

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE FOR PACKRAFTERS

Jason Taylor

PACKRAFTING – A UK MANUAL



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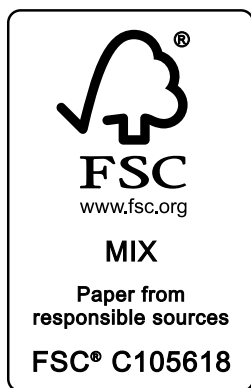
PACKRAFTING – A UK MANUAL

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About the Author

Born in Burnley, Lancashire in 1971, Jason spent his childhood walking and climbing in the Lakes, Yorkshire Dales and North Lancashire moors under the tutelage of his father – Jeff. After watching a rescue on Raven Crag in Langdale, he left home at 16 for the Royal Air Force “to join the mountain rescue teams”. During 15 years of service as a professional Mountain Rescue Team Member, Jason was appointed as Deputy Chief Instructor and Immediate Emergency Care Officer, as well as qualifying as a Mountain Rescue Team Leader. He was twice commended for life-saving and services to Mountain Rescue. Throughout this period he led, and was a member of, numerous expeditions, including climbing in Yosemite, Verdon and the Alps, as well as mountaineering in North Africa, USA and Europe. In 2004 he took the Queen’s commission as an Officer in the Royal Air Force as an engineer, serving in a number of operational roles. He retired from the service in 2011 to spend more time at home with his wife, Marianne and their two children.

In these years, their attention moved away from the hills to the rivers and lakes of the UK, predominantly exploring Scotland by canoe, especially the far north, with their children. Jason stumbled across ‘packrafting’ after meeting an enthusiast on a paddlesport course and was instantly converted.

Jason and Marianne established ‘Tirio’ in 2016, to promote their love of the outdoors, family adventure and, in particular, packrafting in the UK. Jason holds various coaching and leadership qualifications in mountaineering, rescue and paddlesport as well as post-graduate awards in management, he has a Master’s Degree in Elite Performance and is currently undertaking a research PhD at the University of Edinburgh. During his infrequent spare time, he enjoys reading, planning and undertaking packrafting and hiking expeditions, especially those that ‘rediscover’ and ‘reinvent’ routes and adventures around our beautiful islands. In 2022, after several years of research, he completed the Pack Wrath Trail, a 350km journey by land and water up the west coast of Scotland, from Arisaig to Cape Wrath.



Marianne and Jason

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PHOTOS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

All photos by the author or Marianne Taylor unless otherwise indicated in the caption. Illustrations by Marianne Taylor.

Introduction

My thighs burning, I dig deep, striding out towards the non-descript Loch na h-Airbhe, after a long, arduous ascent from Dundonnell. Ahead, I watch Millie (my dog) skip over a stream and climb onto a rocky knoll and so, hoping for a glimpse of Ullapool and the way ahead, I decide to follow. Tired and clumsy, I slip and stumble over the wet rock until I summit. There, panting, I stand and look north. As I wipe the sweat from my eyes and the view becomes clear I can feel my emotions swelling. After a week of paddling and hiking through some of the most remote land and seascapes of the UK, I now gaze into the far north of Assynt and Sutherland. Below lays Loch Broom and Ullapool, my halfway point, and then ahead lies miles of mountain and water, ribbons of blue and green crossing my intended route. Overhead, the anvil-shaped clouds that mark the snow squalls move purposefully west to east, diagonal grey bands throwing snow from their bellies. Swaying, I lean forward, balancing my rucksack laden with camping gear, clothes, food, packraft, buoyancy aid and paddle. I am mindful that it is this unique combination of paddling and hiking, made possible by this equipment, that has made this route feasible and allowed me to cross the lochs and mountains so far, and will allow me, in several more days, to reach my ultimate destination – Cape Wrath.

Looking north to Cape Wrath.

