

Cape York Canoeing Trip 2014

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It was dark when the alarm went off. It was still dark. My legs hurt as I rolled over in bed in an attempt to fall back to sleep. Fortunately, my wife May, and friend Paul stirred and got up to have breakfast and start the packing. This was Monday, 8/8/14, the day we were to start our 940km journey from Port Douglas to Badu Island in the Torres Strait by sea kayak. We were to be in 2 sea kayaks, one a Pitarek double for May and myself and the other, a plastic single for Paul.

Murphy's Law was with us from the start. We were to transport our Mirage 730 double and a fibreglass single to Cairns by a kayak transporter. Unfortunately, he advised at the last hour that he could not do it, other kayaks he was to be transporting were stuck in port and he had to wait.

However by a small miracle we found 2 kayaks on gumtree, both in Cairns, both second-hand but appeared to be in good shape so we purchased them sight unseen except for photos.

We arrived in Cairns in the early hours of Saturday morning with what seem to be at least a tonne of gear, paddles, camping equipment, clothing, food etc, etc, etc. As we were about to board the flight Paul was advised his paddle, which could not be dismantled into halves, was too long by a couple of inches. After some discussion and pleading, they agreed to take it on board as the flight was relatively empty. Another lucky escape. It will be good once we are on the water, I thought. After a short nap we collected our hire ute picked up the kayaks and drove to Port Douglas. We cleaned up the kayaks and put on a few small additions to make them expedition ready. May and Paul had a relaxing day Sunday, sightseeing whilst I ran the Kuranda to Port Douglas ultramarathon. It was my first 65km ultra. I slept extremely well that night, however my sore legs, in particular my right ankle reminded me on Monday morning.

Four hours later, we slipped the kayaks into the water off Main Beach, Port Douglas and started paddling. The sun was shining and the breeze light. A perfect start. We set our sights on Snapper Island 20 km distant on the horizon. It was to be our lunch stop before going on to Cape Tribulation. There was a campsite there which offered wood fired pizzas. As we paddled, I could feel the energy draining from my body, my legs still hurt as I pushed against the foot pegs with each stroke. By the time I got to Snapper Island, I decided I had had enough and we decide to camp there for the night. A swim and snorkel along the beach and fringing reef was refreshing. Fresh oysters off the rocks and an excellent rehydrated dinner served up by May completed the therapy I needed. The next day we set off north and did our 40+km day, passing Cape Tribulation on our way. We could see people along the beach which looked very inviting but we could not afford the time to stop and enjoy, so after a quick lunch in the kayaks we continued to paddle.

Days passed slowly at first, Cowie Point, East Hope Island, Cooktown, Cape Bedford, Cape Flattery then Lizard Island. Each day brought with it new adventures (a synonym for problems) and discoveries and beauty and stunning scenery both above and below the water. There was the crystal clear waters and excellent snorkelling at East Hope Island and Lizard. The wind and fine blown sand at Cape Bedford and our total exhaustion by the time we arrived at Cape Flattery where we had our first rest day, prematurely. It was then another days paddle to Lizard Island and our next rostered

rest day. We had forwarded about 20kg of food supplies to Lizard Island for our next stretch to Portland Roads where we would pick up more supplies for the final leg to the Badu Island.

As we left Lizard Island, despite 2 rest days, I still felt mildly fatigued; our next rest day was to be at Stainer Island another 205 km and 6 days away. I did occasionally wonder whether we would make it to the end within the time frame we had given ourselves, 5 weeks. Fortunately as each day passed we got stronger and fitter but it would not be till we left Portland that I would lose my sensation of fatigue. By the time we got to Badu we felt that we could keep paddling indefinitely but alas all good things have to come to an end. The leg from Stanley Island to Stainer Island was to be our longest at 48 km. The wind had dropped completely by midday and the sea was flat, the reef was clearly visible through the crystal waters as we passed over Corbet Reef. It was so tempting to stop and snorkel but we had a long way to go. Unfortunately the wind picked up and was blowing hard as we approached Stainer Island. The forecast was for stronger winds the next day hence we had another rest day on Stainer Is. Another 6 days later we arrive at Portland Roads, a small community just north of Lockhart River with a population of just 10 persons. It did have a room for rent and an excellent café. It was lovely to have a soft bed and showers again with steak and fresh vegetables for dinner. We had our last rest day here. We would not have any further weather forecasts from here onwards but we felt strong and we prepared to paddle whatever the weather.

