



The Outward Bound Trust uses outdoor experiences and challenges to help young people unlock their potential. Eager to see how things had changed since his own experiences with the Trust in 1985, earlier this year Ken cycled between centres in North Wales, the Lake District and Scotland, clocking up over 1,000 miles. This is a flavour of what he found.

Aberdovey Centre

“I was really quite nervous – Aberdovey was to be the first of three centres to visit – and, perhaps like so many of the students, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect. What I found, apart from a very warm welcome, was the opportunity to participate in activities, to see close up how the instructors worked with young people.



Within a few hours of arrival I found myself describing to pupils from Coppice Primary School in Sutton Coldfield what my venture was all about. A few props – the cycle, an inflatable globe, and a selection of equipment – helped. There were questions. Lots.

The following day was spent down at The Trust’s water activities facility in the heart of Aberdovey on the Dovey Estuary. I joined Richard, the school’s headmaster, and a group of his students for a raft-building session. Rather than be shown every step, merely copying the instructor, the group was encouraged to think the problems through and find solutions for themselves. Just the odd bit of direction to keep them safe. In a brief quiet moment, Richard described what my fund-raising was seeking to do not as ‘pay-back’ for my own experiences, but rather as ‘pay-forward’ for the benefit of others to come. I liked that.

The next day it was time to get back on the road, heading north towards the Lake District. First though, chance to discuss what I’d seen with the centre’s head, Andy Jeffrey, especially the changes since I was a student. Most striking had been the shift of emphasis to shorter courses, far greater attendance by schools groups, and a broader age range for participants. One thing remain unchanged, a passionate belief amongst the instructors that they could make a difference.

Andy left me with a thought for my own venture – ‘if you’re having a really epic day, remember it always ends at midnight.’

Ullswater Centre

Three minutes to midday. Five hours of hard riding. I was greeted by the centre’s head, Simon Waring. His was a familiar face, having been an instructor at the Eskdale Centre when I was a student there in 1985. A brief lunch and off across the lake to The Trust’s newest centre, Howtown. We were joined by Laura from the London fundraising team, with whom I’d been working closely for the expedition.

We joined two teams of apprentices, competing against each other in a combined orienteering and raft-building challenge. This time success required more than just team work. There was a strong business dimension to consider – materials, time and labour all had costs. Conditions on the water were deteriorating rapidly, strong winds precluding the planned raft race back across the lake to the Ullswater Centre. A more sheltered, in-shore course was challenging enough, requiring plenty of good, old-fashioned gutsy determination just to get around it.

Late into the evening the teams busied themselves preparing to present the outcomes of their week’s experiences to their managers, due to arrive the next day. I chatted with Tony, one of their instructors. It was his second career, and a very different one to the first, a very bold change of direction. I promised to return to the centre when ‘Across Continents’ was complete.



A chance to watch the apprentices group presentations the following morning, snatch a few photographs and then back on the road, bound next for Loch Eil, about 100 miles north of Glasgow.

Loch Eil Centre

I’d reached the Highland town of Fort William, a few miles short of the Loch Eil Centre, in good time and in glorious weather. Ben Nevis, a little way to the north east, still kept the remnants of its white winter crown. I pressed on, keen to meet with Tony Sheppard, his team and the students. A welcome cup of tea on arrival, brief tour of the centre and off to be kitted out for getting wet...

The following morning I joined small group of High School students from Tobermorey, a day’s ride away on the island of Mull, down at the boathouse on the shores of Loch Eil. Sailing was followed after lunch by the real challenge of the day – sea kayaking down the long sea Loch to a secluded bivvy site and a night out in

improvised shelters. They did it admirably, against the tide, rafting up occasionally for a brief respite. I was impressed.

It was clearly felt that I'd not got wet enough out on the Loch, so the following day course director Laura suggested it was time for some gorge walking. Now, even on the hottest of days in the UK, I've always, without exception, found the apparent attraction of a dip in cold water never matches up with the grim reality. Wetsuits help. To a point. I joined up with a small group from Holyrood School in Glasgow.

Led by instructors Helen and Scott, we made our way up the bed of a small gorge, getting ever more immersed as we went. The first deep plunge pool. Any quite understandable reluctance on the part of the students to jump straight in wasn't shared by their teacher, Andy.

He led from the front. I followed, shouting 'Abandon ship' as I leapt off a small rocky promontory. It seemed a suitably nautical thing to say given the origins of The Trust. Waterfalls and deeper plunge pools with higher promontories followed. And then the run back to the minibus along a forestry track, quickly restoring warmth.

Back at the centre just time to return my wet kit, grab some photographs down at the boathouse, say my good-byes and head off back towards Fort William.

Conclusions

So what has changed since my own experiences with The Trust as a student in 1985? Quite a bit actually, with much greater emphasis on shorter courses, much increased attendance by schools groups and a broader age range for participants. Very refreshing because it is easy for organisations to become staid. Crucially, what hasn't changed is the underlying philosophy of getting young people to learn through experiences rather than simply being shown what to do.

Whilst the three centres I visited shared a common approach to working with young people, each had a distinct feel. A real strength I thought for The Trust - welcome diversity, a chance for new ideas and approaches to be nurtured, helping keep the organisation fresh.

Finally, I have some great memories to inspire me when the going gets tough... as I am sure it will."

