

Bass Strait Kayaking Trip Report 2009



It all began at about 3am during a 35hour stage on day 3 of an adventure race in Victoria in April last year when I mentioned to my teammate, Nick, that for a number of years I had wanted to kayak across Bass Strait. What better time is there when you are physically and mentally exhausted and are feeling jealous of your mates at home tucked up in their warm beds after a few beers to be considering ideas for future adventures? Having no sea kayak experience or really any idea of what may be involved I recall Nick muttering in a state of delirium "yeah buddy" probably just to shut me up at the time. A month or so later after the pains from that race were forgotten those words were recalled and we started to put plans in place for the most amazing and challenging kayaking trip either of us had ever experienced.....

During our initial investigations into the trip we were put in contact with Dave and Marj who also had aspirations of kayaking across Bass Strait. So, as a team of 4 we obtained nautical charts, weather patterns, equipment lists, Google Earth photos, trained and prepared for the journey ahead. The plan was to kayak from Tidal River in Victoria via the islands on the eastern side and land at Little Musselroe Bay in Tasmania. Total distance would be approximately 320km and approximately 10 days depending on weather conditions. End of December 2008 was chosen as the target date, mainly due to being the holiday period and fitting in with each others work commitments and movements. Around Christmas/New Year Bass Strait is renowned for unpredictable weather, storms and big seas. We were hoping for a good weather window and prepared to spend extra days camped on islands if need be waiting for weather to pass.

On 28th December we departed Tidal River (many thanks to my Dad and brother-in-law for driving with me from Sydney to Melbourne to drop us off at our departure point and drive the car back to Sydney) and paddled the 28km around to Waterloo Bay on Wilsons Promontory, the closest departure point prior to the first ocean crossing to Hogans Island. This day of paddling was in fact the hairiest time both Nick and myself had had so far in a sea kayak. About an hour into the paddle, and coming around the southern tip of Wilsons Promontory the winds really picked up, and, combined with the confused combination of swell, current and waves breaking off the rocks for 2 hours Nick and I were absolutely crapping ourselves and certainly didn't dare take our hands off the paddle. Arriving at Waterloo bay, where for the next 6 days we would have to camp waiting patiently for the weather to subside. There would certainly be worse places to be than camped at the 'Prom' and we filled in our days with a number of great walks in the area. A walk to the lighthouse on one of those days we saw that wind gusts were recorded up to 96km/hr whilst we were out there paddling, certainly pretty exciting stuff and makes you feel alive. On day 6, the day before a good weather window was to arrive, we were in the bay practicing a few capsize drills. As bad luck would have it during one drill the cockpit rim in front broke off. As the saying goes "if it cant be duct, it's f*&ked" thus ending any chance we had of even really beginning the journey to Tasmania. Breaking the rim means it's impossible to wear a sprayskirt to prevent water entering the boat. After duct taping Nick into the cockpit to minimize water entry we paddled back around to Tidal River and headed back home. We'd had a great week of camping but disappointment at not being able to achieve our goal. We were down, but not beaten.



Back home in Brisbane Nick and I still had a burning desire to complete the mission but Dave and Marj would not be able to join us. This meant we had to make a decision to attempt the trip again just the 2 of us in a double or abandon the trip and have that feeling of being beaten.

Both being determined, stubborn and hated the feeling of being beaten we decided to give it a second crack, just the 2 of us. One thing that we were both confident of was the ability within ourselves and each other to be able to lift in the face of adversity should the need to arise. There'd certainly never be any quitting on either behalf no matter how bad things became. We had also learn a lot from our small amount of paddling around Wilsons Promontory and were able to better prepare for the trip ahead in the second attempt. So, on Wednesday 18th March we took a 5am flight from Brisbane to Melbourne to begin our second journey. Below is day by day summary:

Day 0 - Wed, 18th March 2009

Flew to Melbourne and spent the day cutting out the old cockpit rim and inserting a new rim. Thanks to my brothers friend Anna who let us keep the kayak at her house in Melbourne and perform the work on the boat.



