

# Kayaking the Amalfi Coast and more in Italy

*Back in July Wellington club members Frances Martin and Mike Booker, and their two children Tom and Maggie, included two kayaking trips in their Italian adventure.*

## **Ruggero was telling us that he didn't like large groups on his kayaking trips.**

We were about to boost to 11 a group of seven kayakers who were circumnavigating Elba Island, joining them for the last three days - I thought Ruggero was talking about the difficulty keeping track of everyone. But no, his concern was "difficulties on the beaches". We were about to find out that Italian beaches are not like ones back home.

Early on in our planning (thanks Google) for our family holiday in Italy, kayaking was on the agenda.

For our household - my wife Frances, and children Tom (14) and Maggie(12) - the call of the water is strong, even in a destination like Italy where the enticements of land-based activities are not easily ignored.

As it turned out, kayaking often allowed us to indulge ourselves on water and on land (thinking food and drink here).

Our "warm up" for Elba was a day-long paddle on the Amalfi Coast. Our day started with a drive from our Sorrento hotel, across the Sorrentine Peninsula, to the famous Amalfi cliffs and towns. There's a great selection of YouTube clips to help appreciate the astonishing views and the 'heart-in-mouth' road. Search "bus ride Amalfi Coast".

Our kayak trip started and finished at a surreal place called the Fjord at Furore, between the townships of Positano and Amalfi. The Fjord looks like someone had swung an axe into the cliffs, cleaving a narrow slit for the sea to enter.

Clinging to the Fjord's cliffs were restored fishermen

homes called "monizzeri" or "living in solitude". It was other worldly - like being in a Star Wars set. Truly the most amazing place I've ever pushed off a kayak.

The 24 km kayak, organised for us through the Amalfi-based Amalfi Kayaks, was unlike any paddle we'd ever experienced in New Zealand. Kayaking, but not as we know it.

Once we were out on the water, the first things you noticed were: the heat (it was 30 plus degrees), the gentle swell (this is the Mediterranean, not the Pacific), the clarity and warmth of the water and the lack of wind which occasionally nudged up to a gentle breeze.

Then you look up. The cliffs totally dominate your view with towns and



houses clinging to the near vertical slopes. Antonio Junior, our guide, said the houses sold for around 10 million Euro (NZ\$17 million) each.

The other distraction was the sun bathers, latched on to any available flat(ish) space.

Look the other way, out to sea, and you get further evidence this is a playground for the rich. Huge floating gin palaces were at anchor or sliding by on their way to their next champagne-fuelled rendezvous.

Back in our plastic fantastics (two singles and a double) we were having a taste of how money rules on Italian beaches – the best and biggest are controlled by beach concession owners who charge to use the beach, their loungers, umbrellas right down to lilos. A day at the beach can set you back more than 30 Euro (NZ\$50) per person.

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So, we were left going ashore on the small public beaches – not a difficulty at this stage because we were only dealing with our kayaks, not setting up camp. And as these public beaches had poor (as in dangerous), or no access by land, we were not dealing with huge crowds.

Tip – wear reef shoes. Most of the Italian beaches we landed on were rocky and once on the beach, the stones are hot enough to make bruschetta. (In our concern over our suitcase weights we'd left our reef

shoes behind.) Once out of our kayaks we'd end up making ever faster runs to any sign of shade.

The return paddle was tough. Our lack of time on the water since the New Zealand summer began to tell.

But the Fjord snuck up on us. I was looking at the next point thinking 'that's a long way away' but then we were back.

You can't see the Fjord until you are right on it which, in the past, apparently made it a favoured spot for bandits.

Around a week later we were in the port of Piombino, which incidentally provides ugly proof that Italy is not all perfect tourist fodder, waiting to catch a one-hour ferry ride to Portoferraio, the main city of the island (isola) of Elba.

Elba's mainly famous for being Napoleon Bonaparte's place of exile during 1814 and 1815, before he returned to the mainland for his Waterloo. After that, the authorities made sure he saw out his final days somewhere much less attractive.

The island has been in Italian hands since 1860 when it became part of the new unified Kingdom of Italy. It is now in the Arcipelago Toscano National Park which includes all seven main islands of the Tuscan Archipelago.

The park is the largest marine park in Europe - 56,766 hectares of sea and 17,887 hectares of land.

At Portoferraio we were back with Italy at its touristic best side. Ruggero from Elba's kayak company Il Viottolo (they also organise mountain biking and hiking) picked us up to take us westwards to Fono where we meet up with our kayaking companions for the next three days.



