

South Island Circumnavigation

by Max Grant



Melanie going through a viscous "Bumper Dumper" off the Rangitata beach.

Photo by: John Bisset, Timaru Herald.

Described in the sea kayaking world as “The Everest of Sea Kayaking”, Melanie & I wondered if we had taken on too much as we battled against rough seas along the East Coast during our attempt to circumnavigate the South Island. Two other kayakers who were attempting the same feat this year, one from Japan and the other from Hong Kong, abandoned their attempts because of rough seas.

After completing the difficult Fiordland coastline in 2008, Melanie and I had made a decision to continue from our finishing point at Bluff and kayak the Catlins coast. So six months later we relaunched our kayaks at Bluff in an attempt to reach Dunedin.

Fully exposed to the southern oceans, this part of the South Island proved as rugged as any we'd seen on our trip so far. Sheer cliffs rise out of the sea with jagged outcrops of rock that only sea birds seem able to cling to. But favourable conditions enabled us to complete our trip around the Catlins and finish at the Otago Harbour. At Dunedin we pondered whether to finish our journey here or complete a circumnavigation of the entire South Island.

I was keen to continue in an anti-clockwise circumnavigation, and Melanie wanted to 'break the spell' and become the first Kiwi woman to complete the journey. So in November 2009, we left the Otago Harbour with high hopes of reaching our starting Point at Jackson Bay before the

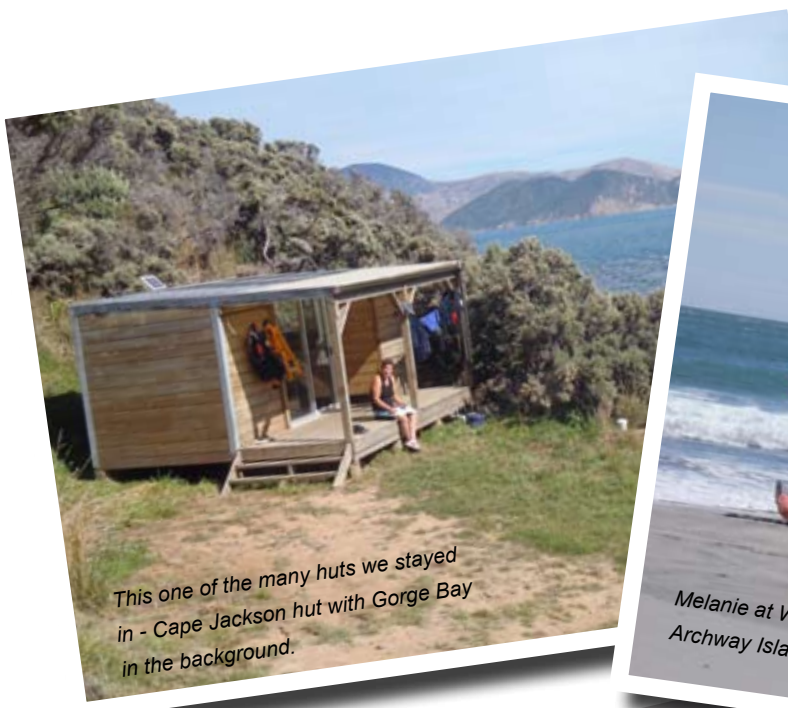
end of summer.

But rough seas and strong head winds (the prevailing North Easterlies) eventually forced us off the ocean at St Andrews, just south of Timaru. The South Island was gripped in an El Nino pattern that was continually pushing cold fronts up the South Island and conditions weren't forecast to change until mid February.

Monday 8th February: Started from St Andrews on a long and somewhat difficult paddle up the East Coast. While nasty dumping surf made some of our landings & take off's difficult, we made steady progress and only missed three days due to bad weather on our way to Queen Charlotte Sounds.

Upon reaching Picton we took a two week rest when bad weather prevented us from rounding the top section of the Marlborough Sounds. When conditions improved and the seas calmed down, we relaunched into Queen Charlotte Sound to complete the final leg of the journey back to our starting point at Jackson Bay. Favourable conditions down the West Coast allowed us to reach Jackson Bay on 19th May, 21 paddling days after leaving Picton. (This does not include a break we took at Okarito where we were hit by a "weather bomb" and couldn't kayak for three weeks)

"We did it"!!! And boy o boy, were we a couple of happy chappies! It had taken us 71 paddling days to complete nearly 3,000kms around the South island. Melanie is the first Kiwi woman to complete this arduous journey. It



This one of the many huts we stayed in - Cape Jackson hut with Gorge Bay in the background.



Melanie at Wharariki Beach with the Archway Island in the background.



Melanie at Milford Sound

recalls how she felt quite scared just north of Christchurch when a very large shark swam around the kayaks.

But for me it was very special to have achieved such a feat with my daughter. The challenge and successfully raising over \$5,000 for the Child Cancer cause helped to keep us going.

Our fund raising page is:
www.fundraiseonline.co.nz/maxmelaniegrant

differed from other successful attempts as we did it anti clockwise and in stages over two years. To be met at Jackson Bay by those people who gave us such a lot of support along the way was brilliant – thanks to my wife Margaret, Belinda Mulvany & Paul Caffyn (Even though I copped the traditional pavlova in the face!)

There were many highlights during our journey, especially our encounters with the wildlife. Melanie's favourite; "I enjoyed the company of the Hector dolphins that accompanied us. Near Hokitika about a dozen dolphins swam beside us for over an hour. They enjoyed surfing beside the front of our kayaks, riding our bow waves and darting beneath us."

For me the worst moments were battling against strong winds on the east coast near Timaru, while Melanie



Finishing our trip at Jackson Bay



*Melanie kayaking through a cave
with Nugget Point in the distance.*

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