



Christopher Nye

THE UK ADVENTURE SPORTS HANDBOOK

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THE UK ADVENTURE SPORTS HANDBOOK

100 ADVENTURES IN BRITAIN'S
GREAT OUTDOORS

Christopher Nye



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Introduction

“What did you do at the weekend?” Do you hate that question? If the truth is something like got up late, re-organised sock drawer, wandered downtown, watched *The X Factor*, opened (second) bottle of wine, passed out on the sofa – then maybe you ought to get out more and live a little closer to the edge.

There’s a wild world of adventures on your doorstep, from exploring vast subterranean caverns lit only by the lamp on your helmet to rediscovering the hunter inside as you pull the bow back and let loose an arrow at a (model) deer. This afternoon you could be climbing without ropes at a bouldering site, foraging for food and cooking it on a wild camping expedition, or on horseback cantering along a sandy beach. Tomorrow, why not try snorkelling down to barnacle-encrusted shipwrecks, clambering up a waterfall in a Welsh valley or testing your off-road driving skills in deepest Devon...

We’ve rounded up 100 plus activities from every corner of Britain to suit all fitness levels, from iron man to obese, every pocket from loaded to empty and every age from 8 to 88. It’s for whatever you call a ‘weekend’, not just Saturday and Sunday but a day off mid-week, a week’s holiday or even just an afternoon. There are ideas to fill any gap in your schedule up to and including taking the rest of your life off and paddling the world in a canoe, camping on the riverbank and eating what you can pick or catch. Some activities you do alone, most with friends old or new, and there are also options for team-building sessions.

Many won’t cost much, if anything, to try, and most have the option of equipment hire and gentle instruction (if necessary). We’ve listed a few specific locations, so that you can easily find the closest venue, and added an ‘Accessibility Index’ that grades each activity on how easy it is to arrange. There are easier options for most of them, so you can start gently, maybe even take the kids, and gradually work your way up to weekend marathons and death-defying feats.

There’s really no excuse for being bored these days. *The UK Adventure Sports Handbook* provides you with the inspiration for countless unique experiences, a sack full of dirty clothing on Monday morning and an exciting tale to tell the folks at work.

“What did you do at the weekend? Well I was sailing at 3,000ft over this mountain...”

Have a GREAT weekend!

Christopher Nye

March 2011



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1.

BANISH BORING WEEKENDS

- ❖ **Wake Up Your Weekend**
- ❖ **The Best of British**
- ❖ **Activities Without Barriers**
- ❖ **Join Up, Join In**
- ❖ **Safety First!**
- ❖ **At a Glance**

WAKE UP YOUR WEEKENDS

It's Friday morning, and you're at the office, factory or school, getting ready for the weekend but not expecting it to be anything special. If your weekends add up to a predictable routine of shopping, television and a trip to the pub, it's time to shake them up a bit and give yourself something to **really** look forward to. *The UK Adventure Sports Handbook* is full of ideas for activities to transform your time off into an exhilarating and extraordinary adventure. Some can be arranged in an afternoon, while others take a bit more planning, but all are achievable, enjoyable and anything but dull. So what have you got to lose?

Modern life, while free from the dangers and stresses faced by previous generations, promises so much yet often delivers so little. You're in no danger of being stamped on by a woolly mammoth or asked to storm a foreign beach under enemy fire, but where are the thrills? You won't find them on Facebook, in the Sunday newspapers or on reality TV.

Psychologists agree that it's generally by **doing** things that we make ourselves happy. The technical term for this is 'flow': the positive feelings that envelop you when you're absorbed in an activity. If you can get your brain engaged in something that's challenging but not beyond you, such as hill walking, pony trekking or tobogganing, then feelings of anxiety and boredom are replaced by profound excitement and happiness.

In this state, time flies by without you noticing discomfort, politics, debts, petty squabbles, even hunger or thirst – all you care about is the task in hand. It's called flow because people have likened the feeling to being carried down a river. Sportsmen and women experience it while playing; artists, musicians and writers also experience flow, which is why some don't eat properly, wash or talk to anyone for days during a creative period. Flow is what therapists try to induce in celebrity drug addicts at rehab centres when they attempt to get them to reconnect with the world by doing menial tasks. Indeed, there's a whole branch of medical treatment called occupational therapy which is based on the idea that if you can get people to forget about their illness or problem by doing something, they'll get better without even realising it.