Photo: R. Sumner



These light, packable and remarkably robust little boats, or packrafts, have, in recent years, changed how I and many others see maps and plan adventures. Being able to switch between travelling over land and water opens a whole new way of adventuring. Not only do packrafts allow us to hike and paddle, but as many others have discovered they allow us, amongst other things, to use public transport more easily, eliminate the need for lugging and lifting heavy and unwieldy boats and mean that those without the space to store a traditional paddle craft can now own a boat themselves.

In terms of paddle craft, a packraft is unique, and while, as is the case between most paddle craft, there are many transferable skills and techniques, there is much more to understand to use a packraft effectively and safely; this book will focus on introducing the reader to a range of knowledge and techniques required to safely, and effectively,



Our business 'Tirio' specialises in packraft coaching, guiding and education.

undertake appropriate adventures in a packraft. To that end, I hope that the book will not only benefit the novice but also enlighten the established paddler as to the nuances of packrafting.

For some years now I, through my business 'Tirio', have been leading people on a range of packrafting adventures, as well as designing and delivering a range of training courses to allow folks to get out there and enjoy these amazing little craft on their own adventures. This process has highlighted the differing, and often unique, characteristics of a packraft and has, through much thought, trial, effort, and review, allowed me to better understand the progression of skills required by a packrafter in the UK.

The book itself began its life in 2018 as a 'manual' that we gave clients on our range of packrafting courses. After numerous iterations, a great deal of positive feedback, and some pretty strong-willed insistence on the part of Marianne (my wife and the books illustrator), I was finally convinced that I may indeed have something to offer to the wider packrafting community and to approach a publisher. This I did during lockdown and, at that point, it is fair to say the hard work began.

Some thoughts before starting out

RISK

Packrafting is inherently risky. No amount of planning, knowledge, skill or experience can eliminate the hazards associated with mountains, hills, lakes, rivers or the sea. Nature simply does not care about you or your life and so, with that in mind, you must take on that caring role.

That said, it is this 'risk' and the unknown that draws me towards exploring remote areas with my packraft, however I always bear in mind that things can go badly wrong, and quickly. There have, tragically, been several packrafting accidents and fatalities in recent years, often involving beginners who have not understood the risks they faced. Having the right equipment, knowing how to use it, effective planning, understanding, anticipating and identifying hazards and knowing when to simply stay home are key to ensuring your safety and that of others.

EXPERIENCE

I am firmly opposed to the modern tendency of many people's desire for 'zero to hero' style training. Indeed, having worked as a professional rescuer for many years, I learnt quickly that the forests, hills, rivers, lakes and seas care little for what someone thinks they know and, as such, I have always favoured a slower, more expertise-based approach to learning in the outdoors. This book has been written with

this in the forefront of my mind; experience is key and hard earned, it doesn't come quickly. To recognise this requires the adventurer to possess a respect of the outdoors and the humbleness to know that there is always much more to learn. Indeed, while packrafting opens a whole new range of freedom to exploration, it also provides us with an equal number of ways of getting ourselves into trouble.

STRUCTURE

To facilitate appropriate progression and the building of experience, I have attempted to break the book down into progressive chapters that, in my experience and opinion, follow the typical and healthy journey that people I have trained as packrafters have taken. From considering foundation knowledge and first outings, to progression onto rivers and expeditions. Throughout my time as a packrafter, I have also been blessed with the company of not only Marianne, but also our two children and our dog – Millie. Our time together, packrafting in the UK and beyond has always been great fun, and so I have also included thoughts, considerations, and recommendations for undertaking packrafting adventures with children and dogs. Another key area of an adventure sports person's skill repertoire is their ability to make appropriate decisions. Understanding the environment they're in, identifying hazards as well as opportunities, and knowing how to avoid or use them – the importance of understanding these things cannot be understated, especially when our physiological response to being tired, hungry, cold and wet (often the norm as a packrafter!) can significantly interfere with our ability to make decisions well.

I have to admit to being, probably overly so, fascinated about how adventure sports experts think. This obsession has led me through a master's and now progressing through a doctoral degree. It shouldn't

Family packrafting adventures in Sweden.



be a surprise, therefore, if at least a little of that obsession finds its way into this book. How we decide to act has the utmost bearing on our success as a packrafter, from choosing to purchase and read this book, deciding to get some training, right up to deciding whether or not to run a rapid. In particular, these choices are underpinned by ‘knowing’ what we know and ‘knowing’ what we don’t, and in this I include *knowing how* we make decisions in the wilds. This, I firmly believe, is essential knowledge and so in the Chapter Decision Making, I will explore these factors in more depth.

SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

The forests, mountains and waters of the UK can be remote and challenging, even for the most experienced adventurer. Combined with the fickle and often wild weather the UK experiences, the range and severity of risks a packrafter can face is significant. It is, therefore, important for the reader to acknowledge that no book can hope to furnish a person with the whole range of practical skills and knowledge required to undertake something as complex and as hazardous as paddling and hiking. This book is no exception to that rule and, as such, I recommend that the reader use this volume as a reference point from which to begin their journey as a packrafter, rather than seeing it as an account of the journey itself. To that end, I have deliberately omitted some topics that other books have chosen to include, for example detailed explanations of rescue techniques or navigation. While I find these topics immensely interesting, they are predominantly practical skills that require a level of nuance and technicality to master, that could simply be better achieved by undertaking specific training; in addition, there are already detailed books on the subjects that explain the subjects far better than I could here.

Moreover, as the saying goes, “*there’s more than one way to skin a cat ...*” and the same could be said about how to be a competent packrafter. While I have been influenced by many other mountaineers and paddlers, as well as the many books and articles one reads throughout a lifetime in the outdoors, what I present here are the knowledge, techniques and skills that I feel are most appropriate, based upon how I have helped individuals develop as packrafters over the years. No doubt, others may ‘skin’ the same cat in a slightly different manner – this is (when based on specific experience of packrafting), healthy and will help to develop our community further.

Warning

I would, therefore, strongly recommend that anyone wishing to experience packrafting should combine reading this book with structured packraft-specific training, ideally undertaken with a professional who has detailed knowledge and experience of these unique craft.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR A LONG AND ENJOYABLE LIFE PACKRAFTING!

In this book I will explore a range of knowledge, techniques and skills to help the reader maximise their enjoyment of packrafting. However, I feel there are a few fundamental principles that I’d ask the reader to bear in mind as they go forward ...

Things to be aware of:

- Packrafting under the influence of alcohol or drugs is dangerous, for you and for others – don’t do it.
- A packraft is not a kayak or canoe – it presents its own unique challenges and techniques. Get packraft specific training and coaching.
- UK waters are cold and will significantly impair your ability to rescue; prepare accordingly. Cold water shock doesn’t care how good a swimmer you think you are. Always wear a CE/UKCA/ISO approved buoyancy aid and a CE/UKCA/ISO approved paddle sports helmet where appropriate. Use equipment appropriate to the water and environment and check it prior to use.
- Understand, and be aware of, changes in river levels, tides, currents and weather. Never packraft in flood or spate conditions.
- Moving water is powerful and some river features can be extremely hazardous, understand how to identify river features and avoid hazards. If you can’t do this, stay off moving water.
- Stay within your capabilities, this means you need to have an honest appreciation of what you can and can’t do, what you know and what you don’t. Remember, rescue is a gift, not a right. Throwing yourself into harm’s way without the means or skill to get yourself out of trouble isn’t cool, it’s selfish. Not only can it leave a gaping emotional hole in those around you if things go wrong, but it puts others at risk as they try to come to your aid.
- Never packraft on water you cannot clearly see and where you don’t know where you’ll end up – inspect and scout ahead, portage around hazards where required.
- Modifying and attaching items to your packraft can be dangerous, never modify or add items to your packraft without a sound knowledge of the implications. Never restrict or impede your ability to exit from your packraft.



Things to strive for:

- Respect the environment and have minimal impact – pack out what you pack in and always leave things at least as pristine as you found them; better if you can.
- Seek out, and packraft with, capable companions. Packrafting alone significantly increases risks and reduces your options for rescue – don't do it. Paddling with reliable peers is both rewarding and enjoyable. Seek out those whom you can rely on to challenge your assumptions and speak honestly.
- Undertake good quality training. A huge part of my time every year is spent doing training courses and practising what I have learnt. There's always something valuable to gain from a course.
- Be the best ambassador you can be for our new and vibrant community, accept and embrace the needs of others and act as an advocate for all who respect and enjoy our amazing outdoor spaces.

