

Claire goes native... for a rapid rise to success

BY HOWARD WILLIAMSON

KAYAK champion Claire O'Hara "went native" in Nepal in her bid to win a world title.

She slept outdoors and in a mud hut as she did seven weeks of intense training in the Himalayan kingdom.

She is preparing to represent GB in the world freestyle kayaking championships in Canada in April.

She is now back in Britain training on white water near Fort William, Scotland.

Claire rafted and kayaked down the mighty Sun Kosi river in Nepal, tackling rolling rapids which are not far short of Niagara standard.

And she met up with an old male friend, Nepalese kayak champion Sanu Babu Sunwar, with whom she did much of her training.

Leeds-born Claire, 25, a graduate of Leeds Metropolitan University, became the first westerner in 2004 to visit Sanu Babu's village... and she says the local children were scared of her!

This time she visited the local school and was met by singing children with garlands, oranges and bananas.

Diary

In her diary, Claire says she slept under a tarpaulin tent on a sandy beach at the side of the Sun Kosi river.

She then climbed a 1,000-metre vertical ascent to reach Babu's village.

With his family she enjoyed a meal of dhal bhat - a traditional dish of lentil soup, rice, potato curry, spinach chillies and meat.

"This was a far cry from my normal tuna sandwich or jacket potato lunch," she said.

"After eating I set off with Babu about 4pm for another hour's trek to watch the sunset over the Sun Kosi valley and the mountains opposite.

"This was an amazing sight.

"In the dark we then set out through the trails in the woods and the paddy fields, using the moonlight to guide us back to Babu's home.

"Almost 20 of us sat around a small clay cooking stove in the small smoky downstairs room, chatting.

Later we ate a meal of roti (rice bread), vegetables and goat which had been specially slaughtered to celebrate our visit.

"Around midnight we retired to bed. There were seven of us sharing the upstairs room, three on the bed and four on the floor. I was lucky to get the bed.

"But it was hard to get to sleep as we were surrounded by spiders, mice and bats and the room was really smoky



from the stove in the room below.

"About 3am I was startled by a spider landing on my head and I didn't get a lot of sleep. I was up at 6am to watch the sunrise from the bedroom window and had an early breakfast of pancakes, honey and sugar before continuing on our journey down the river."

Claire, who went to Cardinal Heenan RC High School, Meanwood, and Notre Dame sixth form college, is European and British women's kayak champion. In the past year she has travelled to Europe, Norway and Uganda as well as Nepal.

She also trains at the National Water Sports Centre near Nottingham.

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE - Claire emerges from the river; the mountains of Nepal; the river's rugged beauty; white water kayaking in Nepal

PICTURES BY ROSS MONTANDON and FOCUSED-ON-ADVENTURE.COM

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