me down as the mobile phone number I had given had been off for the majority of the weekend as I hadn't expected any response until Monday.





We talked about the event, what Nick was looking for in return for supplying a kayak and what equipment was best. Nick recommended the Advanced Elements Convertible kayak, twin deck top, touring paddles, backbone and, of course, a pump.

Unpacking for the first time revealed a boat of such high quality that should never be referred to as "blow-up", in the same way you don't really think of

a 7 metre RIB as inflatable. To be honest the Advanced Elements specifications don't do the kayak justice. The bottom of the kayak is made from a similar material as our small inflatable motor boat and the top constructed from tough waterproofed fabric. The internal tubes that keep the kayak afloat and give it shape are multilayered and very tough. The removable floor is made of a much tougher material than the £100 boats I was looking at last year and provides insulation from cold water the kayak may be in. On top there are sturdy carrying handles and a number of buckles for adding Advanced Elements luggage system and a large bungee on the bow. Seats made from a tough looking fabric clip onto the tubes and offer a wide range of adjustment, enough to accommodate my 6'4" frame. As with any boat, I'm sure it is possible to put a hole in the bottom or tubes, however with the quality and quantity of materials used, it's not going to happen easily.

Setting up for the first time was quite straightforward, taking about 15 minutes, mostly due to re-reading the instructions as I really didn't want to break anything and partly due to a slight confusion about what IN and OUT meant on the pump. Unusually I like to read instructions first and I was able to download and digest the instructions from Nick's website before the kayak had arrived. The instructions are clear and easy to follow and after the first couple of inflation sessions they really aren't needed. I had a slight problem aligning the backbone, pushing it too far into the bow of the boat, which made it appear too short. Practise helps and I can now get in just the right position with ease. Once inflated the kayak is rigid and no sign of folding in the middle when picked up by the bow and stern grab handles. Deflating is quick and easy and the bag is sufficiently large so that folding doesn't have to be too precise.



Our first trip out was on the River Medway in Tonbridge on a busy Sunday. I last canoed here 23 years ago, but it hadn't changed much, just a bit busier. Kayak was inflated, ready to go in 10 minutes and attracted some attention from other boat owners. All were impressed by the quality. The double deck has an inflatable edge around the cockpit hole that allows a standard spray deck to be fitted, but we decided on this occasion not to use them. Getting in and out of kayaks has always been a problem for me, a combination of long legs and dubious balance had caused many a dunking when I was younger. Getting in turned out to be OK, and we were both a bit worried about stability, but there was really no need. The kayak sat nicely in the water, a little lower at the back, but that's my fault, and felt very, very stable, certainly as stable as the kayak I used in France and considerably more stable than I remember the Scout's kayaks feeling. The kayak was comfortable to be in, an important factor when the crew are firmly in the Radio 2 age range and I was surprised to find you couldn't feel the back bone at all. As with a solid kayak, you don't sit on the bottom but are raised up by the inflatable floor and a substantial seat, so water dripping into the inside from the paddles or from getting in doesn't bother the crew.

We got into a good stride, clashed paddles a few times but declared the inaugural journey a complete success.



A few weeks later I had the kayak, without Karen but with my just teenage children, in Studland Bay, Dorset. Here the flexibility of the Convertible really shone. With the top off it's a safe kayak that the kids are more than capable of handling in this sheltered bay. Five minutes later the top is on and I'm off with a mate on a 3 mile trip to Old Harry Rocks and back. The downside with sea trips is salt water and sand and you really do have to rinse thoroughly

as soon after use as possible, including inside the paddle and backbone tubes. The fit of the paddle and backbone tubes is such that getting sand in the join makes it difficult to separate them later. In order to get behind the kayak's internal air tubes for cleaning and drying they can be pulled out from the inside, although not removed completely as one of the main air valves passes through and is fastened to the outer shell. Putting them back in is straightforward and you get to see just how strong these tubes are.

The crew at the back gets an adjustable foot rest, attached to the tubes using Velcro, which additionally protects the front paddler from being kicked in the back by their long legged companion. There isn't a footrest in the front, which

would be a useful addition for the serious kayaker, but this is remedied by wrapping some towels in plastic and wedging between the front tubes.