If you want to experience your own flow, read on. *The UK Adventure Sports Handbook* is packed with ideas to revitalise your weekends, whether you want to suck a little





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Please ask for details of vouchers when making a booking. Age and height restrictions apply. Please contact your chosen Experience Centre to confirm their restrictions and individual insurance policies. Participants must be able to safely use standard seatbelts. Please confirm restrictions with your local centre when booking. All drivers must have held a full current driving licence for a minimum of 12 months. The voucher holder and accompanying guests will be required to confirm their health and fitness to participate in off-road driving tuition on the day of training. A disclaimer form must be signed by all parties.



Isle of Skye, Scotland

more of the marrow out of life by scaring yourself silly, get fitter without boring yourself at the gym, find something fun to do with your partner or children, or simply need a break from your job, home or family for a day or two. Whatever your motives, we promise that you'll get a great feeling from climbing a cliff or a waterfall (frozen or not) or cycling along a woodland track at night, dodging badgers. We guarantee that if you have a go at orienteering this weekend, or learn to sail a dinghy, or run a fast cross-country course while harnessed to your dog, you'll be proud of yourself come Monday morning.

It could be that you've heard of some of these activities but you don't know if they're expensive or how fit you need to be to do them, or whether you're too old and overweight (you probably aren't). Maybe it all looks a bit too difficult or scary? You'll never know unless you take the first step...

THE BEST OF BRITISH

Until a few years ago, if you asked a friend where they were going on holiday and they mentioned somewhere in the UK, you probably felt a bit sorry for them. Not any more. These days, saying "Oh, we're off to the Serengeti" is more likely to earn you a lecture on global warming. After 40 years of flying out of it at the first opportunity, the British are rediscovering their own island paradise.

From Vacation to Staycation

In 2007, a new word entered the holiday lexicon as people opted for a 'staycation': a holiday spent at home rather than in an exotic overseas destination. This option has become increasingly popular among the British, partly as a response to the credit crunch, poor exchange rates and disruptive events such as the Icelandic volcano eruption in April 2010, but also because they're discovering just how much the UK has to offer.


There are benefits to spending your leisure time in Britain, starting with the water. British rivers are reputed to be the cleanest since before the Industrial Revolution. We have a coastline of some 11,000 miles (17,000km) – more than double that of Spain – so you may even have your bit of coast to yourself. The Gulf

Stream flows up from Florida and across the Atlantic, bringing warm water to our beaches, thus ensuring that the UK is a gentle, verdant oasis in comparison with say Siberia or Canada's Labrador Coast, both of which are on a similar latitude. Unless you go ice climbing in the Cairngorms, you rarely have to cope with -15°C (5°F) days. Nor are you likely to die of heatstroke as there's always somewhere to shelter from the sun. What's more, according to a United Nations report, Britain has more woodland than at any time since 1750.

And it's all on your doorstep. Even in central London you're never more than half an hour's drive from a grassy hill and the furthest point inland from the sea is just 70 miles (113km). The UK has a network of trains and buses that make travelling to beauty spots almost a joy compared with the agony of shuffling through airport departure lounges. Plus, we are waking up to the realisation that cheap flights aren't so cheap after all when you consider the greenhouse gases pumped into the atmosphere. A return flight from London to Barcelona pumps 277kg (611lb) of polluting CO² into the air per passenger – that's the weight of an average family – while going on a UK camping expedition adds little or nothing. Even a return train journey from London to Edinburgh produces ten times less pollution than the Barcelona flight.

Staying on home turf gives you the opportunity to do new and exciting things, instead of aimlessly wandering around foreign cities as a tourist. You can take your ropes and crampons on the bus or train, pop your kayak on top of your car, fill the caravan with the kids' bikes and head for the hills, lakes and beaches. The UK's service economy is making a huge effort to tempt us to spend our leisure time in Britain. New National Parks have been created – the most recent being the South Downs in 2010 – while there are dozens of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and thousands of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). Pro-active organisations such as the Forestry Commission, Natural England, National Waterways, Scottish Natural Heritage and National Trails all promote Britain's great outdoors and help you to enjoy it. The main British 'countryside' organisations are described below.

National Parks

Britain has 15 National Parks ( www.nationalparks.gov.uk) which recently enjoyed their 60th birthday, having been created after the Second World War to ensure that people could visit the beautiful coasts, mountains, moors, woods and wetlands they had recently so stoutly defended. Each has a National Park Authority whose job it is to protect and promote the parks, which are great places for walking, mountain

Peak District National Park





biking, camping, climbing and many other activities. They are easily accessible with good transport links and also provide accommodation for visitors.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

A rung below National Parks, are the 38 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty/AONB (www.aonb.org.uk) in England and Wales and eight in Northern Ireland, covering some 20 per cent of the countryside and including areas as large as the Cotswolds. As well as being beautiful places to visit, they're the habitats of special plants and wildlife, and many have interesting historic and cultural connections, yet people often don't even know they're in an AONB or that they have one on their doorstep. The Scottish equivalent is the National Scenic Area (NSA) of which there are 40, run by Scottish Natural Heritage (www.snh.gov.uk).

