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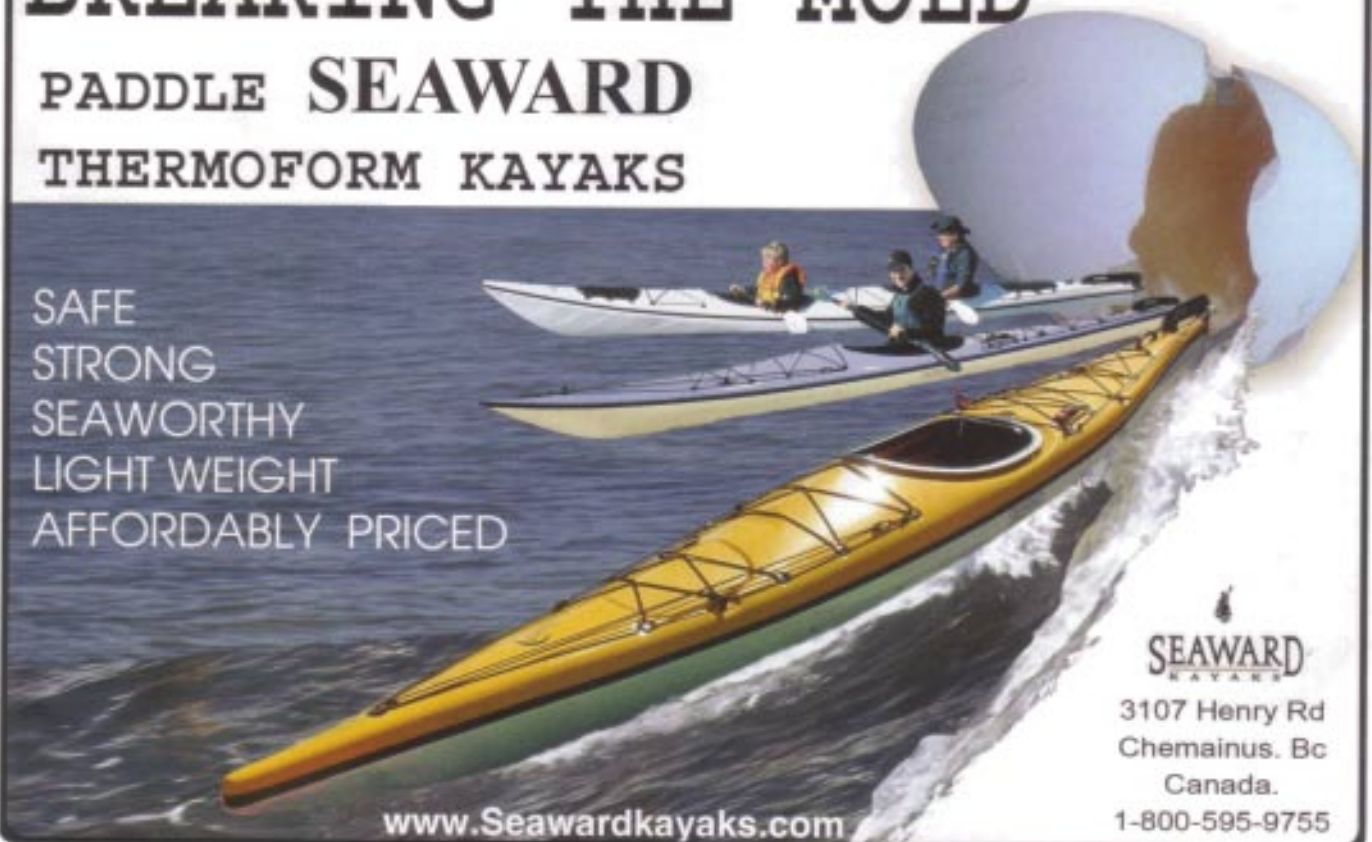
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Trys Morris (left) and Gemma Rawlings launch from Lighthouse Bay after a rocky lunch stop near the end of our trip. (All photos by Justine Curgenvan except where noted.)



Rounding Tassie

Three paddlers from the U.K. are the first women to take on the 900-mile circumnavigation of Tasmania.

by Justine Curgenvan

Trys passes in front of magnificent diorite columns as we approach Cape Raoul after our longest crossing of the trip.



We're not going anywhere! Trys shouted into the wind.
This is pointless!

My heart sank—I didn't want to stop. Ahead of us, tantalizingly close, lay a headland that would offer us some protection from the wind. If only we could reach it, we could go ashore and camp beneath the trees. Trys was right, though—we'd been paddling for two hours and had barely made a mile. The sea and wind were stinging our eyes as we battled, head-down, into the full force of a gale. Again.