Both Karen & I were both confident in the kayak's ability to cope with the 18 miles on the Thames we were to cover. Our own ability was in question, however, despite training in the gym.

The weather the day before being dreadful, so we were relieved when the forecasters were right and August the 10th dawned sunny with a few clouds, a brisk breeze and not too hot. Perfect, in other words. The logistics of the event had been

finalised the week before, and at 9:15 Karen & I launched the kayak at the public slipway in Chiswick Mall, whilst our support RIB was dropped in at Putney Hard. Despite having been in The Solent a few weeks earlier, The Thames felt very large, but the kayak felt stable and followed the river's current well boosting our confidence.

After just over an hour we started to see London's landmarks, the first being the Telecom Tower. Suddenly, so it seemed, we were alongside the Houses of Parliament and the river changed personality, becoming choppy with wash from the river shuttles and sightseeing craft, increased by bouncing from moored boats and pontoons. Some of London's bridges created some fast flowing, choppy water, but the Convertible took it all in it's stride. Being at river height alongside the HMS Belfast really brought home how big the town-class cruiser is and how small we were. Kayaking through London felt surreal, you feel much more of a participant than if you walk through the city. I know there are kayakers that spend time on this stretch of water most weeks and I now know why they do it.

Through Tower Bridge and the water calmed down again, but for a short time we were paddling into the wind. Hard work but the strong gusts didn't blow the kayak off track. Forty minutes later we passed our finish line at the Cutty Sark, although due to last year's fire the masts are missing from this fantastic naval monument. We were warm and comfortable and hadn't felt like we had just spent three hours in a kayak. Clearly you could cover distance in the kayak



and the storage space above and below deck makes a day out or longer very easy. Our original plan was to land and deflate the kayak, returning to Putney in the RIB. However the tide at Greenwich was so strong landing either boat was far too risky, so we moored behind a floating pontoon, hopped into the RIB and deflated the kayak on the water, bringing it in when most of the air was out.

Our little adventure raised over £2,400 for The Greenwich & Bexley Cottage Hospice and put a smile on our faces. But more about the kayak.

Without a doubt the Advanced Elements Convertible was perfect for our trip. We're both kayak novices and appreciated the comfort and stability offered by the kayak. It went pretty much where we wanted it and wasn't adversely affected by the wind. Being able to deflate and store the boat on the RIB at the end was a bonus, having to manage a solid kayak on the trip back to Putney would have either slowed us down if we had towed it or taken up a fair bit of room if we had have brought it on board.

I would like to see a foot rest for the front crew member in the same style as the rear paddler and the only other complaint is that there is a small amount of seepage that seems to come in around the cover's zip. This is really not-picking and in reality this isn't a problem, it's not much and it falls below the seat and floor, and it is the trade off for the flexibility. If I had a choice between a zip-off top or fixed top (although Advanced Elements only do the zip off top for tandem kayaks) I would have the zip-off top as it provides so much flexibility with my children being able to use it without getting caught up getting in or out.

I've not tried it without the optional backbone and for the little effort it takes to fit it there seems no point in not having it.

Would I recommend it? Without a doubt, in fact I've bought the one we used on The Thames along with a Wind Paddle that hasn't, as yet, been used but should add an extra dimension to trip out. I expect to get a lot of use from the kayak, not only as an escape from sitting on a beach, but as a flexible boat I can load in the car in minutes and go for a couple of hours of relaxing paddling in our nearby rivers. Interestingly, everyone that has seen it, including a keen kayaker who looked less than impressed when I announced I was going to use an inflatable, has been impressed with the quality of the kayak. Sometimes it's hard to judge quality from a photograph and the word inflatable does tend to





worry potential purchases. In the case of the Advanced Elements kayaks this really shouldn't put you off, you won't be disappointed, but if you are still not sure try and see one for yourself.

Lastly I would like to thank Nick Pipe from Vortex. His enthusiasm for the event was fantastic, particularly as he lives so far away from the hospice he was supporting. Nick clearly knows his

products well and his advice was always spot on.

<http://www.thameschallenge.org.uk/>