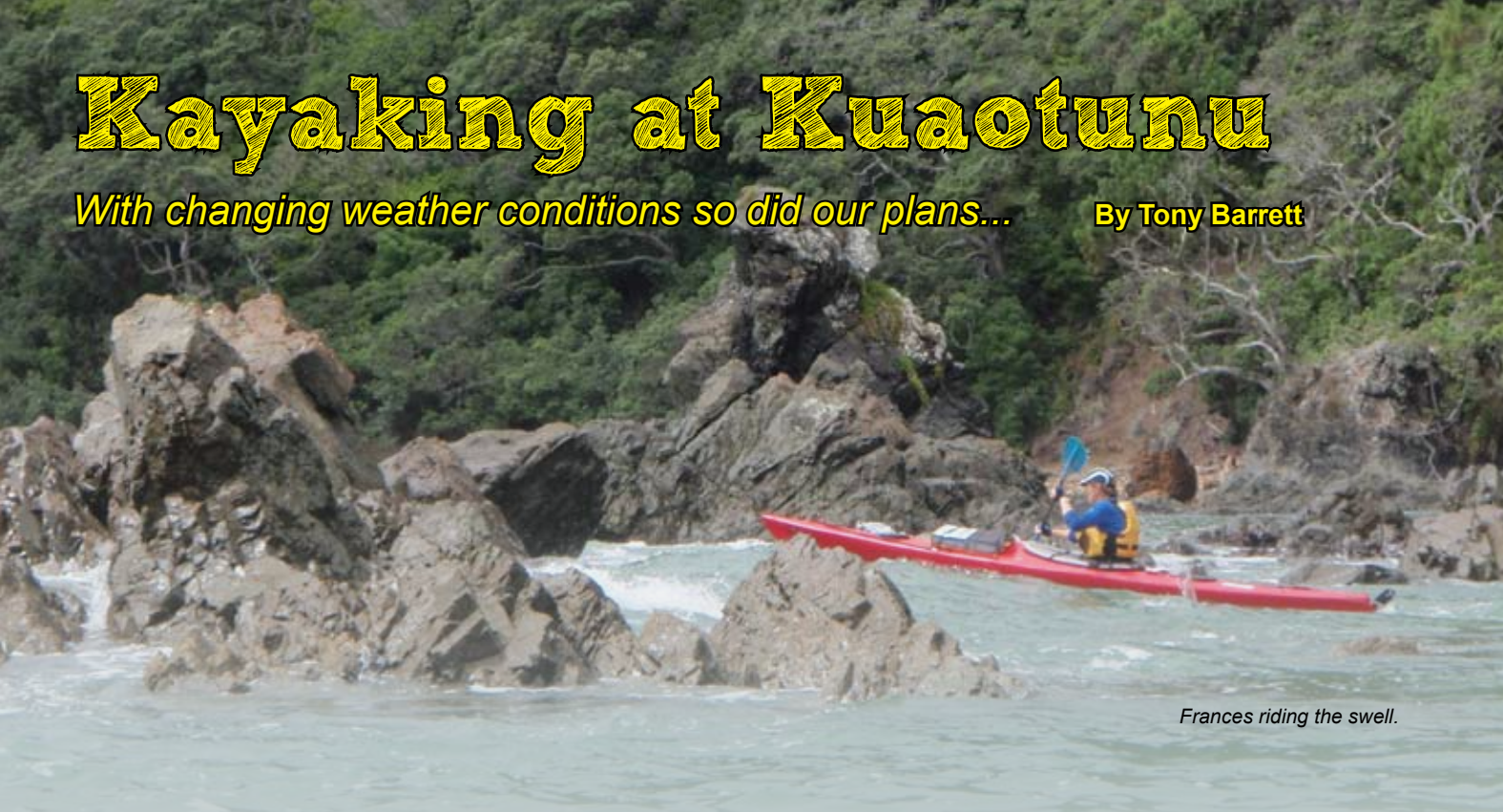


Kayaking at Kuaotunu

With changing weather conditions so did our plans...

By Tony Barrett



Frances riding the swell.

The rain beat down on the windscreen as the van, heavy with its trailer of kayaks, laboured over the hills of the Coromandel Peninsula. In the deepening gloom of the evening thunderstorm it truly took an act of faith to embark on a two day kayaking trip at Kuaotunu Beach. The weather forecast was for improving conditions but the immediate weather made us wonder what we were letting ourselves in for.