Trys, Gemma and I all desperately wanted to complete our circumnavigation of Tasmania in the six weeks we'd allocated, but day after day, we had faced strong headwinds. The demoralizing and energy-sapping weather meant that after the first two weeks of paddling, we were already behind schedule, and we needed to paddle whenever possible. We'd hoped to make up some time that morning when we left the North Coast town of Bridport. The wind had already been buffeting the trees, so we tried sticking close to shore to sneak along the coast for as long as possible. Unfortunately, the wind had picked up until it was stronger than we were.

"Can we just push it for a few more minutes and get to the beach ahead?" I hollered back.

The three of us were only a few yards apart, but the wind tore our words from our lips.

"We can try," Trys bellowed, unconvinced but charitable. Gemma nodded agreement.

I tried to guess how far away the headland was. It must be only 400 yards ahead. Surely we could reach it. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. My face was chapped from the sting of the wind. My kayak bounced and thudded down

Trys and I pull our kayaks on the long portage near Shipwreck Point and the northwest tip.

into the chop, but the headland wasn't getting any closer.

"This IS pointless!" Gemma shouted.

My shoulders and head dropped with frustration, and I knew she was right. Reluctantly, I pointed my kayak toward the beach to our left, hoping we could land there. Unfortunately, the choice that lay in that direction wasn't great.

As we grew more tired and our progress slowed, the game with the sea stopped being fun.

Four hundred yards of shallows separated us from high ground. It would be exhausting to haul our heavily laden kayaks there and back. The only real option was to turn back to Bridport. It would be gut-wrenching to retreat after two hours of intense effort, but I knew it was the most sensible choice. On a calm day, we could recover the progress we'd lost in 20 minutes, but I ached all the same. It felt so unfair that we could try so hard and fail. I choked back tears and wondered if the weather would ever allow us to make it around the island.

An Ambitious Plan

The heart-shaped island of Tasmania has always fascinated me. I love to circumnavigate islands, especially beautiful and remote ones with some challenging kayaking. I'd sat at home with a map and traced a route 900 miles around the coast with my finger, imagining being there in my kayak beside the steep cliffs,

white sandy beaches and the exposed southwest coast where the swells can reach 50 feet.

In 2004, I finally decided to go for it. I told a few friends about my intent, and to my surprise, Trys Morris and Gemma Rawlings said they could come along. In early November, the three of us boarded a plane at Heathrow Airport.

Trys is a highly qualified kayaker who kayaked 5,000 miles from the U.K. to Greece and has been coaching all over the world for years. Gemma is a gutsy paddler who earned her stripes playing



Sheltering from the persistent, strong headwinds on Tasmania's East Coast.

The wind stayed behind us for two more days, and we averaged 25 miles per day. We paddled along a countryside lined by sandy beaches and steep red rocks, all carpeted with lush green trees. Gannets made detours to flutter above our heads in wonder, and fat shags—with white bellies and black overcoats—struggled to take off and get away from us. We rafted up and held our tarp high above our heads. Laughing, we let the wind carry us along at about two knots, but I have to admit that my arms hurt more from holding the tarp up than they would have from paddling. Navigating was interesting when all we could see was grey fabric!

On the morning of our fourth day, we were battling into a Force-4 headwind. We had reached Freycinet Peninsula, one of the top tourist attractions in Tasmania. Rugged red mountains of granite rose steeply from the sea, with just the occasional break of white-sand beach. Beautiful as it was, there weren't many places to land, and the wind stirred up the sea into short choppy waves that slammed against our bows and slowed our pace to less than two and a half miles per hour. We battled on, but the gusts picked up throughout the day until whitecaps crashed around

us. We didn't dare stop paddling to eat as we knew we'd be blown backward as soon as we took a hand off the paddle.

For eight of the next 12 days, the wind picked up to at least Force 4 by 9:30 A.M. We started off setting the alarm for 6 A.M. and getting on the water by 7:30, but it soon became clear that the only way to make any reasonable progress was to be on the water at first light and paddle hard until the wind picked up. On our 10th day, the alarm went off at 4 A.M., and we crawled reluctantly out of our cozy sleeping bags into the cold and dark. We were on the water as the red light of dawn oozed into the sky. It was the first time I missed the 6 A.M. radio forecast because I was up too early!

