

Overcoming Barriers

by Nathan Fa'avae



The shuttle dropped us early at the wharf, they'd warned us the teeming morning city traffic could create time pressure we didn't need, meaning we could miss our sailing. I was with my wife and three children heading to Great Barrier Island, part two of our school holiday Easter escapade.

Sitting on the ferry in downtown Auckland reading weather forecasts available online, they suggested we'd hit the meteorological jackpot, a row of sunshine symbols. The weather systems were settling down after cyclones Debbie and Cook had tracked over the country making a mess in some regions. Ahead of us we had eight days before our return ferry and onward flights home to Tasman. Awaiting us were sea kayaks arranged

through friends at Hillary Outdoors, and an island with a circumnavigation route planned of around 120 km. There was nothing severe in the forecast. Perfect.

Our first trip to the Island, we were glad we'd taken all our supplies, as a quick glance at the local stores showed a heavy GBST (Great Barrier Service Tax), fair enough. Unloading at Tryphena port we were instantly aware that we were in the sticks. We asked a staff member what our options were to get a bus or shuttle to Orama, where Hillary Outdoors was situated at the northern end of the island. "You'll be lucky - you should have organised something before you came", the friendly islander told us half scowling and half smiling, but proceeded to ring a mate who ran a shuttle service. "Your ride will be here in 20 minutes".



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The drive was scenic, but the narrow twisting roads and speed of the trip had everyone feeling queasy, ironic after we'd spent four hours on a ferry without issue. The drive had the added bonus that we got to see up close the swell on the eastern side, which signalled to us that we were in no rush to get onto that side, given our starting point, an anticlockwise trip would give us the most days before reaching the east side, the swell having dissipated by then.

First impressions, amazing but busy. By the time we had the kayaks ready to float, only a few hours of daylight remained so we headed to Kaikoura Island. We shared the cove we camped in with some moored yachts. The scenery was to behold, the water, rocky coast, dramatic landscapes on the skyline and lush forest, noticeably different to what we're more accustomed to in the South Island. The bird life was rich as well, with some bat sitings as the stars began to dominate.

Our vision was warm water, which it was, calm seas, which it was, blue sky and yellow sun, which it was, lots of swims and more specifically lots of snorkelling. We eagerly broke camp and launched into the adventure.

Soon into the morning a southerly wind started to build; this wasn't forecast. Never mind, there was plenty to explore and land to shelter behind in the Broken Island group. It was quickly obvious to us why the place had such a fine reputation as a sea kayakers utopia, and we felt ashamed it'd taken us as long as it had to finally be on the water there. But now it was time to plant the paddle and enjoy the landscapes, waterways, caves and passageways. The marine life appeared healthy and vibrant, sitting at least a dozen sharks up close, two of them hammerheads. A full day saw us find a campsite near Flax Point, a grass patch for our tent, fresh water, dry sticks on the beach, million dollar seaside view.

We woke to a flapping tent harassed by increasing wind; this wasn't forecast. As we sat on the beach eating breakfast, dressed in full weather gear in a cool wind, it was tempting to head to Tryphena as we had the keys to a friends bach, but our senses told us to get more distance covered. It was a paddle focused day and we wearily surf landed in Rosalie Bay, with enough daylight to dive for a plate of Paua for tea. I was keen to keep going to Medlands Beach, I'd lost faith in the forecasting and my instinct told me to paddle while we could, we'd have more options but I was aware the family had done enough, they were tired. With the kids aged 10, 12 and 14, we had two doubles and single. Traditionally we've done most of our trips using just two doubles, as two small children could comfortably share a seat in my kayak, but they've grown to a size now where that is no longer practical or safe. So in a strange twist, our sea kayaking capabilities have reduced as family, until the kids get older and stronger.