Natural England

The independent public body, Natural England, provides advice to the UK government on safeguarding England's natural environment. It regulates Sites of Special Scientific Interest, posting signs telling visitors that they're somewhere special and mustn't do anything to damage the environment or disturb the wildlife, such as wild camping. For more information, visit the Natural England website (www.naturalengland.org.uk).



Sites of Special Scientific Interest

England's 4,000 Sites of Special Scientific Interest/SSSIs (www.sssi.naturalengland.org.uk) cover around 7 per cent of the country, so there's likely to be one near you – check out the maps on the www.natureonthemap.org.uk website. They're notable for rare flora and fauna, and include rivers teeming with trout, wetlands popular with wading birds, and meadows filled with wild flowers or endangered creatures. Although usually owned by farmers, they're regulated and overseen by Natural England (see box).

National Trails

There are 15 National Trails (www.nationaltrail.co.uk) covering every corner of England and Wales and stretching for over 2,500 miles (4,000km), plus four in Scotland where they're known as 'long distance routes'. They're way-marked with an acorn logo, normally on an oak post, so they're easy to follow, and they link up ancient lanes, footpaths and bridle paths to offer the best routes through Britain's beauty spots. The longest is the South West Coast Path at 630 miles (1,014km); other popular trails including the North Downs Way (153mi/246km) and the Pennine Way (268mi/167km) down the central spine of northern England. There are stretches for bicycles and horses,





Lake District National Park

often with hire companies along the way, and also access for wheelchair users. For walks in Wales, visit the Countryside Council for Wales website (www.ccw.gov.uk).

Forestry Commission

The Forestry Commission (www.forestry.gov.uk) is the guardian of over one million hectares of woodland in England, Scotland and Wales. As well as safeguarding and enlarging the forests, it also makes them more accessible and fun for visitors. As the largest provider of outdoor recreation in the country, the Forestry Commission organises pop concerts in the woods, cani-cross events (cross-country running with your dog), and maintains trails for mountain biking, horse riding and carriage driving. Nature lovers can learn how to recognise trees, the best ways to climb them, and which mammals, insects and birds they might encounter. For outdoor adventurers of any age, the Forestry Commission is a great place to start.

British Waterways

Half the UK population lives within five miles of one of the 2,200 miles (3,541km) of canals and rivers maintained by British Waterways (www.britishwaterways.co.uk/home), and we should be enjoying them more. Through Waterscape (www.waterscape.com), British Waterways encourages people to use their local waterways for boating, barging, fishing, swimming, rafting, cycling and hiking along towpaths, and almost anything else that's legal, as well as recruiting volunteers to help clear canals. As a testament to its success, there are more boats on British canals today than there were in their industrial heyday. Waterscape is also a great resource for boating holidays, accommodation and weekend volunteering projects.



ACTIVITIES WITHOUT BARRIERS

You may be young, elderly, penniless or disabled, but you've never had a better chance of doing an adventure activity. There's a wealth of information available and fewer barriers to accessing adventure, with charities, clubs, individual sports' governing bodies and private companies reaching out to all sectors of the community.

There are programmes to enable young people to enjoy adventure activities, with the aim of reversing the trend towards childhood obesity and giving underprivileged kids access to adventure. Projects include Tall Ships Races, where children from all backgrounds get the chance to sail a three-masted barque, the scholarship scheme run by the British Gliding Association, and the excellent Pony Club, which has over 500 centres around the country for kids who don't own a pony. For children of all ages and abilities, groups such as the Scouts and Girl Guides are still a great way to get a taste of adventure.

You're never too old to try something new and there are many options for older people to take up a new challenge, with retirees' clubs promoting the 'bucket list' approach: ticking off the things you want to experience or achieve before you 'kick the bucket'. You can organise a club yourself or there are plenty of companies happy to grab the 'grey pound'.

New technology gives people with disabilities access to many more sports and activities. Specially adapted ski-bikes allow amputees to ski and water-ski, and aids for wheelchair users are so advanced that they enabled quadriplegic yachtswoman Hilary Lister to sail round Britain controlling the sails and rudder by blowing into a tube. Technology has also made previously dangerous activities safer. You don't need to be a strong swimmer to tackle river rapids anymore; almost anyone can do it with a wetsuit, life jacket and helmet. The development of sturdier yet lighter hang gliders means that you can now soar up to thousands of feet, and if anything goes wrong, you have your own neat little parachute on your back. There are even riding jackets with airbags fitted to take some of the danger (but not the thrill) out of cross-country horse riding and drag hunting, and avalanche airbags for off-piste skiers.



