

Remote, Rugged, Wild & Beautiful:

Kayaking around Stewart Island By Carol Tweed

Majestically soaring and almost clipping the grey and white topped waves, the Mollymawk effortlessly glided over our four kayaks as we paddled westwards out of Half Moon Bay, our first afternoon of a 10 day kayak adventure, the aim to circumnavigate Stewart Island, also known as Rakiura.

Doing this trip was not for the faint hearted; many we had spoken to had warned us of the high likelihood of wild weather, huge seas and big surf; topped with this was the fact that the daylight hours were short as it was almost mid winter. We also had plenty of more light-hearted "information and advice"; most memorable was to be aware of great white sharks that were known to frequent these waters!

Once out of the shelter of the harbour, the 4 m rolling swell and tail wind made for easy sail assisted paddling and a fast 18 km first leg to Bungaree Hut. We joined a group of 12 guys whose excuse was hunting but judging by the huge amount of beer, the electric generator and the hot shower, this was probably more an opportunity for a boozy and luxurious week away with the lads.

Down these parts in winter, it's not light until almost mid morning – OK that's an exaggeration, but that's what it felt like! At 7.45 am the sun was only just poking up on the horizon and a thick blanket of grey cloud and heavy drizzle just about obliterated the sun. As we headed out on to the ocean, the wind picked up again chopping the water but also creating further

opportunity for sails and a reasonable pace. Now one might not imagine getting any speed thrill from a 5.4m plastic Tasman Express kayak, but visualise this... a brisk tail wind, following sea and travelling down the face of a 4 m wave; this combination enabled a top GPS speed of 24.3 kph... almost warp factor 10 in kayak terms! Thirty kms later, we arrived into Long Harry Bay looking for the aptly named Long Harry Hut perched high on a hill and accessed by a steep, muddy and slippery climb.

For our next day we had a leisurely start with a side wind, big chop and swell. Waituna Bay was our destination where we arrived early afternoon, set up camp and got to work building a massive fire and accompanying shelter from the drizzle. Amazing what one can build from driftwood, a large sheet of polythene and a bit of imagination... this was real Boy Scout stuff!

The following day was going to be a long one. We had to get across Mason Bay where the full force of the southern ocean swell gathers and causes huge surf. Paddling well out to sea, this was a long 5 hour energy sapping morning, punctuated by




several squally showers that quickly whipped up chop and spray. However with every down side comes a good and we were amply rewarded with stunningly beautiful rainbows dipping straight down into the ocean. Eventually we managed to pull into a small bay in the shelter of the Ernest Islands for a late lunch, a welcome stretch of the legs and a long overdue toilet stop (phew!). Misguidedly, we thought that at high tide it would be possible to cut through a narrow neck of land aptly called The Gutter saving a further 7- 8 km of paddling. Great idea... but there had been changes in the land geography compared to the map and it was also two hours past high tide. It was time to portage! Kayaks may travel fast down faces of waves, but they are certainly not meant for land travel and a half metre carpet of very soft and smelly wet red kelp didn't help progress either. Doughboy Bay hut, our final destination was still a few hours away where we finally arrived at dusk. We made this our home for two nights taking the opportunity to dry out gear, rest and recover ready for the gruelling days that lay ahead.

Doughboy hut to



Another flat day in a winter paradise. Much of the coastline is rugged, but beautiful with it.



Carol dwarfed by towering cliffs, no landing spots here

Nicholson Harbour, our next leg was a long 42 km grind, with the intention to get as close to the South Cape as possible, rest up overnight and leave early the next morning. However, arriving at Nicholson Harbour at 5 pm allowed little time for finding a suitable camp site as darkness was rapidly descending. There was plenty of bush for hammocks which Jim and Andy were using, but absolutely no flat ground for our tent, so we quickly had to look for an alternative option. A two minute paddle across the bay to another small beach was the solution and we soon found the ideal spot, a small piece of hard flat sand with the luxury of being at least 4 m away from high tide! As was the case for all nights on this trip, tiredness and early nightfall meant we were in bed often by 7.30 pm waking only for bladder relief and midnight snacks... I needed extra calories at every opportunity!

