



SOLO DOWN THE OUTSIDE PASSAGE

Never paddle alone! It's sound advice. There are many ways to get into trouble at sea, and the ocean is notoriously unforgiving. Strong rescue and towing skills allow a well-trained team of sea kayakers to carry an incapacitated team member to safety, but a solo kayaker necessarily foregoes this safety net.

By Jonathan Walpole





The decision to paddle alone should not be taken lightly, but then the decision is often not one of paddling alone vs. paddling in a group, but rather one of paddling alone or not paddling at all! This dilemma is commonly faced by expedition paddlers who find it all but impossible to select paddling partners with shared ambitions, compatible journeying styles and schedules that allow many weeks away from home and work. Deciding to go at all often means deciding to go alone. Maintaining adequate safety while traveling alone requires an extra level of caution to compensate for the lack of a safety net. In this respect solo kayaking is like solo climbing. Climbing solo doesn't make the climb any harder, and in some respects it gives you more freedom, but it certainly puts your mind in a completely different space.

I decided to go paddling rather than stay at home. My plan was to follow the

Outside Passage route down the west coast of Canada. This stretch of coastline offers almost unlimited scope for wilderness sea kayaking, and is a vast maze of islands and fjords reaching deep in to Canada's Coastal mountains, with steep heavily glaciated peaks up to 13,000 ft high. There is no road access along the entire route, a direct distance by water of over 600km. Attempting to reach a road by walking inland would require a journey of several hundred kilometres through impenetrable forest and mountains. So walking out in the event of trouble is simply not an option.

The remoteness of the route poses some logistical challenges. B.C. Ferries operates an Inside Passage ferry service that connects Port Hardy and Prince Rupert. This is a world famous tourist route, but luckily there are inexpensive one-way options for walk-on passengers with a kayak. By utilizing the Inside Passage ferry the transportation logistics for this month-long expedition become easy: just take the ferry north, get

off at Prince Rupert and paddle back south with no time table or deadlines save for those imposed by a limited supply of food.

My route is referred to as the Outside Passage in contrast to the more famous, but less exposed, Inside Passage. The Outside Passage is not a single well-defined route but rather a set of many possible routes down the island chain that defines mainland British Columbia's outer coast before finally reaching Port Hardy on Vancouver Island. Due to its exposure to the open ocean, long crossings, strong tidal currents and extreme remoteness the Outside Passage is not frequently traveled by kayakers, or anyone else for that matter. As such, it holds a special allure for those who enjoy truly wild places.

The ferry ride north started out as a delightful experience. With each passing hour I watched a full day of paddling pass by as the ferry sped north at 20 knots. The fun lasted for hours, but after a while the scale of it all began to feel a little daunting. Fifteen

hours into the journey and it had become down right intimidating. By this stage a mix of rain and sleet was being driven hard by a strong, gusty wind and visibility was poor. Everything seemed grey and uninviting, and with the snow level down to 500 ft it began to feel more like January than June. The full scale and seriousness of my mission gradually came into focus.

With a mixture of excitement and trepidation I began the paddle south from Prince Rupert. Nevertheless, it was good to be on the water at last experiencing the steady glide and reassuring stability of a heavily loaded sea kayak. Passing the last cargo ship at anchor off the southernmost terminal I noticed its title: "Eternal Confidence". How well those two words summed up what I needed at that moment, although I wasn't quite sure whether to take the message as a note of encouragement or forewarning.

Bad weather made the first few days of the journey a bit of an ordeal. Southeasterly

gales to Force 8 directly opposed my progress. They also brought with them a cold driving rain. This is the typical foul weather pattern that develops in Northwestern British Columbia with approaching offshore low pressure systems. These were clearly not suitable conditions for paddling solo down an exposed wilderness coastline. I'd promised myself to be extra cautious with the weather, but I also faced a bit of a dilemma. With just under a month of food I only really had a week or so buffer for sitting out bad weather. I was reluctant to use that entire buffer at the start of the trip because that would essentially force me to travel the entire journey with no buffer for further bad weather. So I decided to try to make some forward progress by paddling the sheltered channels on the east side of Porcher Island. Unfortunately, there were two flaws with this strategy. First, these channels are steep sided, big and actually not very sheltered at all. Second, progress is a relative concept involving not only distance traveled but

energy consumed. While it would clearly have been a worse idea to try to paddle on the outside, in retrospect the most energy efficient strategy would probably have been to just sit in camp and wait the weather out. But then sitting alone for days in a storm-battered tent at the start of a long daunting expedition isn't particularly restful on the psyche either, so I resolved to spend my time paddling, even if I might not get far.