Reducing the Cost

The downside of some activities is that they are expensive and require high-tech equipment. A way to share the expense and minimise the difficulties is to join a club (see below). There may also be budget options or discounts for those receiving social security benefits; your local authority or the sports' governing bodies (listed in all chapters) should be able to offer advice.

If you have a disability, check out tourism and governing body websites to find out whether you can do an activity and find a suitable place to stay while you're doing it. For example, Enjoy England (www.enjoyengland.com), the official website for English tourism, uses symbols to denote whether accommodation is suitable for mobility-impaired, visually-impaired or hearing-impaired people, while the UK government's information website (www.direct.gov.uk) has information about charities, companies and organisations which help disadvantaged and disabled people to have as much fun doing adventure activities as everyone else.

JOIN UP, JOIN IN

What did people do with their weekends before the arrival of Saturday television and Sunday shopping? You may have a rosy image of people in the '50s spending their weekends cycling into the countryside for a picnic with the church youth club, going pigeon racing, doing flower arranging or choir singing, playing cricket on the village green, staying up late with a flask of cocoa at the astronomy club or dressing up for a historical re-enactment. And you'd be right; half a century ago, clubs were the social hub and people preferred doing things together.

These days, we do things together far less. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Harvard professor Robert Putnam explains how the club habit has been lost in American society over the past generation. In some cases, people still do the activity but on their own. Take ten-pin bowling as an example; in the US, people formed bowling teams, clubs and leagues, but now they go bowling alone. Putnam found that the number of Americans attending club meetings had dropped by almost 60 per cent over the last 25 years, due to the competing attractions of TV and the internet, the pressure on families with both parents working and other reasons. The situation is at least as bad in the UK, where many of us commute long distances to work and don't have the time or energy to be the treasurer of the local archery club in the evening. Putnam calculates that for every extra ten minutes of commuting we lose 10 per cent of our 'social capital', i.e. our connections with friends.



Yet there are many advantages in getting together to do adventurous things, rather than doing them alone or paying a commercial operator. Clubs are cheaper. Members can pool their resources to buy expensive equipment such as a glider, dive boat or vehicle. At the very least, they offer a chance to swap opinions and ideas. In a club, the donkey work and administration is done for free by volunteers and becomes part of the fun. Most of all, it's a chance to meet like-minded people, exchange information and improve your proficiency without needing to pay an instructor. Going coasteering with a commercial operator costs at least £40, which is fine for a one-off experience, but if you enjoy it you can join a club and do it every weekend for little or nothing, even sharing the cost of transport. Other club members can also be a motivating force to tempt us out at the weekend when our own inertia is holding us back, and leaping into the foaming sea or off a mountain feels a little unattractive.

Be Prepared... for Fun

One of the easiest and most worthwhile ways for young people to get involved in adventure activities is with the Scouts, Girl Guides, Boys' Brigade or Woodcraft Folk. Whether you're young enough to be a member or old enough to be a volunteer leader, it's a great way to spend your weekends doing anything from abseiling to zorbing. In some areas young people are on waiting lists due to a lack of volunteers, so you'll also be helping the 'Big Society' along – and you don't even need to have any kids of your own.

SAFETY FIRST!

One of the blessings of living in the UK is that you're on pretty safe ground. In some countries, even to go for a 'walk in the woods', you may need to take a compass, bear-scarer, emergency rations, first-aid kit and fire starter. In the UK you're rarely far from civilisation and unlikely to be attacked by wolves or enveloped in a mudslide or forest fire. The notion that we're probably going to die if we do anything out of the ordinary has come from insurance companies and well-meaning people misunderstanding the principles of health and safety, and from a media which focuses on reporting tragic accidents rather than pointing out the millions of people who have accomplished the same activity safely. This reaction doesn't treat all sports or their participants in the same way: if you're privileged or wealthy enough to climb to the 'death zone' of Mount Everest or sail around the world single-handedly, you're an inspiration, but if you're a kid having fun leaping from a breakwater into the sea, you're an irresponsible menace.

