

Expedition Planning

I CAN STILL REMEMBER THE WONDERFUL FEELING OF FREEDOM THAT I FELT ON MY FIRST OVERNIGHT SEAKAYAK TRIP. IT WAS A 12MILE PADDLE FROM JERSEY TO SARK AS PART OF THE JERSEY SEAKAYAKING SYMPOSIUM. AND I WAS TERRIFIED THAT I'D SLOW EVERYONE DOWN, DESPITE MY FEARS, I WAS FINE. AND I LOVED EVERYTHING ABOUT IT. THE SENSE OF SATISFACTION OF GETTING TO SARK UNDER MY OWN STEAM, THE FILMERS THAT FLEW AT YOU UNTIL YOU WERE CONVINCED THEY WOULD HIT YOU, THE FISH THAT ANITA CAUGHT, AND BIVVYING ON SARK'S HARBOUR WALL. ALL MADE A DEEP IMPRESSION ON ME THAT SET THE COURSE OF MY LIFE AFTERWARDS. EVERY EXPEDITION I HAVE BEEN ON SINCE – INCLUDING PADDLING AROUND TASMANIA IN 2004 – IS AN EXTENSION OF THAT FIRST EXPERIENCE OF LIVING FROM MY KAYAK. PACKING MY BOAT FOR ONE NIGHT HAS EXTENDED INTO PACKING MY KAYAK FOR OVER A MONTH. FROM FOLLOWING A BEARING SOMEONE ELSE GAVE ME, I'VE LEARNED HOW TO DO THE NAVIGATION MYSELF. IF THE WEATHER TURNS MASTY, I NO LONGER PANIC BECAUSE I ALREADY HAVE A PLAN B. I CERTAINLY DON'T KNOW IT ALL, BUT I AM AWARE OF MY STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS...

WORDS AND PICTURES: MARK RAINSFLEY



PERSONAL SKILLS / TRAINING

In my opinion, personal skills are an essential part of expedition planning. Before you launch off into the unknown you need to know you can live from your kayak. That doesn't mean that everyone in a group has to know everything, but as a team you should make sure you can navigate, have some understanding of the weather, have first aid equipment and knowledge, have emergency procedures in place and know how to rescue each other and yourself. If you feel confident in rough water and tides, you can go to more exposed coastlines. If you know that you can pack everything you need for a month's journey, you can go to more isolated areas. The fantastic thing about sea kayaking is that you can choose a destination to match your skill level and your idea of fun. You don't have to be an expert paddler to enjoy the expedition lifestyle, as long as you choose a sheltered area or go with more experienced friends.

I found doing my BCU five star training really useful in teaching me all aspects of expedition planning and leadership. I actually did two training courses before I did my assessment because there was such a lot to take in. I also persuaded more experienced friends to let me tag along on trips and I made sure I soaked up as much information as I could from them. When I felt ready I hassled them to let me plan the day and make decisions. In this way, I slowly built up my knowledge, always pushing myself, but doing it one step at a time so I didn't launch myself into a potentially dangerous situation before I thought I could handle it.

That way you'll build up the most essential expedition skill – good judgement. It's best to avoid a life-threatening situation rather than be big and strong enough to deal with it. If you know your own limitations and make sensible decisions then you can complete any journey (given enough time). Sometimes the best decision is to stay on the beach.

WHERE TO GO

Deciding where to go will depend on your budget, timeframe, level of skill and experience and basically what you fancy. The hardest thing is taking that first step and deciding to go for it! Get the atlas out or go to google earth and start planning.

THE INTERNET

The internet has made planning trips so much easier. Go to google and type the destination of your choice and a keyword like 'kayak', 'circumnavigation', 'tides' or 'weather' and you'll instantly have endless useful information about where you want to go. Try to find a local paddler or someone who has been there before. They can give you invaluable local knowledge and advice, and will probably tell you about things you hadn't considered. When I first started looking for information about Tasmania, I came across Matt Watson's website. Matt lives in Tassie and has circumnavigated it twice solo. I emailed him and he was incredibly helpful. He ended up picking us up from the airport, taking us to the start and meeting us five times during the trip. He even text us weather forecasts everyday.

