

# Third Time Lucky

by Nathan Fa'avae

*Three kayaks, Three paddlers, Three sea lions, Three days*





**What draws one to explore, to adventure, to challenge themselves with difficult and risky endeavours? This is what I pondered as I paddled south along the western side of Stewart Island, well and truly in the Roaring Forties, the notorious belt of ripping westerly winds.**

My thought process had begun as we drove towards the island, travelling from Tasman Bay. After a stop in Queenstown we were amid the convoy of tourist buses heading to Milford for the day. I wondered, about those passengers. They bus for hours, glimpse Milford Sound, perhaps have a short boat tour, then return by bus to Queenstown. At the end of the day, when they rest their heads on their white starched hotel pillows, what have they achieved, how have they been touched, changed, how are they better for the experience? I wasn't judging them, I was genuinely curious. I had to think that the experience couldn't be that meaningful, but maybe I was wrong, maybe it just wasn't something that would fulfil me. Adventure relativity.

It got me thinking about my impending trip to Stewart Island, with the aim of circumnavigation. I decided that for me, I needed more than seeing incredible places, I needed to live within them, be part of them, even if it wasn't for long. I needed to travel slower than a bus going at 90 kph.

One fond memory of the kayak trip was having breakfast at Flour Cask Bay, freeze-dried banana porridge, a steaming mug of panther black coffee, pondering the paddle to follow, around the South Cape. The fact we'd worked so hard to reach Flour Cask Bay enhanced the experience.

I like exercise, I welcome some hardship, I enjoy basic living - drinking from streams, cooking on fire, sleeping on the earth. I also need, somewhat regularly, to feel alive, to have peak experiences. Moments

where skill level meets the level of challenge. Peak experience is not about the activity itself so much: but more about the blissful feeling that is being experienced during it, and the reward for making it, the accomplishment.

I've accepted I need regular adventure in my life to function. Another part of me reasons that my sea kayak loaded with gear for a multi-day trip has a total value of around \$10,000, I've worked hard for that gear, I better well use it.

I was a sea kayak guide in the Abel Tasman National Park as a younger bloke. After the 1992 season I joined a group of guides and we headed to Stewart Island with the hope of paddling around it. Weather forecasting in those days isn't what it is today, we arrived on the island at the same time as a large storm. Kayaking around the island was impossible so we resorted to a thorough exploration of Paterson Inlet and hiking to the West Coast, Mason Bay. We had an amazing trip, but the around island paddle was postponed. I knew I'd be back.

And I was back, in 2010. My paddling partner was Tony Bateup (Golden Bay Kayaks). We'd paddled a number of exposed water trips over the years and were eager to explore the Isle of the South. Short story, we reached South West Cape half way around and were battered and bruised by an unrelenting storm that had west in every forecast. 75-knot winds, mountainous ocean swells and tidal streams that resembled flooded rivers more than sea currents, chuck in some breaking waves and we couldn't find a safe passage, frightening stuff. Eventually when stores were bare, on the advice of the skipper, who predicted the weather pattern to last for at least another week, we hitched a ride with a cray boat to Bluff. We'd be back.

And we went back, in 2018.







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This time Tony and I were joined by Perry Turner, all of us from the top of the south. We didn't have the luxury of waiting for the perfect weather, we all lead busy lives, like everyone else I guess. So we set the dates well in advance and simply hoped somewhere over that time we'd get a window to complete the trip, around the island.

As the departure date arrived, we studied the weather maps on various websites and gathered all sorts of information. It's quite incredible how different the forecasting can be between rival forecasters, but what we looked for was patterns and trends, and from that made our own conclusions, based on data rather than hope.

What resulted was that we believed there was a four to five day window suitable for a circumnavigation, March 17th-21st. The plan was to get on the water on a calm after a storm. There was two fairly settled days before another north west system hit, cutting up the west coast of the island. Tony and I had seen that up close before so we knew what to fear. After two days of north west there was a southerly change, which creates a whole other set of challenges, adding exposure to cold as another factor.

On paper, which in this case was a map of the island, our plan was to get off the ferry on the 17th and paddle the north coast, which should be aided by a easterly behind us. Then we had to clear the west coast on the 18th, with a small back stop being we likely had a small window on the 19th to get around the southern capes before the arriving storm. If we managed that, we would be able to tuck in under the land along the south east coast and have two days to paddle that before the cold and windy southerly arrived, which was forecast to last for a week or so, .

It was possible, but it felt like we were running the gauntlet, to borrow a phrase.

The plan relied on no surprises in the forecasting, or if there was changes, we totally relied on them resulting in less severe weather. If the weather turned out to be worse than forecast, then we would be ... up Stewart Island without a paddle, something like that.