I was leading a sea kayaking trip of fourteen paddlers to a destination I had passed through some years ago during a multi-day expedition around the Peninsula. Last time I was there, I determined this was a place I wanted to come back to and spend more time at.



All hands on deck! Stan helps to carry a fully loaded boat.

Friday night grew wetter and windier as the group limped in and bedraggledly set up tents or found cabins. I lay in bed listening to the wind howl and felt sorry for the tenters. Just not quite sorry enough to wander around in the downpour and check! Sure enough, one camper found the borrowed tent wasn't up to the challenge.

The next morning was drizzly, windy and generally unpleasant so we had some time to read the paper, drink coffee, and walk. We hit the water mid afternoon.

There was small but steep surf breaking close onto the beach, conditions which to nervous first timers seemed to invite a watery capsize. We had a brief session talking through and demonstrating breaking out before everyone successfully gathered beyond the surf zone.

A rolling swell gave its own excitement:

Heather told us that she gets sea sick and if she starts barfing not to be too concerned. "I'll soon come right after a good chuck". Actually, I did take that quite seriously as the nausea from sea sickness is not only unpleasant, it affects one's sense of balance – important to preserve in a kayak. Watching the group barfing and capsizing was not my idea of a fun trip! To nip that in the bud, we found a small strip of sand amongst the rocky coastline and landed for a stretch and rest from the rolling sea.

I thoroughly enjoy coastal kayaking. Big surges send water smacking into the rocks, spray flies everywhere. The sound and swell brings the sea alive, a living thing, breathing and stirring beneath us.

Heading back along the beach the swell had increased. Waves were building a lot further out. I had already planned an alternative exit at a sheltered breakwater the locals use to launch their boats, so there was no real difficulty.



Shawn rock gardening in his Skua



After inspection, some of the group chose the breakwater, while others – with some nervousness – tried the beach landing. I surfed into the beach to receive the incoming paddlers. One by one they flew in, balancing on wave tops, correcting madly and finally sliding up the beach in a rush of foam. Laura, the first time ever on a wave in a kayak, low braced to perfection and ran a wave sideways to the beach like an old hand. All came in fine but with the odd spill when the last sudden deceleration on meeting sand took its toll!

The next day dawned clear and calm. I had second thoughts about the intended destination of Opito Bay. With a forecast for an increasing swell, no sheltered bolt-hole and the bay being open to the swell, we headed over the hill to Coromandel town.

Looking across Coromandel Harbour the view of its off-shore islands was breathtaking. This was going to be quite a different paddling experience from the rugged coastline and surf beaches of yesterday.

The water was mirror calm as we launched. Stan paddled the Greenland T kayak which was new to us, so I was keen to see how it would handle the different conditions. Its low profile was very obvious and it carved nicely through the water like a sleek black sea animal. In New Zealand we have been familiar with rudders, so the use of the skeg was intriguing. Experimentation proved that it was very effective when lowered just enough to stop the bow blowing downwind.

After their first taste of coastal kayaking the day before the new paddlers would now experience open water crossings and island hopping. We made a short stop at Rat Island, paddled 2 kms to a beach on Waimate Island



and in smooth water slipped onto the beach for lunch. Judy found a swing hanging from a tree and made the most of it, while others ate and soaked up the tranquil stillness. Patricia went for a swim, before realising that she was sharing the water with a stingray.

We had a short taste of tidal chop crossing to Motutapere Island, paddled on to Whanganui Island and the channel into Coromandel Harbour.

I loved leading this trip in conditions which varied from flat calm open water crossings to rugged, wave-battered coastlines; from the sea

being our own to sharing a narrow channel with heavy boat traffic; from challenging surf to mirror-still calm. Fast changing weather and sea conditions meant altering decisions about destinations with alternative 'plan B's part of the deal.

But what I loved most was the group of people, about half new paddlers, who thoroughly enjoyed themselves and want to do more. And isn't that what it's all about?

Doing lunch - An informal affair



Stan in the Tahe Greenland T



Judy took to the swing





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Greenland T - This kayak is a direct descendant of the traditional canoe inspired kayaks of Greenland. Speed, lightness and one very relaxed paddler. L: 545 cm - W: 53 cm - Carbon/aramide 22-24 kg - Retractable skeg

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