

WeekendsOut



There's nothing like being flung into a freezing-cold loch to waken you up in the morning. But as **Susan Welsh** discovered, it's actually rather good fun

Paddle your way to a great big adventure

BOTH my arms were screaming with pain and I could feel beads of cold sweat running down my back. I pushed hard; I pulled hard, but nothing was moving.

My breathing was rapid, my face redder than a sunblushed tomato, and I could hear my heartbeat thumping in my ears. I felt things couldn't get any worse, but I was wrong – a high-speed train whizzed by and the driver, seeing my struggle, gave me a cheery toot as if to spur on my efforts.

Or, and I suspect this is more likely, it was his way of drawing the passengers' attention to the ridiculous sight of a middle-aged wife – that's me – battling to get into a skintight wetsuit. It was a battle I was clearly losing.

I had imagined the hardest part of our family's kayaking session on Loch Insh would be learning how to avoid falling in the water, but no, for me the worst part was getting into the wetsuit. It was all the funnier as we weren't changing in a smart clubhouse but in a layby close to a busy road.

Luckily, I had popped on my swimsuit before leaving home, which, when faced with the choice of front-seat of a car or the open air as a changing room, was just as well.

Let's just say that after coping with having dozens of people

stare at my white wobbly bits from a train, I was ready for anything our kayaking guides could throw at me.

The wetsuit was just part of the kit provided by John Mason and Sarah Powell from Full On Adventure, an Aviemore-based sports adventure company that helps others achieve their outdoor objectives and aspirations, whatever they may be.

In our case, it was having a pleasant Sunday morning paddle along Loch Insh, a beautiful loch near Aviemore, which is known as the gateway to the Cairngorms National Park.

The crystal-clear water was as calm as a millpond and, during our visit in May, the dramatic mountains which surrounded it were capped with fresh snow. The sun was beating down and had it not been for the sight of one of the loch's resident ospreys flying quietly overhead in search of a juicy trout, the scene could have passed for an Italian lake.

Although keen to be let loose on the water, we spent quite a bit of time receiving clear instructions, humorously presented by John, on everything from adjusting the kayak seat to suit your build, to how best to use the paddles and what to do if you accidentally upturned the boat.

Health and safety is paramount and as well as the wetsuits, which incidentally were

remarkably comfortable and cosy once zipped on, we wore a type of rubber skirt attached by braces – this was used to cover the seat area and keep water out – a lifejacket and crash helmet. After carrying our kayaks to the water's edge, we clambered onboard and pushed off into the loch, staying about 20ft out from the edge until everyone felt comfortable and in control. These kayaks are very light compared to the ones of my youth, and remarkably manoeuvrable with only small movements needed to adjust speed and direction.

While getting instruction on how to use the paddle correctly, I dug mine in too sharply and promptly capsized, much to the hilarity of my teenagers. It was the best thing to happen as, reassuringly, everything John said would happen did, which meant I didn't panic.

Within seconds of being dooked, he was at my side, holding the kayak steady and encouraging me to clamber on board. No problem for a fitter person, but I struggled, so opted to swim to the shore and start all over again.

Within minutes, we were good

to go, so set off along the loch towards the hamlet of Kincaig, paddling at a steady speed which allowed us time to soak up the stunning views. When one of the ospreys which nest nearby swooped down into the loch, it was the icing on the cake.

Loch Insh plays host to myriad watersports, including sailing, paddle sports, rafts, rowboats, pedalos, kayaking and fishing. Equipment can be hired from a variety of places, including the Loch Insh Watersports and Outdoor Activity Centre, which also has a nice

restaurant overlooking the loch. Full On Adventures provide all the equipment needed, as well as instruction from a team of experienced and inspirational coaches.

Activities can be geared to suit adventure seekers and families, large groups or singles, and range from half and full-day trips to week-long adventures. Whatever type of experience you seek, the company can tailor it to meet your requirements, whether it's a loch or river trip, gorge walking or canyoning.

After several hours of fun on

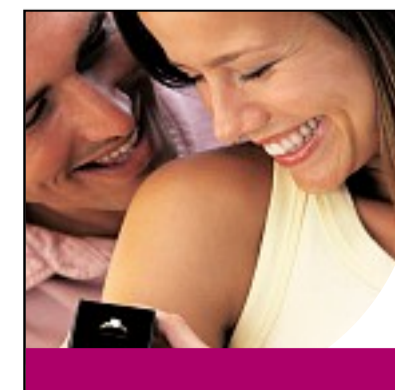
the water, we paddled quietly into a small sandy beach, just below picturesque Insh Church. After stepping on to dry land, we went through the much easier process of removing our wetsuits, before being transported back to our original starting point on the other side of the loch.

For those looking for a safe, but enjoyable and adventurous, family day, I'd thoroughly recommend it and I suspect we'll be back to try it again, sooner rather than later.

By then, I'll hopefully be able to squeeze into my wetsuit a little

more gracefully, but, just in case, I'll pick a spot where passing trains can't see me.

■ **For further details of trips organised by Full On Adventure visit www.fullonadventure.co.uk, e-mail info@fullonadventure.co.uk or call 07885 835838. Prices start from £55 for a half-day taster session which includes hire of all equipment, safety clothing and hard hats. Full-day excursions are priced from £75 and five-day trips, which include overnight stays, are priced from £350.**



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