Once on the water, the morning stillness and the quiet were broken only by the gentle splash of three paddles slicing into the water. When the wind came on those calm mornings, it came on suddenly. In 10 minutes, it transformed the sea from velvet calm to angry whitecaps. We gritted our teeth, put our heads down and held on to see how long our energy would last. In those first hours, the hiss of the wind and the stinging bombardment of the cold, saltwater spray on my skin made me feel alert and alive, attuned to every

nuance of the sea—lifting a hip to let a wave ride under the kayak or putting in a long powerful paddle stroke to lift the bow onto the crest of the wave in front.

As we grew more tired and our progress slowed, the game with the sea stopped being fun. We forced it for a bit longer—none of us wanted to be the one who suggested stopping—but usually by early afternoon, we were lying on a beach looking up at the tree branches, hoping that tomorrow they wouldn't be dancing so wildly. At times we battled fatigue. The early mornings and long hard days took their toll, but day after day, we forced ourselves out of bed to get on the water by 5:30.

Worse for the Wear

The morning that a headwind picked up at 5:45, just minutes after we'd launched, I realized that I was exhausted. I'd used the last of my resources to gain a few hundred yards. It was almost more than I could bear. Would the wind ever stop? I paddled off on my own, my stroke limp and lazy, ashamed that my motivation had finally vanished. I wanted to cry. Then incredibly, the wind started to drop. By 10 o'clock, the confused chop had settled into a small, undulating swell and our ears rang with silence.

A high-pressure system lingered for the next week, allowing us to make good progress toward Tasmania's northwest tip. There were strong tides and a labyrinth of shallow sandbars in this area, so timing was critical to make sure we weren't stranded as the tide went out. If we paddled hard, we knew we could get around the corner in two days of forecasted good weather, but we'd have to start a 15-mile crossing at 5 P.M. With the target in our sights, we set off optimistically on a straight line toward the headland. By 9 P.M., we were less than two miles away, but the sea was disappearing from beneath our hulls at an alarming pace, matched only by the rate the sun was dipping below the horizon. We'd failed to read our chart, which showed the deep water channel was much farther north than our direct path. Sandbars appeared all around us, and the creeping darkness made it impossible to choose an intelligent line. Time and tide were waiting for no women, and we had to make a choice quickly. Our earlier optimism crushed, we decided to go back a mile or so to a headland called Shipwreck Point, where we knew we could land. We paddled, dragged, then carried our heavy kayaks back to the peninsula and up the beach. Two hours later, I tried to sleep and block out the thought that we'd have to do it all again the next morning.

When the sun rose, it took another two hours just to get our kayaks back to the water—then we had to get in and out of them several times as we tried to weave through sandbars and shallows. The tide was rising and we had plenty of daylight, but time was still against us. We'd been told that if we didn't cross a certain very shallow channel precisely at high tide, we'd have to turn back or risk being stranded for 12 hours. The alternative was a much longer route that would make it very difficult for us to get around the northwest tip that day. It was a shame to be in such a hurry, as the wildlife in these sheltered waters was wonderful. Hundreds of black swans floated on the still sea and took off in huge noisy flocks as we approached. Several times the gray shapes of rays flitted under our kayaks, and a school of dolphins fed in some small tidal rapids a few yards away.

We finally paddled over the shallow channel 30 minutes after high tide. It was overwhelmingly tempting to keep going. There was still a foot and a half of water underneath us. Surely our arriving a half-hour late to the landmark

couldn't be *that* critical? We took the gamble and continued on. It looked like we had about two and a half more miles of shallow to cross before we reached the safety of deeper water.

Dhained

The first mile or so went somewhat smoothly, but soon we were hemmed in by sandbars, and it was impossible to tell if we were paddling into a dead end or toward deeper water. We studied the birds ahead of us. If they looked stationary, we assumed they were perched on a

away with the last of the tide. The water was literally being sucked away from underneath us. Our gamble had landed us in the middle of an ever-expanding desert of soggy sand. It would be at least a mile or more to drag our kayaks to the nearest high ground or a long day spent on a sandbar until the tide came back in at midnight. With options like that, I wasn't about to give in while there was still an inch of water under my kayak. In one last backbreaking effort, we heaved and dragged our heavy boats through gritty mush until we found enough

After a couple of miles, our hopes looked like they were being washed away with the last of the tide. The water was literally being sucked away from underneath us.

sandbar and steered away from them. If they were wobbling slightly, and therefore floating on water, we turned toward them. After a couple of miles, our hopes looked like they were being washed

water to float them, then a few inches more that let us sit in them. We paddled awkwardly for half an hour until we stumbled across a deeper channel and were able to take proper strokes again.



