

Personal Equipment for Winter Trips

Winter provides paddling opportunities which don't arise in the summer. This is because there is often more water in the rivers, and many whitewater rivers are forbidden to us except during the mid-winter spawning season. When taking part in day or weekend trips in the British winter the biggest risk is likely to be of hypothermia. This is dangerous for the individual, and also puts the rest of the group at increased risk, because the delay increases the chances of other members of the group succumbing to the cold.

Hypothermia is a particular risk because of the combination of wind with cold, often wet, weather, and contact with water. A typical trip will involve 4 to 5 hours time spent paddling or on the river bank, so it is vital that paddlers are correctly equipped to stand up to the conditions. It is not unknown for temperatures of -2C to be encountered during paddling days, sometimes with a breeze as well. The coldest part of many trips is the lunch stop, when you are out of the windproof boat.



Clothing

The clothing usually used consists of a wind-proof and water-proof outer shell, protecting multiple layers of insulating clothing.

The outer layer could be a drysuit, a dry-top and waterproof trousers, or at the very least a semi-dry cag and waterproof trousers. The possibility of a swim early in the trip must be borne in mind, so keeping the insulating layers dry is important.

The insulating layers are usually thermals, although wetsuits can be used as well. With a wetsuit, at least one long-sleeved top is necessary (most wetsuits are sleeveless), and some more layers are advised.

Thermal trousers are recommended, with wetsuit shorts if a wetsuit is not worn.

Footwear will usually include wetsuit boots, with socks inside. The outer footwear needs a reasonable sole, to protect the feet when on the bank, or when climbing out after a swim.

A woolly hat or paddling skullcap worn inside the helmet prevents a significant degree of heat loss.

Hands will get cold. There is no ideal solution, but possibilities include gloves (cycling, windsurfing, jetski types can all be used), palmless mittens made for paddling, or pogies, a windproof loose glove which attaches to the paddle. You will need to experiment in advance of any trips to find out what works for you.

On a weekend trip you should plan for all this kit to get wet on the first day. Many of the bunkhouses we use have poor to non-existent drying facilities, so spare inner layers for the second day should be considered. It is not just for comfort when getting dressed - putting cold, wet thermals on starts the day cold, and it is difficult to warm up before paddling. Don't forget at least one towel.

Don't be fooled by your playboating experience - paddling for an hour then going into a warm changing room for a shower is very different from spending the day on or near water, then changing on the riverbank.

And Also...

In addition to clothing you will need a boat, paddle, buoyancy aid, spraydeck and helmet. If you need to borrow any of these from the club, you need to contact the equipment officer (phone number on Breakout) well before the trip to book the kit, and arrange when you will collect and return it. You will also need lunch, and on most trips, a way to carry it in the boat while keeping it dry. Lunch should be a snack - we normally manage to arrange a full breakfast from a nearby pub, along with substantial evening meals. Pre-packed sandwiches from motorway service areas are surprisingly good for this, and have a packet which helps keep water out. Zip-up plastic bags are useful, and a proper kayaking dry-bag is a good investment. You may be able to borrow one of these until you have your own. You will need a drink, as you can dehydrate even in cold weather, and a hot drink is recommended. Finally you need to make sure that you still fit into the boat when wearing the extra clothing. It may well be necessary to adjust the footrest or backrest, or even the seat position. It is not a good idea to be doing this on the riverbank while the rest of the group get cold. Make sure your helmet fits over your hat.

Checklist

Cag/drysuit
Waterproof trousers
Thermals, tops and trousers
Shorts
Boots
Socks
Gloves/pogies
Skullcap/hat
Towel
Lunch
Lunch bag
Boat
Paddle
Buoyancy Aid
Spraydeck
Helmet

Do you still fit your boat?

Will your helmet go over your hat?