

River Wey & Navigations by Ultralite

Paddling is my perfect escape, when I need time away from the grind of working life in London. The metropolis is blessed with plenty of waterways for the keen kayak – the Thames and River Lea are easily accessible, as are the Grand Union and Regents Canals. But there's an absolute gem to be found a little further out, as I discovered on an autumn adventure in the Advanced Elements Ultralite kayak.



Kayak on my back

Living in the capital, a car can feel like somewhat of a luxury. Like many city residents, I have come to rely solely on public transport to get around. Wouldn't this limit anyone looking to transport their water sports equipment? Not at all. Inflatable kayaking is something of a revolution – not only in the sophistication of their design, but in logistics and transportation. Bring your portable kayak with you on a train to point A, launch and paddle to point B, and bus your way home... It was as simple as packing a dozen kilos of Ultralite kayak on my back, plus a modest front pack for the rest of my

gear. The Advanced Elements kayak bags are generally quite roomy, so it's easy enough to squeeze in a few extras. In addition to the kayak I stowed a pump, 4-part Axis paddle and the dropstitch floor, plus a pair of booties. The portage is do-able if you keep the weight down to essentials only, so I packed as light as possible in the front pack. Then I set off from the belly of the beast, taking several trains to reach my launch point at Godalming by early afternoon.



Warm up, sit down

After a short walk from the railway station I arrived at Phillips Memorial Park, where the River Wey is reasonably accessible. Setup was mostly quick and painless. This was only my second voyage in the Ultralite, but I'd practised inflating the boat at home a few times, with the help of a YouTube video or two for reference. I bundled into the lightweight boat as gracefully as possible from the uneven and muddy riverside. A drama-free launch can feel like a mini success, but the real triumph was the feeling of being on a waterway I'd never paddled before. A few minutes later I was settled in and pottering upstream to take a few snaps of the start of my journey. Breathing the fresh air and bathed in the early October sun, I turned and headed downstream, cruising out of the town and into the country.

Lift, lift and lift again

The twenty miles of waterways that I had planned to navigate were punctuated by no less than fifteen locks. The old adage “no pain no gain” readily comes to mind. Fortunately, the Ultralite really isn’t a lot of trouble to portage in the event of obstacles. The manufacturers have managed to keep the weight below 10 kilos for this model. On good advice, I used the dropstitch floor, adding two more kilos – though it pays back by giving additional buoyancy, rigidity and overall efficiency. The trick is to position the floor properly within the hull, keeping the symmetry of the design. If aligned slightly wonky, you might – like me – feel the boat creep to one side. All the same, once emptied of kit, the kayak is extremely light, true to its name. And with this boon, the fifteen locks were significantly less laborious to cross than might seem at first. If anything, they helped break down the full itinerary into a series of short legs, as well as encouraging me to break from paddling once in a while.



My boat sleeps in your kitchen

Day One was an easy five miles to Guildford. After a few hours racing sleepy narrowboats, I pulled into the town centre and clambered out of the water and up some narrow steps near The Bargeman. The first day had been a prelude, with only a quarter of my journey complete. The remaining fifteen miles would need a full day. The trick was to stay overnight in Guildford at a nearby Airbnb, and start again early on Day Two.

It was straightforward enough to walk the Ultralite across town to my accommodation. Rain came that evening, scuppering my plan to dry the kayak out in the garden. It wasn’t ideal, and the boat had to stay bagged up through the night, sharing the kitchen with two friendly house rabbits. The next morning at first light, I came downstairs to pick up the kayak, relieved that it had not been devoured by rabbits. I plodded back across town in the weak daylight and was back on the river before 8am.

Freedom and crayfish

As I warmed up and set my paddling rhythm, the town of Guildford gradually transitioned into a peaceful rural backdrop. I wound my way freely through the Surrey countryside, graced with a blue sky overhead. Rowers passed by every so often, sending ripples in all directions across the water, before it returned to its mirror-like rest state. The sight of a lock in the distance became a familiar one, although one or two of them are disused, meaning you can paddle straight through. Just outside of Ripley I spotted Newark Priory – a ruined medieval monastery. A few miles later, I pulled up at the riverbank to stretch my legs, and noticed what looked like a lobster in the shallows. As I came near, the creature darted away as swiftly as anything. I later discovered it was an invasive species of crayfish from North America. The miles racked up as I pushed on northward, and by late afternoon I couldn’t resist the call of the riverside pub at Pyrford Lock. After a bite to eat in the sun, I was back on the water, gliding along the final stretch, re-entering the gravity well of the capital. At Byfleet, the Basingstoke Canal merges with the River Wey, and the M25 passes overhead. Assessing my route, I judged I had enough energy in me to reach the Thames and paddle as far as Shepperton. But a train strike that day severely limited my transport options, and my best bet was to exit at Town Lock at Weybridge. I enjoyed the last couple of miles of suburban calm, powering down and preparing to lift the kayak out of the water for the last time that day. Cruising locally with my Ultralite companion was a moment of freedom – relished and recommended.

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