



GLOBE TROTTING: Expeditions can take you all over the world – but most of them start with a day out in Norfolk.

NORFOLK

Looking for adventure? It needn't be far

By ANNABELLE DICKSON

It may not be big cat tracking in Namibia or spotting sperm whales in the Azores, but armed with a compass, GPS and a map it is possible to get a taste of what it could be like during a day in the Broads.

Twice this year an intrepid group has used the Norfolk waterways as a setting to learn basic expedition skills and safety. And, most importantly, to ignite a spirit of adventure.

Norwich-based Biosphere Expeditions, which usually sends its clients further afield, runs taster days both in the Broads and in other parts of the UK and Germany.

Its main, not for profit, business is teaming up willing hardy holiday makers with scientists needing funding for serious environmental research projects around the world.

Rather than signing up and setting off into the unknown, the company's taster days are a chance to see if it is something potential recruits would like to do.

The days are a chance to brush up on rusty (or non-existent) map reading skills – surprisingly easy when explained – which could be vital out in the wilds of eastern Europe, Asia or the sub-continent, or find out just how clever global positioning systems are.

Aboard a boat they might track otters, or use a photo trap to capture the Norfolk wildlife. Similar skills they might use in more remote locations.

"People feel they need to see your face and get a level of confidence," said Kathy Gill, director and one of the founders of Biosphere Expeditions.

"They like to meet us and see what we are like culturally as an organisation. It is important that they feel confident in you." And the organisation and culture is an interesting one.

It was the inspiration of the German Cambridge University graduate Matthias Hammer, who set up the company in 1999.

He wanted to be paid to take people on expeditions and looking at other volunteering organisations realised there was a market for it.

"He had lots of friends who liked the idea of going out into the field,"

said Ms Gill.

"There were scientists who needed help out in the field. He put the two together."

Dr Hammer came across Ms Gill when she was working as Economic Development Officer at Waveney District Council and the pair became friends.

Ms Gill has the business background, and although she grew up sailing in the Broads, she was by no means a trained expedition leader.

"I have developed my outdoor skills. Mountain leader, off-road stuff. It has been a huge and interesting learning curve," she said.

As well as being a business brain, she is hands-on and often takes part in the expeditions.

"It works well as a concept as long as there are people wanting to do activities," she said.

"There are always going to be scientists that want that help."

So do you need to have a background in science to take part or tracking and data collection skills?

"The problem for the scientist is not picking something up and registering it, it's walking the distance," she said.

"They [people on the trip] can be as effective as the scientists," she said.

"They become another pair of feet and eyes for the scientist. We really extend their research. We can get lots of work done."

But what do the people taking part get out of it?

"You get the satisfaction of working and doing a good job."

"You learn so much from these people. I am not a biologist but I could bore you for several hours about coral reef."

"Most people have really inquiring minds when you show them a beautiful fish and explain how it fits into the place around it."

"You get talks from the scientist and you are learning with people who are in the same boat as you."

"You are in a strange environment, sitting around a camp fire. You are looking at photos and learning on the job."

The company does not choose which expeditions it goes on lightly.

Biosphere receives around 100 applications each year from various scientists and they have to fill in a long and complex form to show they are not just credible, but feasible.

"It has to be something the people can do that they can really help with," she said.

"We are not interested in doing research that just sits on a shelf." She said that it had to be something that people could learn about.

It also has to be in a place which they can look after the people on the trip.

"We have to be able to feed people well."

"They have to be able to eat good food and rest their heads."

"After you do that you have to ask will it sell and if it is something the

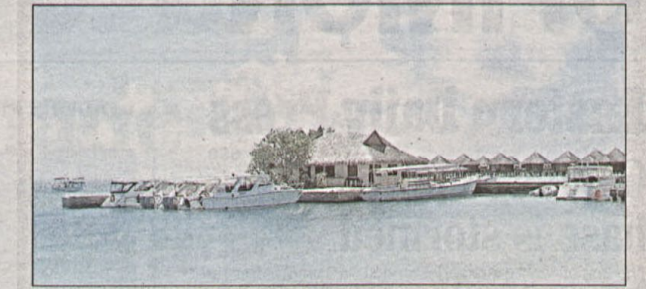
“Most people have really inquiring minds when you show them a beautiful fish and explain how it fits into the place around it”

Kathy Gill



Picture: BILL SMITH

WHERE YOU CAN GO



Two-week expeditions

■ The mountains of the Altai Republic, central Asia, to survey snow leopards and their prey animals such as the argali mountain sheep and the Altai ibex, as well as other animals including marmots and birds.

■ Caribbean Sea off Honduras to provide data on the current biological status of the reefs and of population levels of protected species within the marine protected area.

■ Tioman, Malaysia, to help study and protect the local marine park's beautiful but fragile coral reefs, as well as its marine megafauna such as sharks, dolphins and turtles.

■ Khomas Hochland, in central Namibia, to conduct a survey of African cats including leopard, but also caracal, cheetah, etc and their relationship with humans and prey animals such as giraffe, eland, kudu and zebra.

■ Peru Amazon rainforest working with local biologists on an important wildlife survey concentrating on four

icons of the Amazon, jaguars, pumas, parrots and peccaries.

One-week expeditions

■ Azores Archipelago in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean to study whales, dolphins and loggerhead turtles.

■ The Republic of Maldives (pictured) to help marine biologists study and protect spectacular coral reefs and resident whale shark population.

■ The remote and mountainous Musandam peninsula of Oman in the United Arab Emirates to study the diverse coral reefs fringing the areas where the mountains plunge into the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. It is a study to map the currently unprotected underwater environment.

■ Carpathian mountains of Slovakia to monitor lynx, wolf and wildcat populations and their interrelationship with prey species.

■ Coastline of Western Australia to conduct a survey of iconic Australian flatback turtles.

people will want to do.

"You have to work with people and do something that inspires them."

Meeting Ms Gill her quiet confidence and assurance combined with her enthusiasm and passion make it hard not to believe in it as a cause.

The basic skills really are basic and as the taster day was designed to do. It has given me a taste for an expedition.