Yours Aye!
Jason

Disclaimer

As with all adventure activities, packrafting is an activity that involves significant risk, including the danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of, and accept these risks, and be responsible for their own actions.

This book is no substitute for personal risk assessment and good judgement. The decision on whether to undertake an adventure or not, and any consequences arising from that decision remains yours, and yours alone.

CHAPTER 1

What is Packrafting?

Packrafting today probably means different things to different people, but at its core is one key concept – that a packraft is a tool for adventure, journeying and exploring. By allowing us to combine travel over land and water, these adventure mediums are no longer exclusive, indeed they can be seamlessly combined and allow packrafters to access and experience some truly unique places on our planet.

What is a packraft?

I'd suggest that what defines a packraft isn't a certain shape or design, but as an adventure tool, true packrafts all share some common features:

Lightweight – A true packraft should represent only a fraction of an individual's pack weight. Most true packrafts weigh in the region of 1.5 – 4 kg depending on their water capability. For instance, a white-water capable raft with a deck, combing and thigh-straps will weigh more than a simple open raft.

Packable – The packraft, once deflated and rolled, should be small enough to be transported overland by hiking or biking without undue difficulty. A person must be able to easily pack all the equipment required to hike or bike, as well as the equipment required to safely journey on the water. Generally speaking, the packraft should take up about the same space as a typical sleeping bag or two-person tent rather than taking up most of a backpack.

*Lightweight and ...
packable.*



Robust – Packrafts are constructed from materials that offer the maximum robustness while minimising weight and packability. The grade or ‘denier’ of the material will vary depending on the suggested range of use – white water packrafts will generally be made of a tougher material than an ultralight, touring packraft.

Packraft construction – TPU

Many packrafts are manufactured using a nylon base fabric which is coated in TPU (thermoplastic polyurethane). TPU is airtight, relatively light, strong, puncture / abrasion resistant and low stretch; it can also be welded together, making it the perfect material for building these craft. The TPU is usually coated over one side of the nylon fabric; the thinner the TPU coating, the lighter and more packable the packraft is likely to be, the manufacturing costs, however, can be greater. Some manufacturers will use thicker coatings or possibly coat both sides of the nylon. This makes the fabric heavier and less packable. The heavier the grade (or ‘denier’) of the nylon base and the quality of the coating of TPU will make the material tougher, however it will also increase weight and reduce packability. Thinner or single-sided TPU coatings aren’t necessarily less tough – it will depend on the quality of the manufacturing process. Obviously, there is a trade-off here, tougher materials can be a good idea for high wear areas – such as the floor of a packraft.

Over the lifetime of packrafting many people and some manufacturers have experimented with a range of other solutions and developments:

‘SLACKRAFTS’

Due to the materials and the technical manufacturing process, the relatively high price of packrafts has been a prohibitive factor for many. One option used to overcome this was the use of cheaper vinyl inflatables or pool toys instead of a packraft, these became known in the packrafting community as ‘slackrafts’. While extremely cheap in comparison, these ‘slackrafts’ are not as tough and, as they are not designed for adventure paddling, they can often fail. In our opinion many will not last more than a single adventure and so could, in most cases, be considered to be disposable boats. Although this may seem like a convenient option for some, it doesn’t represent a very sustainable or environmentally friendly solution. In addition, users should seriously consider the safety implications of their use in conditions for which they were not designed or intended.

‘RUCKSACK-RAFTS’

In more recent years some manufacturers have been keen to produce cheaper models, and while these attempts copy the typical shape of some packrafts they are often significantly heavier and bulkier – many need their own rucksack to carry them and weigh anything up

to 14kg! We light-heartedly refer to these as ‘rucksack-rafts’, after the rucksack they are carried around in. While often much cheaper than true packrafts, they are normally made of PVC and although this material is tougher, they are generally bulky, heavy and less flexible. On the plus side, PVC can withstand much higher inflation pressures than TPU and so these can make far more rigid craft.

