

GLOBALSHOTS



Making waves: Ellie Ross gets ready for the novelty of taking a kayak to work, with George Bullard leading the way

My oarsome route to work

Train, bus, bike... kayak? **Ellie Ross** tries out the newest way to commute...

THE morning rush hour, and crowds of London commuters are swarming overhead, trudging towards the Tube or racing their bikes over bridges. So far, so normal – except that today, I'm not one of them. Instead, I'm peacefully kayaking along the Thames.

This is no ordinary commute. Floating under a cloudless sky, I've spotted goslings on the riverbank, watched cormorants dry their wings in the sun, ogled at algae on HMS Belfast and waved at passers-by gaping in disbelief. Watching the world drift by in the sunshine, without the distraction of a smartphone, I feel like I'm on holiday.

If you work in central London, you're rarely far from the river – but have you ever considered using it as a mode of transport? George Bullard, 27-year-old partner of expedition company IGO Adventures (igoadventures.com), has been paddling to work since November and today is showing me the ropes in his inflatable kayak.

'I love the freedom of it,' he says as we meet at the Cutty Sark in Greenwich at 7.30am. 'With a kayak, you can turn a grim commute into an exciting journey that's different every day.'

Of course, the Thames, which claims

30 lives every year, is no place for novices. As a tidal river, it's fast-flowing and wave height can exceed one metre. Don't even think about getting in a kayak if you've had a few post-work bevvies – both the Port of London Authority (PLA) and the Marine Police carry breathalysers, and the PLA discourages kayaking in the dark.

Thankfully, conditions are ideal when I get into the two-man boat armed with a paddle and clipped into a life jacket. The water is calm and the tide gently pushes us in the right direction. Our aim is to reach London Bridge, four miles west, with enough time for me to have a shower and be at my desk by 10am.

After less than five minutes, we meet our first challenge: a Thames Clipper boat is speeding upriver, sending a worryingly big wave towards our little vessel. We turn to face it head-on. Panic turns to pleasure as we bob over humps of water. After successfully navigating past five boats, I stop counting and begin to feel like an old hand.

We paddle on, drips of water splashing my face and my arms beginning to ache. In a kayak, you not only get a different perspective of the city but you can also take everything at your own pace. We crane our necks to get a rare glimpse of Tower Bridge from below and stop to take in Traitor's Gate from the same viewpoint Tudor prisoners would have seen it as they entered the Tower of London.

Our exit at steps beneath London Bridge leaves me with soaking feet and we squelch up to street level to more bemused looks from commuters. I'm in time for a shower but it's taken almost 90 minutes (three times longer than my usual train journey). Still, if I had to choose between a quick but cramped rail commute and a pre-work adventure, it'd be the latter every time.



Ship shape: Ellie and George en route

OTHER **KAYAKING** CITIES

YOU need a licence to access most canals and managed rivers in England and Wales, included in an annual British Canoeing membership, (£42, britishcanoeing.org.uk). For more on the canal and river network, see canalrivertrust.org.uk

Nottingham: You can paddle the River Trent and the Beeston Canal.

Birmingham: With more miles of canals than Venice, you can paddle right through Spaghetti Junction.

Leicester: The River Soar runs through the city, past the Foxes' King Power Stadium and the National Space Centre.

Greater Manchester: There's a good network of navigable waters, from the upper River Mersey to the Peak Forest, Macclesfield, Rochdale and Bridgewater canals.

Leeds, Liverpool and Wigan: These cities are connected by the



Leeds-Liverpool Canal, which runs through their hearts, and will be the basis of Canal & River Trust's new coast-to-coast trail.

Cambridge: The River Cam (left) flows through the city and north to the Great Ouse.

Oxford: The Oxford Canal connects the city to Coventry.

Exeter: The Exeter Ship Canal links Exeter centre with the River Exe estuary.

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