LOGISTICS - TRANSPORT

Once you've pinpointed where you'd like to go, you need to think about transport for yourself and your kayaks. Getting the kayaks there is usually the hard – or at least the expensive – bit. For this reason, many people opt to do trips in destinations they can drive to or get a ferry to. Others hire kayaks at their destination. If you want to fly somewhere for your expedition, it's worth checking the airlines policy beforehand, although I find what you get charged depends very much on who is on the check-in desk at the time. I took a three-piece kayak to Iceland by plane and British Airways charged me a total of £30 because they classed it as a surfboard. I took three three-piece kayaks to Kamchatka by myself because I was meeting Hadas and our Russian guide out there. I spent hours emailing and phoning Aeroflot beforehand to try to arrange a special price. In the end they wouldn't give me any concessions but they did write me a letter saying they would allow me to take nine very large pieces of luggage. I packed one bow piece of kayak lighter than the rest and managed to persuade most check-in staff that all the 'poorly' pieces of kayak weighed the same. Even so, I was charged excess on the flight from London to Moscow and again on the flight from Moscow to Kamchatka. On the way back, I persuaded other passengers to check in one piece of kayak each to reduce the bill from £700 to £100.

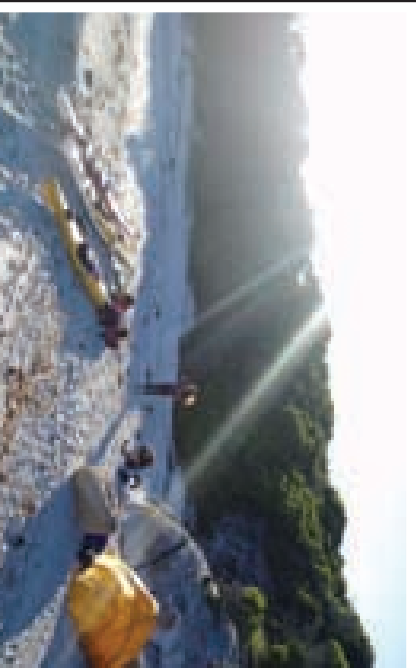
Some airlines will take whole kayaks. Paul Catlyn has managed to fly his single-piece kayak from New Zealand as far away as Greenland, and Tys Morris and Bob Timms persuaded EasyJet to fly their kayaks from Greece to the UK for £10 each! It just goes to show that it's always worth asking! Folding kayaks are another great solution and will go on any plane.

Another option is shipping your kayak. Jeff Allen and Hadas Feldman freighted their kayaks to Japan when they paddled around the four main islands in 2004. This is usually quite expensive unless you can get a discount, as they did, and you usually need to organise this at least two months in advance.

FOOD, FUEL AND WATER

If you are flying, you can't take fuel with you so you'll have to find out what fuel is available in your destination country and make sure you take a stove that can use it. In Kamchatka, petrol was the only fuel we knew we'd be able to get so we took MSRs. We took empty fuel bottles with us and bought the petrol at the local garage. We also took a spare stove as we would be nowhere near a road, never mind a garage, for three weeks. In fact, the petrol was so bad that it constantly clogged up our stoves so we ended up cooking on fires most of the time. I've always used 'proper' fuel like Coleman's ever since.

You need to decide whether to buy your food at home and get your favourite things at a known price, or buy everything when you get there. I took most of my food to Iceland with me because I knew things were expensive there. This turned out to be a good money-saving choice as it was all packed in my kayak which only cost me £30 excess. The pilot bread didn't travel too well, but everything else was fine! In Kamchatka, we



weren't sure what we'd be able to buy so Hadas brought over a lot of food from Israel. This turned out to be a mistake because she was charged over £100 excess baggage and in fact we could have bought most things we needed in the capital, Petropavovsk. In Tasmania, we took very little food on the plane and bought it all from a big supermarket before we started the trip. We're supplied at supermarkets along the journey. Also consider dropping off food at pre-arranged places on a trip, so your next supply is waiting for you. When Paul Catlyn kayaked the length of Alaska he knew he wouldn't be able to buy the food he needed so he posted himself food parcels to post offices along the way.