Back on the Amalfi Coast Antonio Junior had told us that Italians don't kayak, they'd rather lie on the beach.

Maybe it's a southern Italy thing, but our group now consisted of six Italians (including our guide Vittorio), one Hungarian and four Kiwis. Thankfully, given our non-existent Italian (except for ordering food and drink) four, including Vittorio, spoke good(ish) English.

We started off with a short evening paddle across a bay to our campsite. The first choice was nabbed by a French kayaking group, so we potted a short distance to another beach for the night.

The upper beach was covered in a thick layer of a seaweed, like a bed of soft fettuccine – why did I carry my Exped bed half way around the world?

Appropriately we had pasta for dinner that night. The Italian food was one of the highlights of our trip and that night's meal did not disappoint. During our three-week stay in Italy we did not have one bad meal, including when we were, though a combination of heat exhaustion and hunger, sometimes forced to eat at the most unpromising-looking pizzerias and ristoranti.

The next day (needless to say it was fine, windless and hot) we began our journey around the mountainous, western end of Elba with Elba's highest mountain Mount Capanne (1,018 metres) often in our view.

It was straight into the groove... a leisurely breakfast, break camp, into the kayaks, an early morning coffee stop at a village, a swim because it would already be around 30 deg, pick up some food for lunch which we'd eat at another beach along the way, then a mid-afternoon coffee and gelato stop and buying food for that night, another swim, before around 3 or 4pm calling it quits for the day.

It's 147 km around that island, so spread over seven days, there was no rush.

Like on the Amalfi Coast it was constantly hot, with little breeze and only a gentle swell. Much of the paddling was along a coastline not too different to parts of the coastline between Pukerua Bay and Plimmerton on Wellington's west coast – rugged cliffs dropped down straight to the sea or on to slim-line beaches. The big difference though was that the sea lapped against the land, not tried to smash it.

The conditions were not too difficult for Tom and Maggie who are

experienced paddlers. Maggie had to have a tow for an hour or so one particularly hot afternoon after a jelly fish sting had put her off her stride.

The highlight of day one was the campsite for the night – Sant'Andrea which was the most picturesque spot of our entire paddle. Because we arrived about 4 pm, our target campsite was still full of sun bathers making the most of the last couple of hours of sun light.

We managed to squeeze our kayaks onto the beach and then had to wait till the sun disappeared for the day, along with (eventually) everyone else on the beach.

We used this opportunity to walk over to Sant'Andrea which is little more than a few houses and a ristorante/bar attached to the beach concession. At the bar, Frances and I sampled a local brew, a most excellent Elba EPA (Elba Pale Ale). The kids of course had cokes and gelato.

By the time we headed back to the campsite, the beach was half empty. Eventually we were able to cram our tents in, leaving space at one end of the beach for early rising sun bakers looking to catch the first rays of the new day.

Here were the "difficulties on the beaches" Ruggero had mentioned – small beaches that had to be shared with crowds of people with their beach loungers and umbrellas. For us Kiwis this was a bit of a novelty, but it's easy to see territorial disputes erupting.

The next day the landscape began to change as we paddled around the western-most, and drier, end of Elba. Trees made way for scrub, but there were eye-catching cliffs with layered hues of red, green and grey rocks, like a giant marble cake well past its use-by date.

There were not a lot of caves, but we were able to pack all our kayaks into one, with Vittorio then taking those brave enough (that'd be Tom and Maggie) through a narrow water-filled passageway to see shrimps.

At Pomonte we donned our snorkel gear and swam a couple of 100 metres offshore for a look at the wreck of the *Elviscott*, a 25-metre boat sunk in 1972 as it tried to enter the harbour. It is now a popular dive spot with the most fish we saw in the whole trip.

In Pomonte we also visited the local butcher's shop (the best on Elba according to Vittorio) for meat for that night's barbeque. Later a few wines also had to be purchased for what would be everyone's last night on the beaches.





So, our adventure on Elba ended. It's hard to snappily wrap up what it was all about: there was so much to see and do – for sure, great hospitality, a bit of adventure, an escape from the real world, relaxation, something different and of course great fun. Ciao.

Our campsite that night was on a long beach which looked (from the sea anyway) very isolated. But as per usual we initially had to share it with sun bathers who eventually packed up and walked off into the sunset.

Our final day's paddle (really a half day) took us to Cavoli where we were met by our van to drive us back to Portoferraio for our ferry back to the mainland. The rest of the group continued their paddle to their final destination Marina di Campo



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