Tony and I had a coffee at a local cafe before we committed to the 1000 km drive and ferry journey, to be absolutely sure we weren't embarking on mission impossible. By the time the cups were empty we'd decided we were on our way, game on. Perry flew down and met us in Oban. We quickly packed the boats and launched, on the water by 2:00pm, with the goal of clearing the north coast.

We had food for 10 days in case we got pinned down. Surprisingly, we all commented how easy we fitted all our gear into the storage compartments. Typically on a trip over 7 days it's difficult to fit everything in, careful and calculated packing is essential, but this time everything went in easy with room to spare. We agreed the difference was taking freeze-dried meals instead of regular food. We didn't have the bulky low calorie food often packed for trips. We figured that paddling big days we could eat 5 freeze dry meals per day each, accompanied with snack food at sea. 5 meals each per day for 10 days, do the math. 50 meals allows for a huge variety of flavours and choice: we had breakfast options of Banana Porridge, Scrambled Eggs, Creamed Rice. We had hot and cold lunch options: Cous



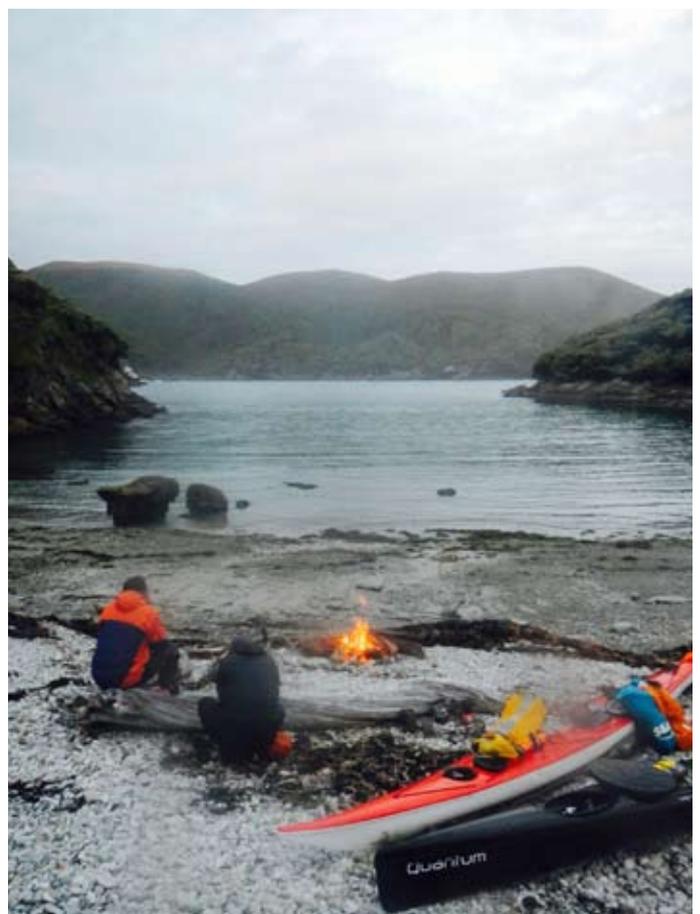


Cous Salad, Bacon Mash, Southern Beans, but we expected to be on land for lunch where we could boil water. Dinners provided a smorgasbord of options, mains and deserts. I took mainly my favourite, Chili Con Carne for main, Mocha Creamed Rice for pudding. Yum.

On the water we made good time, we had a light easterly pushing us and roughly 7 hours of daylight. We wanted to paddle as far as we could, figuring we could get in the vicinity of Codfish Island, about 50 km away. We were prepared to go further if conditions on the West Coast were mint, but we were mindful there was no moon, so it was going to be a dark night.

It was a glorious afternoon. It's a stunning trip along the coast, the bush, the beaches and the Anglem peaks to stare up at. We enjoyed a quick stretch and snack break at Lucky Beach, putting some extra layers on and getting our nights lights set up and accessible. It was hard to keep pushing on as there were so many amazing campsites, but we didn't have the luxury if we wanted to get all the way around.

We were averaging 7 kph and the tidal flow was against us but we knew we wouldn't get far beyond the Rugged Islands for the night. At best, Waituna Bay would be our camp, but as darkness fell, we went through Inner Passage to find a big lazy south west swell rolling in. We sat off West Ruggedy beach trying to determine the size of the waves crashing in. In poor light, we couldn't tell if the waves dumping onto the beach were 1 metre or 4 metres, it felt very risky to attempt to land when we couldn't see much, plus we'd have the issue of getting off the beach again in the morning. A quick scan of the map showed numerous awash rocks on the way to Waituna Bay so that didn't seem smart either. We back tracked to East Ruggedy, which was the best decision. It was calm, there was fresh



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...w, and let the adventures begin.



