

# EXPEDITION

## food

ALASKA, 2001.

THE HUCKLEBERRIES AND BLUEBERRIES STARTED TO LOSE THEIR RIGIDITY, RICH RED JUICE OOOZED INTO THE PAN AND THE BERRIES SLUMPED DOWN IN A RUNNY CRIMSON MUSH. THE SWEET FRUITY AROMA MIXED DELICIOUSLY WITH THE TART SCENT OF THE THICK PANCAKE THAT DUNCAN WAS FRYING IN BUTTER ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CAMPFIRE. THE TREES SWAYED IN A GENTLE BREEZE ABOVE OUR HEADS AS TWO LINES OF KNEE-HIGH SURF CRASHED PLAYFULLY ON THE COBBLE BEACH IN FRONT OF US. THE ANTICIPATION WAS PLEASURE IN ITSELF AS THE SMELLS SWIRLED AROUND IN MY NOSE AND MOUTH, TEASING MY TASTE BUDS. ONLY ANOTHER FIVE MINUTES TO WAIT... BY JUSTINE CURGENVEN

As anyone who has been on an overnight sea kayaking trip knows, food is not only necessary fuel for hardworking paddlers but eating it can be one of the most pleasurable parts of the day. When you're craving calories, carrying enough energy can be a challenge and many people disregard taste and health in their quest for a quick and lightweight meal. I think of this as false economy as when we're working hard every day, it's even more important to feed the engine well and keep everything in good, working order.

I'm a firm believer that food doesn't have to be dehydrated and monotonous and I hope to persuade you that with a little extra effort you can have healthy and tasty food for a month long expedition.

I've been on extended sea kayaking trips with many different people and have tried different approaches to eating. My first big trip was paddling around Wales with Fiona Whitehead (via the canal and river system as well as the sea). We didn't have to plan very far ahead because we passed shops and pubs most days. We were on a mission and paddled almost every daylight minute, so food prepared by other people was always preferable to spending any remaining time or energy cooking. When kayaking through Wolverhampton, the vinegary smell of fish and chips wafting over the canal was too much to resist; we tied our kayaks up on the canal path and I literally followed my nose to a chippie and returned with lunch. When we cooked, we made basic meals of pasta, rice or mashed potato. It was a learning curve for both of us and one evening on Aberaeron beach I was half way through boiling the water for instant mashed potato when I was offered a lift to the local Spar to re-supply. I left Fiona in charge. Fiona assumed, wrongly, that I'd measured out the correct amount of water. She poured in the potato flakes and made what can kindly be described as a potato soup! A tin of macaroni cheese thrown into the same pot made an

interesting concoction. Fortunately almost anything tastes good when you've paddled over 40 miles.

In Iceland the following year, my MSR wispalite was sputtering and spitting under the tent fly and the water was taking ages to boil. After seven hours of paddling, I was starving and impatient and I ripped open my instant pasta meal and poured the inch-long flakes of Carbonara (and the worryingly green powder) into the still water. The packet claimed it was chicken and broccoli in a creamy sauce, and that it would serve two. I doubted both, but it would fill the hole quickly and efficiently. As an extra treat I opened a tin of tuna and scraped the entire contents, including the rich oil, into the pan. While I waited I stuffed a procession of shortbread biscuits in my mouth, barely chewing them before gulping them down.

I was on a two-week solo trip around Iceland's West Fjords and I took all my supplies with me because I knew food was expensive in Iceland and that I wouldn't be near many shops. The solo paddling experience was challenging enough without having to pfa around with complicated meals so I kept things as simple as possible. Breakfast was porridge with honey, sugar and raisins; lunch was cheese and cucumber with crackers and an always-welcome flask of hot soup. Small chocolate bars and sweets bulged from every pocket in my buoyancy aid. A two-week menu of no-frills food fitted into just one 20-litre drybag!