The days passed quickly now. There were fresh coconuts on Forbes Island and the smallest Island we were to stay on, Kay Islet, the size of a soccer field at high tide and the tallest vegetation was about 8 inches high. We met friendly Frank on Hicks Island, one of the few privately owned Islands along the coast. He pointed us to Perry Island as the place to camp for the night, pointing out the lack of mosquitos and sandflies, the safe and beautiful beach and reef. The reef was beautiful; we did not waste any time getting into the water. After about an hour of swimming, I decided it was time to try to catch some dinner and had our first croc encounter. As I walked along the rocks towards the point, I heard a splash; I looked up to see a tail disappear into the water. Looking around more closely we noted several croc slides at the end of the beach we were snorkelling along. A lucky escape. 2 days later we passed McKenzie Island where we know of a kayaker having been attacked by a crocodile, saved by his fellow kayaker, Dave Winkworth. Dave had provided me most of the information to plan this trip. The incident though quite some years ago was still famous around these parts. A few more days on we hit our roughest patch of water at the entrance of Albany passage with 25knot winds against a strong tide kicking up 3-4m breaking waves. We abandoned trying to go through Albany passage and paddled around the north of the Island reaching sheltered waters. Another 1.5 hrs paddling and we were taking selfies off the tip of Cape York Peninsula with gawking tourist staring at us. As we landed we met some friends we had encountered along the way by complete coincidence. I felt some sadness as we set up camp; the trip was going to come to an end soon. 3 days later we arrived in Badu Island into the welcoming arms of our good friend Anne Reis and her extended family. What a way to finish the paddle.

Every day on the trip was special and different. I have tried to think of one or two or even three highlights to recount but I found it to very difficult to choose from between all the memories that we have.

We did not meet many people but those that we did meet were all very friendly and generous. We had a park ranger give us a pack of Arnotts cream biscuits among other things; we wolfed it down

within minutes. We were hungrier than we realised. An aboriginal speared a sea mullet to add to our dinner, oranges from a Melburnian at Captain Billy's landing, frozen icy poles from a young girl at the tip of Cape York. I think they felt sorry for us and thought us mad. For them a drive up the peninsula was an adventure, a paddle was unthinkable.

The sunsets and sunrises were always amazing to watch as we ate dinner. The wildlife; birds soaring overhead and diving down to check us out, turtles bobbing along and diving down at the last minute as we approached, tuna getting airborne chasing bait, sea snakes floating past and the odd glimpses of crocodiles are scenes that we will never forget.

The peace of sitting or lying on an island or beach hypnotised by the rhythm of the waves gently rolling in, the regular drumming of the sea on the beach, birds floating over head as the sun sinks slowly initially then suddenly diving below the horizon whilst staining the sky in incredible colours. Life had become a steady rhythm of wake, pack, paddle, find a beach, camp, explore, relax, eat and sleep.

To end the journey we stayed a few days on Badu Island, met a very good friend from our past who had returned to Badu partly to see her family but also partly to meet us and welcome us. Badu is a hidden treasure, beautiful beaches, friendly people, wonderful fishing and reputable reefs you can walk to at low tide and harvest a few crayfish. It is a place I intend to return to again. Our few days there were wonderfully relaxing and it was sad to get on-board the plane for the return journey to Melbourne. On the flight to Cairns, it was interesting to see the places we had paddled from the air. What took us 4.5 weeks to traverse by kayak we covered in a few hours by air. We landed in Tullamarine late Sat night, followed by the Melbourne Marathon on Sunday and back to work on Monday, physically tired but mentally fully recharged until our next adventure.