My intended strategy was to keep track of possible camp sites as I passed them, and then if necessary turn around and paddle back to the last one when I ran out of time and needed to stop. This seemed like a sound idea sitting at home planning the trip, but in practice it turned out to be flawed: I experienced some days on which I had paddled for many hours into a ferocious head wind having barely seen a single landing opportunity never mind a possible camp site! Part of the problem was the steep rocky shoreline that consisted of granite straight down into the water. Above these



vertical walls of rock was impenetrable forest and on close inspection the bottom three feet of the trees were covered in barnacles, indicating a high tide line that extended well into the forest. With a tidal difference of around 25 feet the pickings were extremely slim even for a solo traveler with bivy equipment.

Getting a fully loaded sea kayak undamaged up a 25 foot seaweed-infested cliff at the end of a hard days paddle is no easy task for a solo paddler, especially one intent on remaining injury free. This daily ritual of dragging a heavy kayak up and down a jumble of sea weed and barnacle-covered rocks made me appreciate like never before the phenomenal durability of my trusty NDK Explorer. I was astonished that it could withstand this level of abuse day in, day out for weeks on end. Aside from the kayak, my other most heavily abused piece of equipment was my waist-worn tow system. Even while teaching rough water rescue classes back home I have never used my tow line as often as I did on this solo trip! I came to depend on it as my only way of maintaining contact with my kayak during the many difficult launches and landings. The consequences of losing either kayak or belongings at any point during the journey would have been unthinkable.

Eventually, a high pressure ridge built offshore establishing a fine weather pattern

that remained in place for the rest of the journey. In contrast to the wet and windy foul weather pattern, the fine weather pattern for the North British Columbia coast consisted of generally calm mornings with dense fog, followed at some random time during the day by Northwesterly gales. Sometimes the gales hit at noon, sometimes

as early as 9.30am and sometimes they just blew all night and there was no calm foggy morning at all. The switch from calm to windy was generally very abrupt, and the wind and fog could occur at the same time. This pattern made daily trip planning tricky, especially when the day's journey involved long open crossings, of which there were

many along this route. Fortunately, however this weather pattern always produced following winds for me, so getting caught mid-crossing made for a somewhat nerve-racking but fast completion of the crossing surfing wind waves.

I tried to be conservative with my trip planning, launching very early in the morning and trying to get the day's distance covered before the wind got up. This meant waking around 3.45am, being on the water at dawn, and sometimes being off the water and in camp by 8.30am having paddled 30-40km. It was not unusual to be off the water by noon having paddled 60-70 km. A particularly pleasant side effect of this regimen was that it resulted in many wonderful sunny and windy afternoons spent in camp sun bathing and drying off! Now I'm not known for getting up early. In fact I've been known to get up at the crack of noon. But when it comes to kayaking I've learned my lesson - getting an early start nearly always makes everything so much easier!

For a couple of days I was pinned down by gales at Wilby Point near Aristazabal Island. Its never pleasant being stuck, but if I was going to be stuck this was a great place for it. I spent my time basking in the sunshine surrounded by the ocean, long golden beaches and old growth forest with distant mountain views all around! I sat for hours on a rocky headland watching

Orca and Humpback whales feeding in the tidal streams flowing around the point. Frequently the whales would surface just a few feet from me. Then I'd walk the beaches following wolf tracks, or wander into groves of gigantic old-growth cedar trees. Or I'd relax in the sunshine and read a book while the bald eagles squealed and cackled in the

tree tops above.

One of the most remarkable things about the journey in general was the persistent feeling of isolation traveling through a largely unpopulated and untouched environment. To say that it wasn't crowded is a gross understatement. At one point I calculated that I had not seen another human being for





two weeks! This level of solitude was new to me. It was not an unnerving experience. On the contrary, it was a deeply calming one. I became acutely aware of and connected with my surroundings, especially the weather, sea, birds and animals. This experience opened my eyes to how much of the real world we miss in our fast-paced modern life styles. But it reassured me that the real world is very much still out there.