Broken cockpit rim from attempt 1

Day 1 - Thu, 19th March 2009

My brother Geoff took the day of work to drive us from Melbourne to Wilson Promontory (thanks Geoff). The park is closed due to the bushfires but we were told on the phone that



there would be a good chance we'd be allowed through the gate depending upon who was on duty. Arrived at the gate 0900 and not allowed through. Our backup option was to depart from Port Welshpool. We were also told we would not be allowed to camp on any of the beaches within Wilsons Promontory either. Stupid bureaucratic crap meant we would now have to depart from Port Welshpool, paddle against the tide, paddle further, and have a longer and hence more dangerous crossing to Hogans Island the next day. According to the National Parks people they said the

only place we could camp would be Snake Island and paddling an extra 10km of open ocean the next day to Hogans Island.

We drove round to Port Welshpool, loaded the kayak and departed @1215. Total weight of the fully loaded boat with 10 days food and ourselves totals approximately 270kg, a fair lump of a thing to have to paddle the next 330km. We paddled past Snake Island @1400 and, assessing conditions, distance we had to paddle the next day and the chances of being spotted by National Parks ranger and decided to continue down (paddling against a strong tide) around Wilsons Promontory and spend the night elsewhere. I wont mention where we spent the night in writing but it was pretty close to Rabbit Island. Rabbit Island was a great little Island and had a rookery of resident penguins, noisy little buggers throughout the night....

Distance paddled: 34km

Departed: 1215, Arrived: 1700, Paddling time: 4hrs 45min.

Day 2 - Fri, 20th March 2009

After spending 6days over Christmas/new years period looking towards Hogans Island somewhere in the distance this was the leg of the trip that was our biggest mental barrier. It was also the biggest open water ocean



crossing without and land that Nick or myself had done. We didn't know how we'd feel not being in sight of land, what the seas would bring to us or even if we'd get seasick. It was all new and all very exciting. Today was the day the trip begins proper....



Up @0345, had breaky packed up and departed at 0500. We planned on leaving early and paddling the first couple of hours in the dark because mentally it feels better to have the day come to us, to minimize the risk of not reaching an island before dark and to make the most of good weather conditions. The forecast



today was perfect, 10 - 15knots wind and only a 1.5m swell. It was to be the best paddling conditions of the trip. There's a small bit of video footage of us paddling in the dark and in these great conditions, but, unfortunately Nick is a banker during the week and must have forgotten to turn the power on when charging his camera battery before the trip. Yes, he'd bought a brand new waterproof camera especially for the trip but had brought along a flat battery.... So, any photo's and videos taken of the trip after today had to be on land or when close to the shelter of land.



Today we also practiced our 'peeing in the boat' skills. When the weather was calm enough we could occasionally quickly take the sprayskirt off to pee over the boat. The peeing into a bailing bucket technique was quickly superceded when we both realised we were well enough endowed to be able to just hang 'it' over the side (well, close anyway) and pee straight out. As the trip progressed we were able to master squirting the last bit over so minimal went inside the cockpit. As for when the weather wasn't so good to pee out of the boat (most of the time during the 7 days of paddling), well, it doesn't take much imagine to know where it went and who got to sit in it....

Arrived at Hogans Island, a great little island and place to spend the night around 14:00. Both rather stuffed and glad to be on land. Our biggest mental hurdle and a lot of questions of ourselves had been answered.

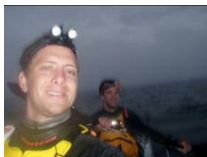
Distance paddled: 60km

Departed: 0500, Arrived: 1400, Paddling time: 9hrs.



Day 3 - Sat, 21st March 2009

Woke up @0230 to a little animal tugging at the feet of my sleeping bag. I immediately blamed Nick who acted too dumb to be capable of anything so I quickly had a look outside to see a little rat like creature hopping away. Looking around inside the tent the cheeky little bugger had left a solid number 2 next to my bag and also a runny white poo next to my head. I still have no idea how it got in or out....



We were looking forward to the shorter 48km paddle today to Deal Island. Alarm was set to 0345 again for an early start. But, on looking outside visibility was down to around 10m. So, back to sleep till 0500 and departed @0615 setting off paddling in only 10 - 20m visibility, in the dark and the fog.