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Rounding the rocky projection of the South West Cape on our 30th day was a milestone. (Photo by Jeff Jennings.)

A few hours later, we were within sight of Cape Grim at Tasmania's north-west corner. This was a major milestone, as it marked the start of the intimidating southwest coast—the section we feared and looked forward to the most: remote, wild and nearly uninhabited. I'd built the coastline up in my mind as the most treacherous place I'd ever paddled, and my heart was pounding as we rounded the notoriously stormy cape. I kept looking for signs of the huge swells that I'd feared, but the windmills on the headland were scarcely turning, and the swell was smooth and only gently rolling. At first I didn't quite believe how calm it was. The reality is that this coastline is like any other in the world—it can be wild, but it can just as easily be tranquil.

Good weather lingered until we were 30 miles from Strahan, almost halfway down the west coast. Overnight, the swell started to live up to its reputation and picked up to almost 25 feet. We had our first big surf launch at Granville Harbour. I had expected anything with "harbor" in its name to be an easy place to land and launch, but on the southwest coast of Tasmania, the harbors are often fair-weather ports, where a headland or a reef only provides some protection from the swell on calm or moderate days. We put our helmets on as we watched walls of white water crash down into the rocky inlet. At times, the

whole bay closed out, and I tried not to imagine what would happen if we got caught in the wrong place. After waiting for a break between the sets, we started our desperate sprint out to sea. We just made it out over a set of towering waves before they broke.

We stayed out to sea all the way to Strahan in a 25- to 30-foot swell—the biggest I've ever paddled in. For the first few hours, we were close to cliffs, and waves rebounded off the rock wall, creating confused pyramids of water even 500 yards from shore. I felt slightly seasick for the first time in my kayaking experience and was frightened by how quickly I lost sight of Trys and Gemma. It was a relief when the cliffs gave way to a long beach and the sea changed character. The clapotis was replaced by regular thick waves rolling in from the southwest. The walls of water were the size of a two-story house. The swell was like runnels on a carpet moving toward us. Mostly we pointed toward Strahan, but a few times the curling waves looked so frightening and powerful that we couldn't stop ourselves from turning into them.

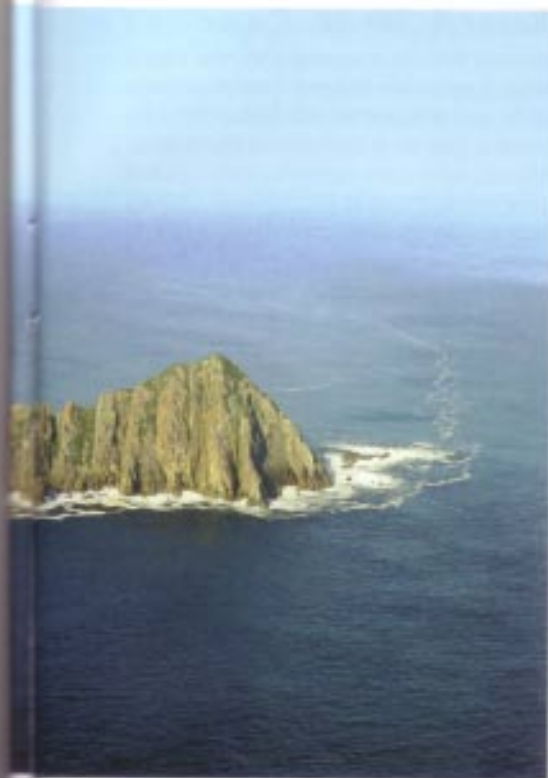
Over and Out

Strahan is protected from the southwest swell by a long headland to the south, so as we approached the harbor entrance, we were sheltered from the worst of the surf. Some swell still wrapped around

the point, but it was much reduced to about six feet. Unfortunately, we didn't pay enough attention to these waves, and we drifted too close to shore about a half-mile from Strahan. A rogue wave broke on top of Gemma, and I saw the back of her kayak rise up vertically, turn 180 degrees and slam into the water. For a few seconds, Trys and I couldn't see what had happened, but when the wave receded, Gemma was in the water a few yards from her kayak. She'd rolled up but was knocked back down again by the wave. She ran out of air and bailed out, and her kayak was driven away from her by the surf.

Trys and I had to act quickly. We were still about 500 yards offshore and couldn't tell how big the breakers were closer to the beach. I figured that it was an extra big set that hit Gemma and we were still just outside the main break zone. If we rescued her quickly, we might be able to get her back in her kayak and paddle out to sea before another big set came. Unfortunately, it was hard to be quick because Gemma was about 10 yards from her kayak. Trys paddled off to get the boat while I had Gemma crawl onto the back of my kayak, and I started paddling out to sea. My already loaded boat now felt like a lead weight, but we were making slow progress.