Dinner was in a small driftwood shelter we'd made ours. Everyone was now dressed in all their winter gear, rain showers swept through quickly and the sea started to build. Oh dear. We woke the next morning knowing we weren't going anywhere in a hurry, at least not in kayaks. In fact, we wouldn't move until the next day. The seas raged, rain squalls ripped in. We couldn't complain though as it was such a beautiful beach and in between the bad weather, the sun would come out. It was a day of reading and drinking cups of tea. It did calm down enough on dusk to go for a short paddle with a pod of dolphins.

A rest day hadn't hurt us, the sea had settled, just a lazy swell lolling around. It was an incredible piece of coast to Shakespeare Point traveling underneath massive cliff walls riddled with caves and tunnels. We pulled into Medlands for a stretch. With an aiding south east breeze, we prepped the kids for a big one, explaining we'd lost a day, we needed to make it up.





It felt like a crime to be zooming past so many magic beaches and camp sites, but we wanted to make haste, we'd learned the weather forecasting was hit and miss and the east coast was exposed. Lunch at Harataonga Bay and on we went. Rakitu Island was mythical, protruding out of the mist, jurassic. That's on the list for the next trip.

We'd been in the kayaks for nearly seven hours total, nearing 35 km of paddling. At the beginning of the day, Rangiwahakaea Bay was our ultimate goal, ambitious but the target all the same. Now that we were rounding the bay, I advocated we should keep going, and get off the east coast while we could. In another hour we could be on the sheltered west side, but the team were done, camp was the only option. Hey, I was looking forward to dry clothes and hot food myself.

By now the forecast was a matter of looking at the sky and seeing what way the clouds were going and how wet your face was getting, but still we couldn't complain, we had plenty of fine weather, warm periods to dry gear and lounge on the beach. We were set up for an early start, keen to get to the west side and enjoy some more leisurely days on the water: the plan was good.

The plan didn't allow for high winds and big seas in the morning. We didn't have far to go so we decided to attempt getting out of the bay, but we soon encountered four metre pulsing swells and wind that was only going to get stronger. Abort. It was a nice day, we set up camp again.

Another rest day. Tomorrow would be the day, we were prepared for an early start, we had a plan.

The plan didn't take into account massive seas and gale winds. We sat on the beach witnessing giant swells building and cascading into the shore, sea spray jetted into the skies. Okay, now I was getting frustrated. This Island seemed to be one barrier after another. When would it respire and allow us passage. Our rations were diminished, we were now on lean portions.

Rest day number three. It also meant we'd missed our return ferry but we had a spare day before we'd miss our flights. We had one more shot to complete the trip by water. Oh well. We did however have an excellent bush walk climbing to the peaks and exploring the land, and made a plan to hike out and leave the kayaks if the sea didn't abate. It was a fun day, we'd seen kaka up close in the forest. The sea was improving.

The next morning we knew we had a chance to get around the north tip, Needles Point. Once around that we'd get back to Orama, we'd seen the west side, it was a millpond. It was an eye opening few hours for the kids as we paddled through humungous ocean swells, some reaching up to six metres but so spaced out they were like hills. They slid under us rising us up and gently lowering us down. Confident and sensibly nervous, we crept our way north giving ourselves a generous amount of sea room, the swell meeting Aiguilles Island was not somewhere we wanted to be.



Relief, achievement. We sat in the calm waters of the western aspect passing around a packet of pineapple lumps. It was a glorious day which we'd spend most of paddling, we still had a full day to Karaka Bay. Despite the conditions, the island always had us in awe, it was pleasant to finish in tranquil waters, drifting over seaweed beds spotting fish and shellfish. Our first thoughts of the Island being busy had been unfounded, we'd had an awesome remote wilderness experience.

Thankfully the next ferry was departing from Port Fitzroy so we avoided the long and winding road back to Tyrpehna.

Great Barrier is for me one of those places you go to and leave more inspired to return. We'd had an educational, at times challenging, other times rewarding journey by kayak, but I can see you could do another five trips and they'd all feel different. Upon returning I've enjoyed learning more about the history of the Island; fascinating tales. I feel like we've dusted off the cover of a book, a depth of stories awaits.



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