



Teenagers plunge into the ranger experience

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Soaring temperatures and people throwing themselves into the River Dee to cool down - it was a VisitScotland executive's fantasy.

Christine Biepl, 16, had left Bavaria well prepared for midges and monsoons, but the weather is exceptional today. "It's very lovely," she smiles as she steps from a canoe. "Different from what I thought about, because I thought it's every day raining and now it's sunshine."

Christine is spending a week exploring Cairngorms National Park with a group of about 50 teenagers from eight countries across Europe, including Scots. They are all junior countryside rangers, aged between 14 and 18, and guests at the Europarc Junior Ranger Camp, hosted by the park's authority and the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association.

The party has split into three groups today, with some off mountain biking, others climbing Mount Kean and this group in Canadian canoes on the Dee at Aboyne. As the temperature reaches the mid-20s, the river seems to have been an inspired choice.

"Junior rangers are young people who are interested in becoming countryside rangers, so we help them see the kind of work they do and the activities we get up to, so they can see if this is a career that might interest them," says Eric Baird, deputy convenor of the Cairngorms park board and head ranger at Glen Tanar estate.

"There's a huge amount of potential work available in managing the interaction of visitors to the area and managing the habitats and landscapes," he says.

"We are going to be visiting other parts of the park," he explains. "We are going across to Speyside to look at Glenmore and Abernethy and Cairn Gorm Mountain. We are also going further up Deeside looking at Mar Lodge and Balmoral. They are going to spend a day there."

Vera Havoea, 17, is also among the canoeists and is still coming to terms with the Scots' accents. "I wanted to meet new people from other countries," she says. "I am from the north of the Czech republic. I think it's very good fun here."

Her friend Jitka Krykorkova, 18, agrees. "I like the mountains, which is different than ours, and also the sheeps. It's my favourite animal, sheep. I don't know why, but they are lovely."

The first international junior ranger camp was held in 2002. It is now an annual event. This year's group have come from 10 national parks across Europe to share ideas and expertise. They are also learning about the Cairngorms, which is home to a quarter of the UK's threatened birds, animals and plants, and around 16,000 Scots.

"I think it's not only learning more about the ranger's profession but also having fun and getting out of home or school and discovering nature and enjoying very beautiful landscapes in the protected areas," says Damien Dechanterac, project co-ordinator of the Europarc Federation, the umbrella organisation for protected areas in Europe.

"Some of the parks, like the Bavarian Forest, have had junior rangers for 10 years; some others for only one year. For example, the Cairngorms National Park are just starting with their junior ranger activities. I think this international camp is a great chance for them."

Lisa Gunn, 15, heard about the camp in her geography class at Alford Academy, which is on the edge of the national park. "I wanted to do something that's different from school, do something adventurous, come back to Alford Academy and report on how we can help the Cairngorms," says Lisa.

Another Scot here, Jane Evans, was a pupil at Aboyne Academy and is now a ranger maintenance warden on the Great Glen Way between Fort William and Inverness. Jane, 28, got her first taste of a ranger's job on work experience at the Glen Tanar estate when she was 14. "Then Eric took me on as a volunteer at Glen Tanar, at the visitor centre," she says.

"I would recommend it as a career. It's hard work but it's also one of the most rewarding jobs."

Mr Baird says part of the idea of A Curriculum for Excellence is that children should get an educational experience of their own area and in their own area.

"We forget what we are told, but we certainly remember what we do," he says. "You can talk to people about hydrology and river currents, but until you sit in a two-person canoe and feel the way the currents are actually moving and affecting you... that makes the theoretical experiential and they will remember that.

"That's what's happening just now. Today they are going to be paddling down the river and will see the issues between anglers and canoeists, which will make them aware of how the Scottish Access Code is actually working in that situation. They are going to be able to see what the issues are first hand, rather than just read about them theoretically."

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