Seas were a little rougher today, and in a way it was good not being able to see it too well for the first 1.5hours in the dark and the fog. Getting away from our camp there was a couple of smaller islands to negotiate within 1km. We set our bearing and expected to see them but visibility was too bad to see. At least our heading was good and we didn't run the boat into them.

Both of us were rather sore and drained from the previous 2 days and some nasty chafing was developing under the arms. We were in great spirits, singing away and I recall that it was this morning that our morning ritual of singing "the Morning Has Broken" as the sun rises each morning. Unfortunately all we knew was the first 2 lines so as you can imagine it did get a little repetitive.



Gees we would sing some stupid stuff and talk some crap at times on the water together. Seeing lots of open water for many hours each day we needed to entertain ourselves to take the mind off the pains. I recall at one stage Nick was quiet for 5 minutes or so, then decides to say "hey, did you realise that on a day like today we'd probably each do about 40000 paddle strokes?". Hmmm, thanks Nick, but probably not a good thing to be bringing to my attention.



Arrived at a great little place called Winter Cove on Deal island @1400 to spend the night. The wallabies here are courageous little fellows. Obviously need a few indigenous fellas to pass on by to spear a few. They'd hang around our camp and not even flinch as we threw small sticks and rocks at them to scare them away.

Camped on the island for the past few days was an experienced sea kayaker, Mike, paddling his neat looking home made kayak. He was just spending a few weeks paddling around the place. Would take some courage (and confidence) we thought paddling these parts on your own. After



chatting to him and hearing some great stories (such as a mate getting attacked by a crocodile during their 800km paddle in far north QLD many years ago) I found he was amongst the kayakers that went to Antarctica on the same yacht I went down on. A group of 8 of us sailed to Antarctica on a 60 footer yacht from South America in 2006 for a 23 day SCUBA diving expedition. Immediately following my trip a bunch of seakayakers,

including Andrew Macauley, sailed the same yacht for a paddling expedition down there. We swapped some funny stories, though unfortunately for the wrong reasons, of the antics of the skippers of that yacht. Those skippers and their unprofessional antics and issues is becoming well known amongst the sailing world as the "Cath and Darryl" show.....

Distance paddled: 60km

Departed: 0500, Arrived: 1400, Paddling time: 9hrs.

Day 4 - Sun, 22nd March 2009

Deal island and its surrounds would be a great place to spend a day to rest and explore but we didn't want to waste any opportunities of reasonable weather to be able to continue paddling. Weather can change quickly in these parts and it's wouldn't be inconceivable to be stuck somewhere for a week if it did.



Up @0430 and entered the water @0540. During the night the swell had changed direction and picked up and was now coming almost directly into the beach we had landed on. In the dark it was difficult to tell how big the breaking waves were but we thought we could make out 4 sets of maybe 3 to 4 foot breaking waves. We lined our boat up on the beach, Nick got in and sealed his sprayskirt on whilst I held it followed my me quickly hopping in and skirting up. Wasting no time we took a couple of deep breaths and paddled with all our power into the waves counting them as we crashed through. Through the first one, not too bad and pushes us back a little, paddle paddle paddle into the next one and crash goes a wave onto Nick in the front. "Paddle paddle paddle" I keep yelling at him as he spits some water out. It's important to keep the momentum up getting through the breakers and keeping the boat pointing straight. Third wave is coming and crash, into Nick it goes again... "ahhaha" I am laughing (a

nervous laughter of sorts but it's great fun and the bloke in front cops the brunt of the waves), Nick didn't seem to think it was so funny. "Keep the boat straight" Nick yells as a bigger, 4th waves rolls up under the bow and it begins to point to the sky. Down crashes the front of the boat as the wave passes and on comes other wave, bigger and better than any of the others. It was at this point I think Nick may have left something smelly in his seat, I'm just glad he had his wetsuit on to contain it. This wave brought the nose of the boat up and up and up till we felt as though we were vertical before crashing down, probably at an angle of 30degrees side-on to the wave.