While they are often a cheaper and more convenient option for ‘park and play’ style activities, their weight and bulk mean they are harder to use as true multi-modal adventure craft.

All that said, some manufacturers such as Kokopelli and Neris have used high-quality PVC to manufacture tough, capable packrafts that are excellent options for folks that want a relatively packable boat but don’t need the ultra-light weight of a TPU packraft. The Kokopelli Recon and XPD (pictured) are great examples of hard-wearing PVC packrafts.

PVC Packrafts
Photos: Kokopelli



The history of packrafting

THE FIRST PACKRAFTS – THE HALKETT BOAT

The first true packraft was born in the 1840’s, the brainchild of Lt Peter Halkett of the Royal Navy. The Halkett Boat. Used on the ill-fated Franklin Expedition of 1845 and then, subsequently by those expeditions who searched for HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* over the next two decades.

Using rubberised canvas, he created a lightweight and easily portable boat, perfectly suited for exploring the terrain along the northern parts of what is now Alaska and Canada. Full of complex terrain which required explorers to be able to move over land and water easily, with its ice drifts, leads, bogs and horrendous portages, the Halkett Boats seemed the perfect solution.

The boat was ingenious for its time and showed a true utility in design. Weighing a modest 3.4kg, the boat itself was made into a cloak and the paddle shaft from the walking cane carried, an umbrella was used as a sail, with the boat itself being inflated using small bellows in approximately 4–5 minutes. One can see that it is still easily comparable with modern day packrafts.

Once the first raft was built, Halkett was keen to test it and did so at every opportunity, often taking it with him while on Naval service.

Paddling it regularly on the Thames and other UK waters, he eventually took his boat to the Bay of Biscay for informal sea worthiness trials, which it passed with flying colours, due in part to the water being abnormally calm for the time of year.

With the success of his first design growing, he set about creating a two person craft that packed into a small backpack. His exploits eventually came to the attention of Sir John Richardson, who in turn recommended his boat to be used on Franklin’s trip to discover the North–West Passage.

Orkney man John Rae, who, while working for the Hudson Bay Trading Company became a foremost explorer in the Canadian Arctic, used the Halkett Boat to great success, despite his preference for using only traditional Inuit methods of travel, he lauded the Halkett Boat for its usefulness in crossing and re–crossing the Repulse River. Subsequently, Rae and John Richardson used the boat again when they set out to search for the lost Franklin Expedition, finding it invaluable in allowing men to cross rivers that were in their path. Despite finding no clues as to the whereabouts of the lost ships and crew, in 1851, Rae set out again, equipped with his “two beautiful Halkett Boats”, where, after contacting a remote Inuit tribe he heard reports of men being seen dragging boats four years previously. Rae later discovered several bodies thought to be crew members of HMS *Terror* or *Erebus*.

ADVENTURE RACING – THE POTENTIAL IS REDISCOVERED

The next major development in packrafting occurred in the 1950’s when Dick Griffith and his wife Isabelle used military surplus one–man life rafts to descend various rivers in Mexico and the Southern US. These often–challenging river runs went mostly unnoticed, until Griffiths thrust his rafts into the forefront of the adventure race set. In 1982, during the first Alaska Wilderness Classic backcountry race, while other racers waited around a campfire for the Skilak River level to fall so that it could be forded, Dick Griffith arrived, pulled a 2.5 kilogramme vinyl raft from his rucksack and paddled straight across the swollen river. This seminal event in packrafting history was witnessed by two young adventurers, Roman Dial and Dave Manzer, who immediately recognised the potential of these ingenious water–craft. This would set the scene for adventure racers to follow!

Dick Griffith would go on to use the first commercially designed packraft – the Sherpa, designed and built by Bill and Gene Prater, of Sherpa Designs. Their success as designers and engineers can be seen in the development of the modern snowshoe, however, their Sherpa Raft never achieved the same popularity and soon faded from the market.