We all knew our next day was going to be no walk in the park. Previous trip reports had highlighted the risks and there was no getting away from the fact that there was the full force of ocean currents, two jutting headlands and unabated exposure to wind. The South Cape followed by

the South West Cape is where you are at the mercy of everything Mother Nature wants to throw at you. As we started the day, although the swell was large, we were moving along quickly, aided by the current but just past Flour Cask Bay this changed and now we had both head winds and current – our only saving grace being that we had a following swell. Arriving into Broad Bay 6 hours later was a total relief. This was a lovely sandy beach with a couple of resident seals who had resting places in the bush behind and didn't welcome human intrusion!

The following day was simply a hop around Broad Head into the sanctuary of Port Pegasus that features two main arms and a series of small islands offering protection from the ocean and a haven for animal and bird life. As we entered, the sea became glassy clear with an inky depth, the clouds disappeared leaving a perfectly azure blue sky and in the distance the majestic granite peaks of Gog and Magog jutted up from the horizon. Two nights here were just sublime and enabled the luxury of a hair wash, dry clothing and time for tramping and fishing.

Here we made plans for our next 38 km paddle that, due to steep sea

cliffs and a rocky shore line, meant there was no opportunity for landing. We were up at 5 am, on the water at 6, crammed in as many carbohydrate based calories as we could manage for breakfast and put our heads down for 8 hours of continuous paddling. Although the forecast was good with variable light winds, we were fighting a tidal current until 2 pm. This was a hard core, head down, bum up kind of day and I needed to get "in the zone"! Eight gruelling hours later we rounded the corner into Big Kuri Bay where we hobbled out of our kayaks and crunched our way up the frozen beach that was covered in kiwi tracks – yes – the frost hadn't yet thawed!

The next day was a relatively uneventful 25 km easy paddle into Kelly's Bay. Plenty of huts were marked on the map but these were all full as we were now relatively close to Half Moon Bay. This meant another camp on the beach – no hardship really considering the beautiful scenery and sheltered site.

As the next morning dawned, all seemed set for an easy final leg but a stiff and gusting westerly off-shore breeze was rising and as we approached the Neck, this just became too strong and dangerous to paddle. With only 6 kms to go, we were forced to land and spend one more night under the stars and hope there would be an improvement. Despite the disappointment, we

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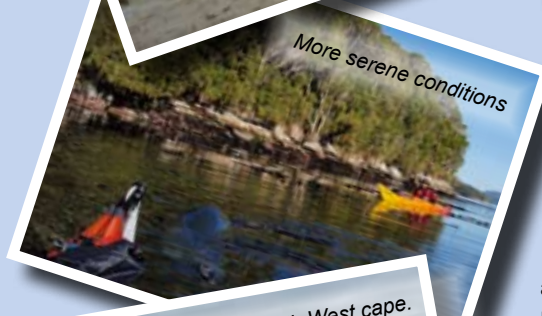
Unexpected hut in Big Kuri Bay



Jim Walker, Andy Blake,
Grant Edwards & Carol Tweed



Andy contemplating more rock gardening



More serene conditions



Between South and South West cape.



Oily sea conditions on the
way to South Cape



Exciting paddling in "the big stuff"

had made the right decision and daybreak was accompanied with a gentle northerly breeze allowing us to arrive back in Half Moon Bay for breakfast, fresh coffee and celebration at our achievement.

Beautiful, remote, rugged and unpredictable are the words that can be used to describe Rakiura. The trip had always been intended to be an adventure, that was the part that was so appealing and we knew we always had to plan for the unexpected, the good and the bad that came our way. You can plan for most things and there is some truth in the adage that there is no such thing as bad weather... just bad clothes. Well, we had the good clothes and the good weather, so luck was also on our side. Rakiura is a very special place and deserves more time than we gave it to explore fully and appreciate the unique experience.

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