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water, cool campsites in the dunes and kiwis calling at night. We didn't have the stress of a surf break out after breakfast either. 54 km on the GPS, nice one boys. Somewhat coincidentally, East Ruggedy was where Tony and I camped on our previous trip.

Awake at 6:00 am we huddled in darkness in the dunes sipping coffees and eating brekkie. The atmosphere in camp was excitement and nervousness. Today was a significant day, could we clear the West Coast? Our ultimate goal was Broad Bay, 85 km away. In theory, the distance wasn't an issue, we had plenty of daylight, but what would the weather do to us.

The first 10 km ticked along nicely, then we opted to cross Mason Bay out wide, taking a beeline to South Red Head, which put us about 10 km offshore at one stage. Over the next 30 km the brakes came on as we hit a tidal stream on the bow. Our speed reduced to a heart-breaking 3-4 kph. It was a tedious stretch and the day was ticking by faster than we wanted. Adding to the sore butts was thirst. Because of the long stint at sea, we'd run out of drinking water, and we didn't feel that we had time to divert off course to land to refill, we wanted to stay on our transit south and stop at Kundy Island, which we'd done on our previous trip also.

Kundy Island was home to a mutton bird, who yelled from the cliff-top something we couldn't understand. It was most likely a warning about the aggressive sea lion that guarded the beach we were about to land on.

We landed at the next beach and had an entertaining conversation with the local resident who suggested we didn't take any chances with the sea lion, who clearly had a reputation. He did tell us to call in and see Alistair at the next island, but it was a detour so we chose dehydration instead. So with parched mouths we started paddling again. We were forced to do some calculations. We wanted to get around South West Cape at least. That would provide some shelter from the north wester if it came in early. If time and conditions allowed then we'd attempt South Cape as well, but we knew there were risks in that idea as it'd mean going into Broad Bay in darkness. The other and more sensible option was to stay the night at Flour Cask Bay, which had the added bonus of an earlier finish and daylight to set up camp.

As we paddled between Big South Cape Island the tidal race was, well, it was racing. Our speed reduced again but we knew we'd make it to Flour Cask, possibly further. As we rounded South West Cape we got into fascinating seas where tidal flow met ocean swells, it was big glassy waves combined with a river flowing through. We opted for Flour Cask, confident we would get around the South Cape proper in the morning.

We didn't have high hopes of finding a decent campsite in Flour Cask so we were stoked to tuck in behind the peninsula and find a sheltered beach with fresh water, and three sea lions, after all, it wouldn't be a beach without a sea lion would it.



It was a clear night with no wind so we built a fire and enjoyed some food, recapping on the 12 hour trip down from the north, 75 km in the arms.

Fatigue sent us to bed early and the knowledge we had another big day ahead. The north west could be a factor and we had two days to round East Cape before the southerly hit.

After deep sleep and an enjoyable breakfast in a truly awesome location, we launched and got our teeth into rounding South Cape. The sunrise was surreal, magical. We had the tide with us for a change. It was a treat to be able to stay close to land after the previous day where we had spent hours offshore. We stopped at Ernest Island for an early lunch, which involved serious negotiations with a seal lion who didn't understand the concept of sharing. Rain and wind was building and we could see white capes in Port Pegasus; the storm was brewing. We braced for an action packed afternoon.

We played it safe staying close to shore and by the time we reached Seal Point the wind had abated; it felt like the storm had passed, rapidly. Our plan was to paddle until six then look for a campsite.

As we approached the Breaksea Islands it was clear we'd be in Port Adventure for the night, joking too soon, we'd have an early finish. Shelter

Point had the last laugh, we encountered big tidal races and a south east swell, so it was all action for a stint to get into the Port. We finally landed at Kaika, clocking up another 70 km. Golden sand beach, lush forest, bird song, the place is very special.

Back on land it was dry clothes, fire and food. We had just under 30 km to go to complete the trip, and it did really feel that nothing could stop us now. We slept well. The final day we cruised up the coast, around East Cape and into Oban, pulling in just before midday.

As you can appreciate, we were very happy. We'd made it, we were safe, we'd worked hard, we'd been gifted with spectacular wilderness and coast.

Unpacking our boats it didn't feel like we had any less gear than when we started, we could have lived comfortably on the Island for 10 days, but we'd only taken three days (two half days and two full days). We did have a spare day up our sleeve but we'd opted not to risk it. We didn't want to get stuck again.

We agreed the positive side of doing such a quick trip, was: we'd be back, with more time and a better forecast, but with the same menu. 🌲

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