In 1991 – now in his 80’s! – it is reported that Griffith descended the Grand Canyon in a packraft. Due to illness and the National

Park looking for him – to confirm he had a permit – he completed the descent in two separate visits. By the time Dick Griffiths had completed this epic journey, he’d more than earned his title as the Father of Packrafting.

ALASKAN EXPLORERS – SHERI AND THOR TINGEY AND THE BIRTH OF RECREATIONAL PACKRAFTS

Alaska is considered to be the main area of packraft development until recent years, with Roman Dial, Erin McKittrick and Sheri Tingey being major contributors.

Sheri Tingey and her son Thor collaborated in 2000 when Alpacka Raft was born. The combination of Sheri’s designs and Thor’s experience in exploring Alaska’s wilderness proved a potent combination. After several designs, their ‘White Boat’ Alpacka Raft, with its 12” tubes and upturned bow took the packrafting community by storm. Since then, there’s been no looking back for Alpacka, their designs are still some of the most innovative out there.

Packrafting today



More accessible paddlesport – Marianne’s dad enjoying a day on the water.

Over the last 20 years packrafts have spread from Alaska and are now used all over the world. Communities are springing up everywhere as novices and experienced paddlers discover the potential of these fantastic boats!

While most packrafts are used on open water and rivers up to grade 2(3), in recent years many hard descents have been made of grade 5 water, including steep–creeking runs, with some serious waterfalls being paddled. There are now many packraft manufacturers out there, producing a wide range of true packrafts, as well as cheaper, bulkier ‘rucksack–rafts’.

While some manufacturers are still copying those earlier and pioneering Alpacka designs, some are now developing their own ideas, and as such the range of packrafts available is growing continuously.

In the UK, we are seeing packrafting diversify to address a variety of different themes:

MORE ACCESSIBLE PADDLESPO

Typically, paddle craft are bulky and heavy, even inflatable kayaks and paddle boards weigh many kilos and need a rucksack to carry them around. This precludes many people from accessing paddlesport. This could be because of a lack of storage space for people in cities and towns, an inability to transport due to not having a car, or for some people, physical impairments that would prevent them



The Pack Wrath Trail – A 335km self-powered journey up the West Coast of Scotland.

Photo: Li Taylor

from moving and handling traditional paddle craft. For these groups, packrafts make perfect sense and enable many people who would normally not be able to get on the water, to do so.

PARK AND PADDLE

The accessibility of packrafting means many people are finding it easier to get out on the water, so lots of folks are utilising their packrafts in the same way as more traditional paddle craft, such as a kayak or a canoe. This may be for gentle lake paddles, or on white water. While this doesn't fit the role of the 'adventure craft' or 'journeying tool' that they were originally designed for, it is having a positive impact on people's enjoyment of paddlesport, as well as having benefits for physical and mental health. As long as people gain the correct training and act responsibly this can only be a good thing!

ADVENTURES

Quite a few people in the UK are undertaking longer trips and adventures in their packrafts. From week-long source to sea descents of rivers such as the Tay or Spey, to longer expeditions such as the trip I recently completed from Fort William to Cape Wrath; light-heartedly referred to as the 'Pack Wrath Trail' it took 16 days, over 335km through some of the UK's most remote mountains and lochs, as well as a bit of white water thrown in for good measure!

The future

MULTI-MODAL ADVENTURES

In recent years many packrafters are looking at combining a wide range of other adventure disciplines with packrafting – typically with a bike (bike rafting) but also from skiing to paragliding. The list of options seems only to be limited by the willingness of adventurers to get out there and try it!