A brief break in the wind facilitated my escape from Wilby Point. Since the forecast for gales remained and with the memories of fierce winds and rough seas fresh in my mind, I decided to avoid the exposed West side of Price Island and instead search for Higgins Passage, a narrow hidden channel with drying tidal rapids that cuts north of Price Island into Milbanke Sound. Finding the entrance to Higgins Passage from the West is tricky. After retracing my path in and out of a few dead ends I finally found it and made it through with barely enough water to float my kayak. A few minutes later and I would have missed the tidal window and been stuck for almost an entire day! On leaving Higgins Passage I passed a huge tidal rapid at the mouth of an uncharted lagoon to the north. Yes, remarkably there are still numerous uncharted regions along this coast! There's something deeply gratifying about seeing that blank white patch on the chart with a dashed line around it. There's something even more gratifying about finding something exciting in one of those uncharted spaces! Even at a distance of 2 km the tidal rapids ebbing from Higgins Lagoon were making a thunderous

roar that carried clear across the bay. I should have paddled across to explore the scene and taken some photographs, but having been stranded for a couple of days I felt uneasy about the weather forecast and I really wanted to cover some distance while the tide was with me and the wind was calm. To this day I still regret the decision to move on though. As it was I made it out of Higgins Passage just in time to ride a strong ebb current for the next several hours and ended up covering over 70 km by early afternoon.

The final few days of my journey involved



four major crossings: Hakkai Passage to Calvert Island, Fitz Hugh Sound from Calvert Island to the mainland, Smith Sound before rounding Cape Caution and finally Queen Charlotte Strait to reach Vancouver Island. Two of these four crossings ended up being completed in dense fog. A two meter swell rolling diagonally across my course made for a disorienting experience in which intuition had to be held firmly at bay and faith in the compass and principles of dead reckoning kept absolute. On the final crossing of Queen Charlotte Strait the gale force winds kicked in earlier than I had expected and I spent



almost an hour surfing across to the Walker Group islands. There was a temptation to continue on to Port Hardy that same afternoon but the wind was howling and I decided for safety sake to spend my last night on a small island before completing the journey the following morning. Besides, I was just getting comfortable, and dare I even say confident, that I was going to make it back ok, and with food to spare, so I didn't want it to be over quite yet.

Of all the experiences of the previous weeks the wildlife encounters were perhaps the most vivid. They surpassed anything I have experienced previously. I saw countless bald eagles, one every few hundred meters for hundreds of kilometers. I had encounters with seals, sea lions, otters, and black bears. In many places I was gliding on crystal clear water that exposed a vast aquarium of sea life



with an endless variety of bat, blood and sun stars, anemones, sea cucumbers, sponges and urchins clustered on every ledge and wall and extending down in swirls of sea grass and kelp deep into the abyss. At times in open water I would encounter schools of tiny fish so dense that they made the sea boil all around me. For days I paddled in the company of humpback whales. At times I had to back away to avoid getting hit as they beat their flukes on the water in thunderous explosions of spray. I can't even begin to describe the exhilaration and awe one feels on seeing a 50 ton animal explode from the sea into a completely airborne summersault with an inverted pirouette culminating in an earth shattering tail-slap that echoes and reverberates through the fjords and mountains for miles around.

Finally, as I pulled into Port Hardy and dragged my kayak onto the beach a couple



came running over, eager to talk to me. They were on vacation from Toronto and this was the first time the woman had ever been to the coast. She was an adult, probably in her thirties, but gushed with a child-like excitement about this new environment. The reason they had run over was because she wanted to ask if I had "seen a star fish." She explained how she had always wanted to see a real live star fish, and wondered if there were any around here. I wanted to relate what I had seen, and all the wonders that were out there, but I didn't even know how to start. Somehow, though from the sheer joy and excitement in her voice I recognized that we shared a common bond.

These moments witnessed in the solitude of a true wilderness adventure will remain with me for the rest of my life.

BIOGRAPHY:

Jonathan Walpole is a BCU Level 4 Sea Coach and a Sea Kayaking UK sponsored paddler. He lives with his wife Kirti in Portland, Oregon, USA, where he works as a Professor of Computer Science.

RECOMMENDED READING:

John Kimantas, "The Wild Coast: Volume 2: A Kayaking, Hiking and Recreational Guide for the North and Central B.C. Coast," Whitecap Books (June 19, 2006). ISBN-10: 1552857867, ISBN-13: 978-1552857861

This is a superb guide book that unfortunately came out just "after" I completed my trip. John marks several camps that would have been extremely useful to know about on my journey!