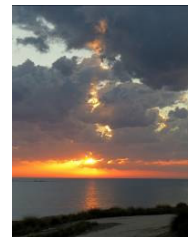
I've never seen Nick paddle so hard before but he was wanting to get out of here. If we got rolled it would be an ugly mess, in the dark with the rocks not too far away. After a few more messy but smaller waves, a lost water bottles, lost sunnies and broken headlamp we were through the breakers and for the next few days I didn't stop hearing Nick talk about that being the most exhilarating time of his life. He was paddling the next 3 hours on pure adrenaline. Maybe it was good we couldn't see the

size of the waves that day, it felt as though they were 6 - 8feet. The next couple of hours of paddling the seas were around 2m and a little messy. As daylight rose the seas calmed down a little but the swell picked up to 3-4m.

Our planned destination for day was a small fishing township called Killiecrankie on Flinders Island. This would be the first possible landing place on the island. As we approached Killiecrankie and after reports of the locals not being too friendly we decided that after having paddled 60km we were feeling good enough to be able to continue around further and find a nicer place to camp opposite Roydon Island. As I said before, conditions around this area can change very very quickly and unexpectedly. In this last final 2hours we copped a very very strong north-westerly wind, probably around 30knots on our side and nose. We really had to dig in deep here to keep the boat upright and moving forward at the end of a long day.



After 11hours on the water and 70km of paddling we arrived absolutely knackered at another great little beach and setup camp. We were now on Flinders Island with the bulk of the open water crossings behind us. Both of us were looking forward to a sleep in and more relaxing paddle along the coast of Flinders island the next day.



Distance paddled: 70km

Departed: 0540, Arrived: 1645, Paddling time: 11rs 5mins.

Day 5 - Mon, 23rd March 2009

During the night whilst sound asleep I felt a firm squeeze on my bum cheek. There was only one other person in the tent so I promptly stuck my head up and made sure Nick wasn't making any unwelcome advances. I asked him if he knew what he'd done and I just said to him "I hope you're dreaming about your girlfriend". Being the charmer he is, he told me my butt "would cut the mustard". Well, thanks for the complement but this made me eager to get this trip over and done with so Nick could get home where he belongs....

After a well earned sleep-in we were up @0700 and departed 0820. Today was very cruisy with the shelter of Flinder Island and a nice 5 - 10knot north westerly breeze helping to push us along. It was also the first time on the trip we were able to break our day up and land ashore for a couple of breaks, stretch the legs and pee on land. We stopped at Settlement point for lunch before continuing on to the township of Whitemark for another break and walk around the township. Here I was able to replace my sunnies with some pretty funky



bug-eye ones and fill up our bellies with some chips and ice-cream. A very nice change! From Whitemark it was onto Trouser point to spend the night under a magnificent backdrop of the Strzlecki mountains. Weather reports were that weather should hold for the next 2 days before a low passes through. We were very keen to keep pushing on and try get to Tassie before the change.

Distance paddled: 45km

Departed: 0820, Arrived: 1615, Paddling time: 8hrs (including time on land)



Day 6 - Tues, 24th March 2009



Today we had a chance of being able to complete the trip all the way to Tasmanian mainland if we felt strong enough and the weather held. Up @0530 and on the water at first light @0640. First stop was 28km crossing to Thunder & Lightning at Cape Baron Island. Reports we had were that there was fresh water here somewhere. After spending 30 minutes or so looking without luck and not wanting to waste time in case we could finish the journey today we decided to push on without resupply of freshwater.

The weather had begun to turn and both of us were shivering when we were stopped. Between us we had about 5L, enough for today but we'd be well short if we had to camp the night. If things didn't go our way we decided that we still had plenty of gas for the stove and would be able to distill sea water with our pots to get us by. So, after a quick bite to eat off we pushed and onto Clarke Island.



With 15 - 20knot headwinds and 1 - 1.5m seas the paddle across to Clarke Island for the next few hours became hard work. It seems that in these conditions our paddling combination works really well. Both just dig in deep and put all pains, discomforts and fears aside and focus on getting where we've got to go. Conditions got particularly messy coming around the south-west side of Clarke Island before entering the shelter of the beach at Rebecca Bay @13:10.