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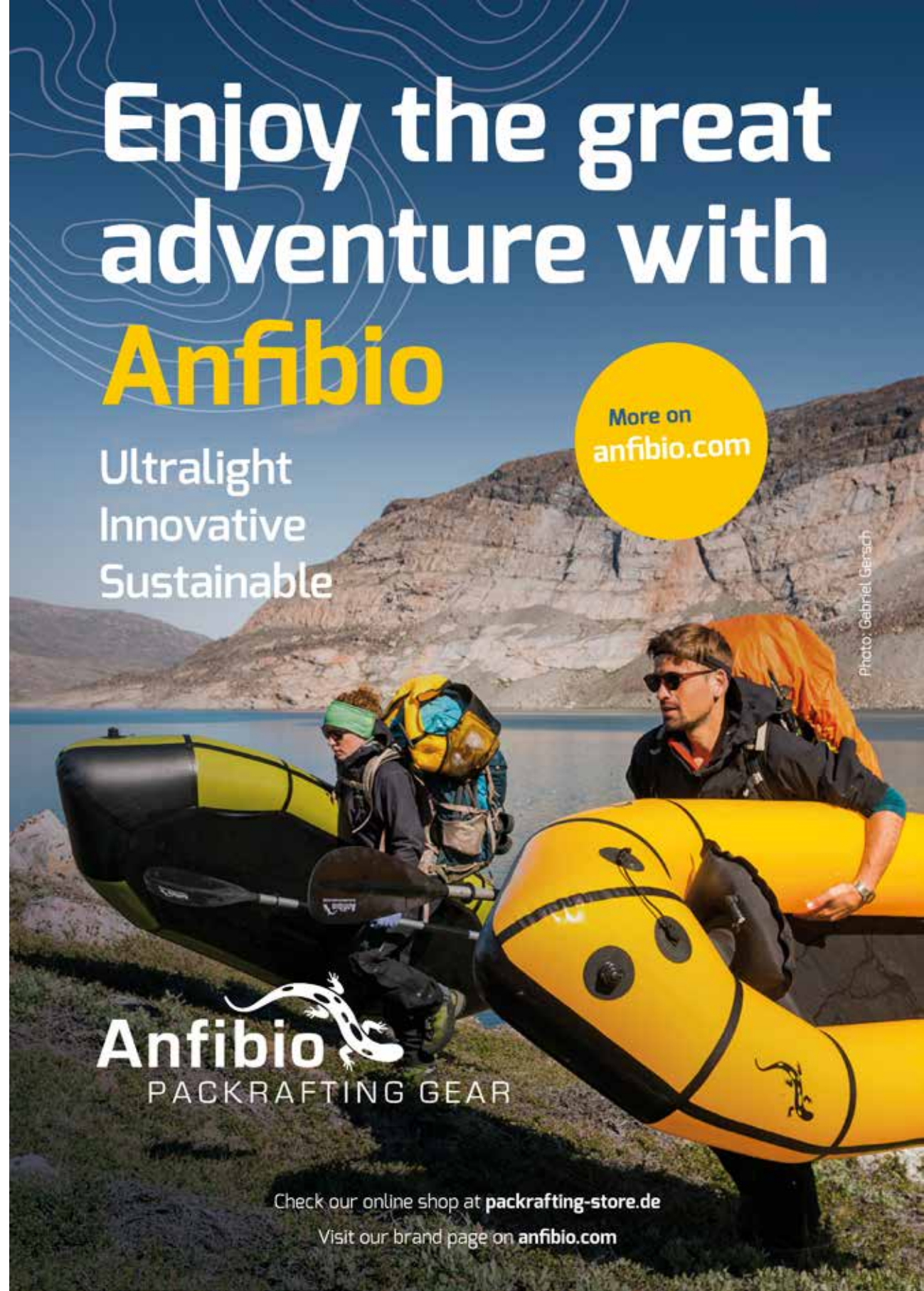


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PACKRAFTING GEAR

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PACKRAFTING – A UK MANUAL

The packraft is a tool for adventure, journeying and exploring. Being able to switch seamlessly between hiking over land, paddling over water and using public transport opens up a whole new way of adventuring. Whether you want to 'park and play' or go on multi-day adventures, their light weight and packability make packrafts easy to transport and store.

This book introduces the reader to a range of knowledge and techniques required to safely, and effectively, undertake appropriate adventures in a packraft. It will not only benefit the novice but also enlighten the established paddler as to the nuances of packrafting.

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE FOR

PACKRAFTERS

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