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The most suitable word for this year's expedition was definitely "challenging". In the previous two years our palette-built recycled raft (named "Melissa") had mostly drifted and paddled fairly lazily downriver towards the Baltic Sea, with only the occasional big rapid or day of heavy rain to push us outside of our comfort zones. This year was quite something else.

The water in the river was around two metres higher than in previous years. Not only did this mean that the rapids had become huge, but the extra water was also ideal for mosquito breeding...which meant there were a lot of mosquitoes. So many in fact that when we weren't out in the middle of the river, away from the mosquito-infested forest, we were either sitting with our mosquito nets draped over our heads, or trying desperately to bathe ourselves in smoke from our campfire to keep the swarms of them at bay.

And that was when we were actually able to have a campfire - it rained almost every day, often for much of the day, so most firewood we found was soaking wet. We also slept in bivi bags rather than a tent, so when we couldn't find any form of shelter we knew we were in for a wet night...and probably a wet morning.

But for all the difficulties it was actually an incredibly successful trip! We travelled 100km downriver (about 3 times the distance in each of the previous years) so that we have now completed more than half of our journey. We also managed to take on some pretty serious rapids, though we had to carry the raft round two of the largest on the river, as we felt that we couldn't ignore the advice of the locals (their exact words were: "If those boys do that rapid it'll be the last thing they ever do"). And although the elements were not normally on our side, we did have a few days where the wind was with us and we were able to set up a sail to travel faster through the water.

Probably one of the biggest highlights of the trip was the huge amount of support we received from the people we met along the river. We even had a visit one evening from a reporter from Swedish Radio 4 who interviewed us about our journey! We learnt more about the

history of the Vindel river and the industries that used to (and still do in some cases) thrive there. We met and interviewed people who used to work as loggers, known as *flotare* in Swedish (which means “rafters”), floating timber downriver in the summer, and heard more about the changes that had happened in the communities as a result of the loss of these industries.

So, in fact, we were hugely rewarded for all the challenges we faced this year. We think that if our first year had been like this it might have been too difficult, and we may not have come back. But with the experience of the previous two years, and the knowledge we gained from those trips, we were always able to keep our spirits up, even at the end of a long, wet day, with no fire, no food and no shoes.

Next year we’ve been told we’ll face more rapids, with more water as the river begins its approach to the sea. The Vindel always provides for us, whether it’s food, water, or excitement, and we can’t wait to get back there next year!

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dCCr9rwRT0>