Camped on the island here were a group of 5 paddlers that we had heard were doing this trip also. They had left 6 days before us and were now camped at Rebecca Bay before the final crossing across the notorious Banks Strait. Banks Strait is notorious for very strong cross currents and standing waves. It's a crossing of only 27km but certainly not to be underestimated and many tales of disasters have occurred in this region. Ideally we want to begin to cross this strait 2 hours before slack tide. Slack tide was due at about 1430 so a quick decision was required. Nick and I were quite cold, and after considering we had paddled solid now for 6 consecutive days and the winds and seas were really beginning to pick up we decided to camp the night with the limited water we had at Rebecca Bay.



Hopefully conditions would improve for the slack tide in the morning at 0900. If not, we'd likely have to spend a few days camped waiting for the weather to pass.



Personally I wasn't too concerned at spending the afternoon here. At the start of the trip when Nick saw me packing my fishing line he bet a carton of beer that I wouldn't catch a fish. Well, I must admit I am a pretty naturally gifted fisherman with a way of talking to the fish. So, bets were on. Intention of the line were to supplement our diet in the likely chance we were stranded on an island somewhere waiting for weather to subside. Apart from a brief period of trolling a lure down the coast of Flinders Island

(where the conditions were too weedy and Nick was doing his best to prevent me catching a fish) I really as yet hadn't had an opportunity to fish. So, with line in my hand of I went. Unfortunately conditions weren't right for most of the fish and they weren't eating but I did manage to land a small crab. In my 'fish' books they show crabs, therefore I believe catching a crab constitutes as a fish and as such I was the worthy winner of a carton of beer. But, Nick, being a banker and pretty good at collecting debts and interpreting fine print in his favour deemed himself the winner. At least I will look forward to drinking the carton with him in Brisbane.....



The evening passed swapping stories of the adventure so far with the 5 other paddlers we were now camped with. A great bunch of guys and I think all of us appreciated the new conversation and people to talk too.

Distance paddled: 48km

Departed: 0640, Arrived: 1310, Paddling time: 6hrs 30mins (including time on land)

Day 7 - Wed, 25th March 2009



Awoke this morning stiff, tired shoulders, sore hands and bad chafing under the arms but it didn't seem to matter. All we had in front of us was 27km to paddle and another dream was to be achieved. So after the usual muesli with water, bread, extra tape onto a few more blisters, more tape onto my right wrist (missing a finger affects technique in the right wrist and seems to tendonitis on long paddles), a couple of photos and we were on the water again. We departed with the 5 other guys at first

light. We paddled together for half an hour or so and then Nick pointed out that with 5 of them they'd probably have a rather big entourage of people to greet them in Tassie. We'd have no-one until the driver we had hired to collect us arrives. From a distance the entourage would see us paddling and think it's their own people, as such, we could maybe steal a few cheers (yes, it's the small things that can bring you pleasure after paddling so long). So, off we steamed averaging at times the fastest we had the whole trip. Halfway across and the conditions deteriorated, but, we were in sight of land and keep those arms pumping. After a few hours, around 1000 we arrived at Little Musselroe Bay in Tasmania. Like predicted there were a few excited waves from some people on shore (which we gratefully accepted) until they realised it wasn't the paddlers they were waiting for. Nonetheless they were a great bunch and we were please to see people there. The



other 5 arrived about 45minutes behind us and there were the obvious smiles and handshakes all round.

Distance paddled: 27km

Departed: 0700, Arrived: 1000, Paddling time: 3hrs.

The days following

We were picked up from the finish by a hire driver, Mike. Phone conversations with courier companies told us that shipping a 7.3m kayak back to Brisbane wouldn't be a problem. However, once we arrived with the boat at Australia Air Express they told us "sorry, our maximum is 6m" and we very unhelpful with the situation. Lucky Mike was able to store the boat in his garage along with his limos and arrange for shipping a couple of weeks later.

Reflecting on the trip Nick was sure he didn't want to do another sea kayaking adventure but, a week or so later the discussions have passed by about possibly crossing by the western route via King Island, or, maybe even the silly idea of a direct crossing in a double down the track. Who knows what lays ahead.....

Photos and a couple of short videos can be found at:

<http://picasaweb.google.com.au/darrenjamesmith>



Overall Trip and Route Summary

Total distance: 332km

Total paddling time: 46hour

Unfortunately the GPS logger used on the trip only stores data for approximately 20hours so a full log of the trip is not recorded. The map below illustrates the route taken.