One day it was too rough to land for lunch and I didn't dare open my day hatch to get out my crackers and cheese. I'd eaten all my accessible chocolate and was down to a few boiled sweets. As a psychological boost as much as anything else, I saw how long I could make a sweet last. If I sucked it really slowly and resisted the temptation to crunch then I could eek it out for 10 minutes. I'd then have

a 10-minute break before allowing myself another one. In that way I could make three sweets sustain me for an hour. I now always take sweets with me on a trip for occasions when you just need a drip feed of sugar to persuade your mind and body that you are feeding it. I also make sure I have more food than I think I'll need readily accessible.

### EVENING MEALS

My diet in Iceland was adequate and I appreciated the ease and speed of the meals, but I really missed fresh food. Although I took a multi-vitamin tablet every day, I'm sure it wasn't good for my body to have no fruit and vegetables. Since then I have always taken as much fresh food as I can fit in my kayak. Onions, garlic, root ginger and carrots don't take up much space and last a couple of weeks. If I have more room then apples, bananas, broccoli, mushrooms, avocados and whatever else takes my fancy are squeezed in. It might not be five a day but I try to have at least one fresh vegetable in every evening meal even if I'm away for a month. When these run out then lentils, sun-dried tomatoes and dried black beans are





other great space-saving things, which are full of nutrients. Nuts thrown in an evening meal are tasty and full of energy – you can even add nuts that have been spoiled by saltwater; once you cook them then that horrid, slightly soggy texture disappears. Dried mixed herbs, chilli powder, cumin powder, stock cubes and tomato paste also take up very little room and can spice up otherwise plain meals.

I usually boil up some pasta, rice, couscous or mashed potato, stir fry the vegetables, add a sauce and sometimes some tuna, corned beef, bacon or salami sausage. If you don't want to carry oil or butter with you then buy tuna, or something similar that is canned in oil, and decant the liquid to cook the vegetables. 'Blue Dragon' makes inexpensive, small packets of sauces that don't take up much space. Or try a spoonful of marmite and two spoonfuls of honey to add some flavour.

On a recent trip to the Queen Charlotte Islands, my paddling partners Leon and Shawna introduced me to their camp cabbage salad. About an eighth of a red cabbage is chopped up with an onion, a carrot, half a granny smith apple and a handful of raisins and walnuts. The salad is drizzled with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, and split into three equal parts (under close supervision from the other two). It tastes wonderful after a day on the water. We had this roughly every other night on our trip and all the ingredients lasted two weeks. On the downside, it's quite heavy and we carried a half litre nalgene bottle

full of vinegar and two bottles of olive oil!

#### LUNCH AND SNACKS

For lunch I like to take a dry bag full of crackers, cheese, salami, nuts, dried fruit, trail mix, chocolate and some flat breads like tortillas. My body craves different things at different times and I figure it knows better than me what it desires to keep paddling. If I'm working hard and sweating then I tend to need salty things like nuts more than sweet things like chocolate. Salami usually wins over cheese, although chocolate raisins are always a winner. I take dried apricots, dates and raisins, although in the Queen Charlotte Islands, Leon introduced me to dried mango, which is my new favourite. I have muesli bars and Twixes for 'on-the-water' snacks and I try to eat something every couple of hours so I don't suddenly run out of energy. On a long trip, any sort of variety is fantastic and I always take a few secret treats to share at a time when things aren't going so well.

#### BREAKFAST

Breakfast is always a tricky meal to keep interesting. I used to really like porridge until I had it almost every morning for 37 days while paddling around Tasmania. Shawna and Leon had to endure it for over 80 days in Iceland and vowed never to touch it again. We all thought long and hard about alternatives in the Queen Charlotte Islands. We took fresh bread with peanut butter and jam for the first few days and then tried allsorts. Pancakes or

cheese and onion quesadillas were treats to be savoured on days off. On paddling days, couscous, with herbs and nuts, was a favourite, followed by muesli with hot powdered milk, but the winner was definitely boiled eggs. Before we left we hard boiled 24 eggs and these kept fresh for a week. We'd eat them for breakfast with bread or with couscous, and would often have another one at lunch or as an on-the-water snack. Hadas Feldman and Jeff Allen also ate egg sandwiches for breakfast on their circumnavigation of Japan and Hadas says these kept her full for much longer than porridge.