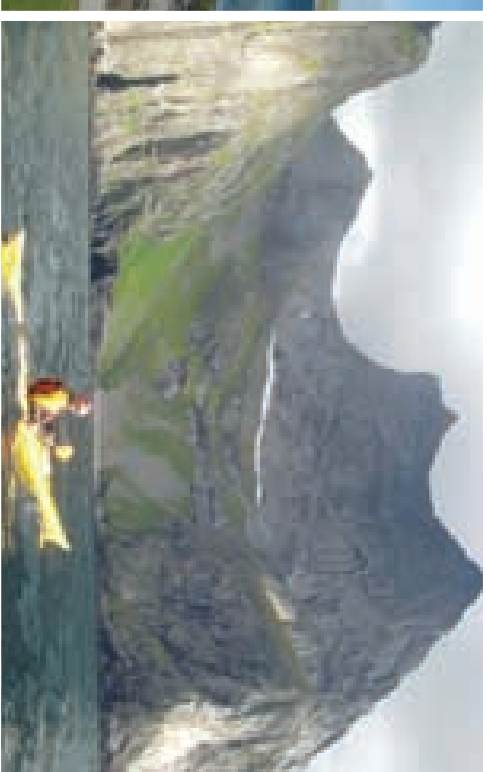
If you are carrying all your food for several weeks then it's obviously not a good idea to take too many bulky things that are low in energy. However, I try really hard to avoid limiting myself to dehydrated food every day. Take fresh vegetables and things you like to eat. If you're really stuck for space then at least take fresh garlic and some herbs and spices to liven things up. In Kamchatka, we mostly had instant pasta and rice meals, but Alexey caught lots of salmon, which was fantastic. I always have plenty of snacks like muesli bars, chocolate raisins and peanuts in my buoyancy aid so I don't run out of energy. When I was paddling solo in Iceland I got caught out in bad weather and I had to paddle for seven hours without landing. It was too rough to get my lunch out of my day hatch so I had to survive on what I had in my buoyancy aid. In the end I was down to a few boiled sweets and I was starving. Fortunately I could make one sweet last 10 minutes, then I'd wait 10 minutes before having another one. That way, three sweets got me through an hour and if nothing else, the drip feed of sugar was a massive psychological boost.

It's essential to find out whether you'll be able to find a safe drinking water supply. How much water you need to carry will depend on how hot it is and how often you can top up. Check to see if you'll need a pump or tablets to treat the water, or whether you need to boil it (which will need more fuel). If I'm short on drinking water, I sometimes mix it with seawater to cook my meals.

MAPS, CHARTS AND TIDAL INFORMATION

Maps can be expensive and bulky so think about what you want to take. Extra detail will help you navigate and choose where to land, but there is only so much room in your kayak. Consider posting some maps ahead of you so you can pick them up at a later point on your journey. In some areas, marine charts give you vital information about tides and depths, but some people choose to write the relevant tidal information on to an Ordnance Survey map (or equivalent) and not take a chart. The Ordnance Survey maps certainly have a lot more useful information about where to land than a chart (and they show important things like toilets and pubs). In Tasmania, to save space and money we had one set of detailed maps and two sets of 1:500,000 maps. We'd take it in turns to have the detailed map. We only had charts of the two most tidal sections.

You can get maps and charts for your GPS which show you exactly where you are and your speed and



direction of travel. Be wary of relying totally on these as batteries can run out and we all know that electronics don't like salt water!

There is varying amounts of tidal information for different destinations. Find out as much as you can about local conditions from tide tables, and tidal stream atlases if they exist. There may be a marine pilot for the area with lots of specific information about tide races and places to land.

SPONSORSHIP

To increase your chances of being sponsored for an expedition, think about what you can offer a sponsor before you approach them. Sponsors rightly expect their money's worth out of you, which usually means providing them with publicity in the form of photos,

magazine articles or substantial website coverage. You could also try local non-kayaking companies. If you are likely to get in the local paper, be inventive and get a photo of yourself with a local product in an exotic location.

Trying to raise sponsorship can take a lot of time and energy, so you have to decide whether it's better just to get on with it, pay for everything yourself and answer to no-one!

Getting cash for a trip is much harder than kit. There are grants available – for example the Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship, the Shipton and Tillman Grant, the National Geographic Expeditions Council and the Welsh Sports Council Overseas Expedition Fund. Again, search on the internet.

MOTIVATION

An expedition can be a six-month journey or an overnight camping trip to a small island one km offshore. The planning, the sense of adventure, the self-sufficiency and the excitement of sleeping under the stars are the same. Choose a trip which stretches you a bit and take it from there. Each great journey starts with one small paddle stroke; you just have to be brave enough to push off the sand.