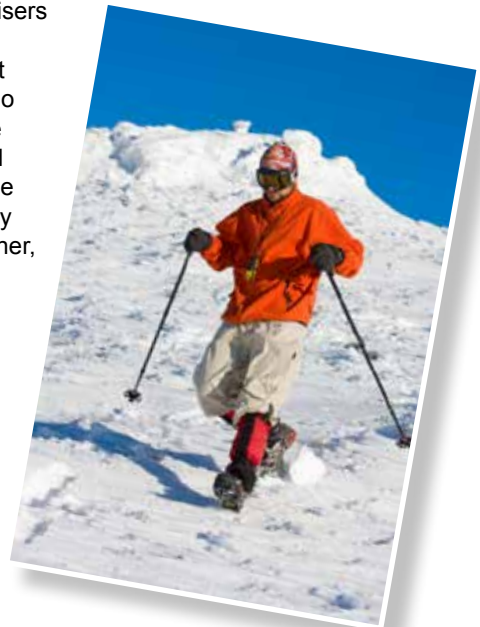


You should never disregard safety, but for the more gentle DIY activities such as trail running or wild swimming, you should be trusted to look after yourself. If you're going cave diving or base jumping, then take all the precautions in the world and be guided by the experts, but you don't necessarily need walking boots to go walking, a helmet to go tobogganing or a self-inflating mattress to enjoy wild camping – it's just more 'comfortable' if you do. The golden rule of any adventure activity is to know your own capabilities and never let yourself be pressured into doing something that you feel is beyond you.

Whatever you do – even a bit of DIY at home – it's important not to be reckless and to take sensible precautions, which can be done without diminishing the fun factor. Don't underestimate the dangers of some activities and sports, particularly when combined with inclement weather. For example, winter hill walking can seem a fairly benign activity, yet every year there are fatalities; and still every time you go out in winter you'll see people who are unprepared for the weather conditions, not only putting their own lives at risk but those of the mountain rescue teams who may have to rescue them. Even experienced mountaineers can have unfortunate accidents in winter while 'just walking'.

Ironically, often the safest activities are the most extreme. When the point of the exercise is to try something that carries the risk of almost certain death if anything goes wrong, such as bungee jumping, skydiving or snowholing, companies organising these activities are obsessed with safety as their licence to operate depends on avoiding accidents. Operators of bungee jumping, for example, have systems that include three safety back-ups, known as 'triple redundancy'. Most water sports have strict safety regulations – not imposed by Health & Safety but formulated by experts and organisers who are intimately aware of the dangers. In some activities, e.g. paragliding and scuba diving, you must undergo training and/or be qualified before you can go solo. Whatever the activity, it pays to heed the advice of experts, take all necessary safety precautions, and (hopefully) give the A&E department a wide berth. The advantage of safety features (and training) is that they provide extra confidence, thus allowing you to go higher, faster and further.

Many of the most dangerous activities are governed by the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA, www.hse.gov.uk/aala), part of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), or by a voluntary system called Adventuremark (www.adventuremark.co.uk) from the Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee (AAIAC, www.skillsactive.com). If you're unsure about an operator, check their licensing status with the national association. Most sports' governing body websites (listed by activity in this book) provide a



cool and rational assessment of the safety of their sport, while also offering advice on how to avoid accidents. There are also some excellent independent websites, such as Safesport (www.safesport.co.uk), which provides comprehensive safety advice and information.

If the foregoing catalogue of disaster and impending doom hasn't terrified you into staying in bed, then all that remains is to wish you the best of luck... **Hals und Beinbruch!** ('neck and leg break') – as the Germans so charmingly put it when wishing someone good luck.

Warning!

If you're tempted to participate in extreme sports while abroad, you should be aware that in some countries the training, regulations and equipment aren't always up to British standards, and some operators have a cavalier attitude towards safety.

AT A GLANCE

All major activities described in *The UK Adventure Sports Handbook* have an 'At a Glance' information box, which provides an overview. This includes an accessibility rating, fitness level indicator, degree of difficulty, equipment hire or cost, white knuckle (how scary) rating, season and other considerations, which are explained in detail below.

Accessibility Rating

How spontaneous can you be about starting an adventure activity or sport? The accessibility rating indicates how easy it is to find a location, centre or organiser for an activity at short notice, ranging from least (1/5) to most (5/5) accessible; for example, base jumping, isn't very accessible (1/5), while hill walking (5/5) is. Some activities, such as whale watching, are only possible in a few remote areas at certain times of the year, but they offer the advantage of not requiring special equipment or training, while surfing may be inaccessible in many parts of the UK, but you can bodyboard on most beaches. Activities which you can do as a 'passenger', e.g. a tandem parachute jump or gliding/microlighting, count as accessible, as do certain activities that are easy to do but can only be done at certain times, e.g. storm watching.