A different trick that I discovered by accident recently is that if you cook more dinner than you need, you can reheat it the next morning and have a hearty breakfast that will really set you up for the day. Or of course, porridge is a good source of energy and is made more palatable by plenty of honey, sugar, raisins and fruit like bananas or apples if you have them!

#### WILD FOODS AND EXTRAVAGANCES

When we're on a trip then we're often surrounded by natural sources of food. On most trips, I trail a hand line behind my kayak and usually manage to catch some fresh fish to supplement my diet. If I'm lucky I'll find a fisherman to sell, or even give, me some of his catch. I can still remember the rich velvety taste of freshly caught crab claws given to me by a fisherman on Inishturk in Ireland.

In Alaska with wildlife photographer Duncan Murrell I got accustomed to eating really

well as we collected as many wild foods as possible. I learnt to spot wild spinach growing just above the high tide line and to scan for the green worm-like fronds of beach asparagus in the inter-tidal zone. We'd collect blackberries, huckleberries and blueberries and either eat them straight from the tree or make a sauce for our pancakes. Duncan's eyes lit up when he spotted a bright orange tree fungus known as chicken-in-the-woods. I was very sceptical but when it's stir-fried it does actually taste a bit like chicken!

For Duncan, eating well is at least as important as paddling and photography. He paddles a double folding kayak by himself, primarily so he can cram in three months worth of food where his paddling partner would have been. He carries a pressure cooker and a heavy weight frying pan and will spend several hours cooking a gourmet meal over a campfire. We'd only eat a small portion of the meal on the first night so Duncan would close up the pressure cooker, position it upright in his kayak and paddle to the next camp spot. Four days later the pan would be bare and it would be time to do it all over again.

Les Ulrich from the west coast of the States takes eating wild foods to extremes! He fries up the little sandhoppers that jump up and down on beaches, which he claims are very tasty! He also collects fresh clams, which he leaves in a bucket of seawater with a little cornmeal. The clams spit out the sand and ingest the cornmeal so after a couple of hours he has stuffed clams for dinner. Les always takes a small aluminium Dutch oven as his pot. It weighs more than a typical camp pot but he can cook on a fire and bake bread in it.

Expedition paddler Jon Turk has a different approach. He's paddled up the entire Eastern seaboard of Russia. Jon travels light and eats what is available. He fishes, hunts ducks, eats seagull eggs and relies on contact with people to buy, or be given, food. He's survived on reindeer brain, dried walrus meat, coconuts

and fruit. When he is away from people he makes 'camp mush', usually white rice and canned mackerel.

#### CONCLUSION

On a trip of any length, I make sure I can have as much fresh food as possible. Depending on the trip, I have to weigh up how much time I want to spend preparing food with how extravagant a meal I'd like, but it doesn't take much effort to at least chop up a few vegetables. I haven't made enough room in my kayak for a Dutch oven or pressure cooker (yet!) and I still always take a few instant pasta meals for those evenings when I barely have enough energy to rip open the packet. One thing is always constant, when I get back to civilization after any length of time away; nothing tastes better than fresh food prepared by someone else. Or as Hadas puts it, 'when we get back to civilization, we stuff up with anything we can find!'

### TOP TIPS

- Soak your porridge overnight to save on fuel and cooking times
- Chose rice and pasta with the shortest cooking times to save on fuel
- Take a fishing line and supplement your diet with fresh fish
- Boil up eggs before you go – they'll usually last a week.
- Stock cubes take up very little space but add flavour to almost every meal
- Garlic, onions, carrots last two weeks
- Search out local foods