

The road to adventure

*Inspired by a brutal challenge of human strength and spirit, famous adventurer John Ridgway and his family created an organisation to bring youngsters outdoors for the holiday of a lifetime, finds **Mairi Fraser***

If you're looking to be pushed beyond your physical and mental limits, I've got just the place for you. Set just a few miles south of Sutherland's infamous Cape Wrath, Ridgway Adventure has been setting guests almighty challenges for the last fifty years.

Far more than just a jolly in the great outdoors, Ridgway Adventure's courses revolve around gruelling tasks, designed to test all elements of fitness and mental strength – and there's certainly no shortage of people willing to sign up.

As I arrived on the shores of the Atlantic-fed Loch a' Chadh-Fi, which lie north of Sutherland's Laxford Bridge and south of Rhiconich, I was greeted by the centre's director, Rebecca Ridgway: 'Ah, you'll have to take the "high-tide route"', she says.

A valuable lesson learned, I thought – make sure you get your arrival time correct. To my cost, my tardiness meant that the shoreline 'track' was impassable. The only option that remained was Plan B – a tough, steep climb through thigh-high heather and slippery rocks.

Five decades ago, Rebecca's mother and father, John and Marie-Christine, flew over the Ardmere Peninsula, fell in love with the magnificent landscape and set up an adventure school, putting the natural terrain to good use.

Two years previously, in 1966, John Ridgway and his friend – a member of the British Army Parachute Regiment – Chay Blyth, rowed across the North Atlantic in a 20-foot open dory called English Rose III. The brutal challenge – with just a compass, four oars, a small horn, a set of oilskins and some curry sauce for company – was surmounted in 93 days, securing both men a place in the record books.

'What was it that led me to row across the North Atlantic,' reflects John. 'I wanted to test myself; to establish my own qualities in the face of the severest challenge I could devise.'

After undertaking the backbreaking task of rowing two hours on, two hours off, across the Atlantic, his epic adventure had a profound impact on his life. 'I found myself deeply impressed by the permanence and the simplicity of the challenge posed by sea and sky,' he says. 'So I resolved that I would try and share with others both my view of the world and the satisfaction that such experiences have brought me,' explains John. And with that, Ridgway Adventure was born.

'We want guests to leave us having achieved more than they thought possible'

Today, John is no longer directly involved with the day-to-day running of the centre, instead he and Marie-Christine live in their croft overlooking the magnificent bay at Ardmere. Rebecca – herself a record-breaker having been the first woman to kayak round Cape Horn – now runs the centre. The family have now hosted over 20,000 children over their fifty years of business.

'We want guests to leave us having achieved more than they thought possible,' says Rebecca. 'We're all about instilling a sense of aspiration.' Like the barnacles on the bottom of the centre's powerful RIBS boat, John's original ethos of



Main image: Discovering the view at the top makes the climb worthwhile.
Left to right: Learning to cook outdoors is a key part of the experience; sea kayaking gets a big thumbs up; kids can achieve things they didn't think possible.



'The non-negotiable pre-breakfast dip is not for the faint-hearted'

'positive thinking, self-reliance and leaving people and places better than you find them,' hold firm.

Ridgway offers the chance to explore the wilderness, giving your children the opportunity to do all the stuff kids should be doing. Electronic devices, even if there was the remotest hint of signal, are banned. Life here focuses entirely on learning, having fun and challenging yourself. And there appears to be no shortage of youngsters up for a challenge, with a steady stream coming to the centre from across Europe and the UK – many of whose parents were bitten by the Ardmere bug decades before.

'We believe anyone can do anything if they put their mind to it,' shouts Rebecca, as we bump across the loch to check out some intrepid young kayakers out dodging mussel beds and sea otters. The idea that teenagers these days spend too much time

in front of a screen may be true, but they've certainly not lost their appetite for adventure, given half the chance.

Certainly, the non-negotiable pre-breakfast dip in the sea, or the compulsory night on 'Survival Island' – with just a bunch of winkles for dinner and a small piece of tarpaulin for shelter – are not for the faint-hearted. But it is the draw of the 'unexpected' that keeps people coming back for more.

Belhaven Hill prep school come every year. I interrupted 13-year-old Charlie, who was busy whittling out some hazel pegs, an essential for a firm canopy and a good night's sleep. 'It's all about the personal challenge,' he says. 'We climbed Arkle, a mountain, yesterday. The ridge was pretty frightening but I'm so glad I managed it.' Another pupil, Sam, seemed delighted at having conquered the art of capsizing a kayak. 'All done with a

smile,' he adds.

Girls don't seem put off by the hefty demands either. Charlotte describes the centre as 'seriously rural', but says it's a unique place to 'learn about yourself and your friends'.

India was a little more anxious about being 'cast away' on an island for the night, but came back smiling and ready for more. Although she might not seek out limpets on the menu in future.

Weather in this part of the world can change rapidly, so there's no formal programme and a flexible approach is adopted for the activities. However, teams Blue Moons, Red Snappers and Blue Whales still have daily cleaning and cooking

chores to complete. Would you lay tables and take out the bins at home, I asked? 'Not really,' one sheepish lad admits, 'but it's all made so much fun here that you don't really mind doing anything.'

A modern-day Swallows and Amazons? I'd say. Throwing together a nifty clove hitch, checking out lobster-filled creels and spending the night on a deserted island – who needs gadgets when you have all that entertainment?

The tide was out when we left, the hitherto unseen shoreline track inviting us to progress. Here, Mother Nature is in charge. 'Guests are on a journey through the week,' says Rebecca.

And what an adventure that journey is... ☺

Clockwise from top left: Taking a moment to soak in those glorious views; making a splash in Loch A Chadh Fi; learning to light fires for cooking with flint and steel is an essential skill for 'survival island'.