I lost sight of Trys, and it soon became clear that she and Gemma's boat had been driven toward shore by the waves.



wave decreased in power enough for me to turn around so I could go back to help Gemma. I'd paddled seaward for only about 20 seconds when I saw her bobbing in the water, smaller unbroken waves washing over her head.

"Are you OK?" I asked. She nodded but looked cold and exhausted. "Grab onto the kayak," I said.

We crept in toward shore and finally reached shallow water where Gemma could walk to safety. We saw Trys on the beach pulling two kayaks onto dry land. She'd had real difficulty trying to attach her towline to Gemma's boat in the surf. The swell took her toward the beach, and one wave violently pushed Gemma's kayak into hers, capsizing her. Trys rolled back up and found that her

it safely to shore. It was the first time she'd tried to use a towline in surf, and she vowed never to do it again.

We were shaken by how quickly complacency led to a capsizing and a series of dangerous events. Both Gemma and Trys had lost gear that they'd stored in the cockpit and under the deck lines—our emergency fiberglass repair kit, a platypus water container, wetsuit shoes, half a spare paddle and a Frisbee. Gemma was cold, but with an extra jacket and a hat on, she said she could paddle the remaining half-mile or so into Strahan.

We had two days off in Strahan as a storm passed through. We ate lots of fresh bread and enjoyed a bit of civilization. We also recovered most of our lost kit on the beach.

Trys and I couldn't see what had happened, but when the wave receded, Gemma was in the water, a few yards from her kayak.

I was 500 yards offshore from a surf beach with Gemma in the water without her boat, and I had no idea if Trys was OK. The only option left was to paddle in with Gemma on deck. Even with the swell behind us, we seemed to be moving at a snail's pace. I knew Gemma was getting very cold. She's normally very sharp, but I had to keep reminding her to get up out of the water and kick to help us get into shore. I looked around and noticed a six-foot wave building right behind us. It would crash down right on top of my kayak. Gemma could be hurt if she was slammed into the boat, and I was sure that I couldn't keep control during the impact with her weight on my stern.

"You better let go for a minute, Gem—there's a big wave coming."

There wasn't time to explain, and she looked frightened to be alone in the surf again, but she let go. I turned my kayak sideways to the approaching wave, and just before it hit me, I put my paddle in the high brace position and leaned into it so I was almost horizontal. It hit hard just as it was breaking. Water surrounded me. I held my breath and waited to see if my lean was enough to keep me from being flipped over. White noise and froth filled my ears and eyes as my kayak skidded and bounced down the wave. I felt the kayak hit air, and the hull shuddered when it crashed back down. I had been thrown ahead of the wave and could now see. The

towline was caught on her map case. Fortunately, she was practically on the beach and could get out and make

On the third day, we left Strahan for the most committing section of our trip. For the next 200 miles, until we reached



Cockle Creek on the East Coast, there would be no roads, no people and few sheltered places to land. In hindsight, we left too soon, as the storm was not yet over, but after two days in a town, I felt out of touch with the sea and anxious to get back to her.

It was rough on the open ocean, and we had to give reefs and the turbulent water surrounding them a wide berth. The sea was nearly all white. It took us

I started to feel exhausted and fed up. It wasn't a good feeling, and sometimes we just needed to get off the water to gather strength.

45 minutes to get a mile or so around the lighthouse at the harbor entrance, but after that, we turned south into slightly calmer waters and picked up the pace a bit. Although we were pretty safe at sea, the sheer noise of the ocean was intimidating. We were all preoccupied by where and how we would land. Progress was slow, and our options limited. We headed toward Birthday Bay, where our map showed a small head-

land that should offer some protection from the southwest swells.

As we approached the bay, we could see big breaking waves on the horizon, and my heart sank. We edged closer, and realized there was a reef between us and the bay. Once we skirted around the outside of the reef, we could see that there was a clear run into Birthday Bay through two-foot surf. The headland offered good protection, and a rip current

also helped to minimize the waves. It was a perfect place to land.

High pressure accompanied us for the rest of the southwest coast. Most days there was some wind, but we made good progress and really enjoyed the beautiful mountains and unusual pyramids of rock rising from the ocean. We were very tired after almost a month on the water and had slowly edged the alarm clock from 4 A.M. to 7 A.M.

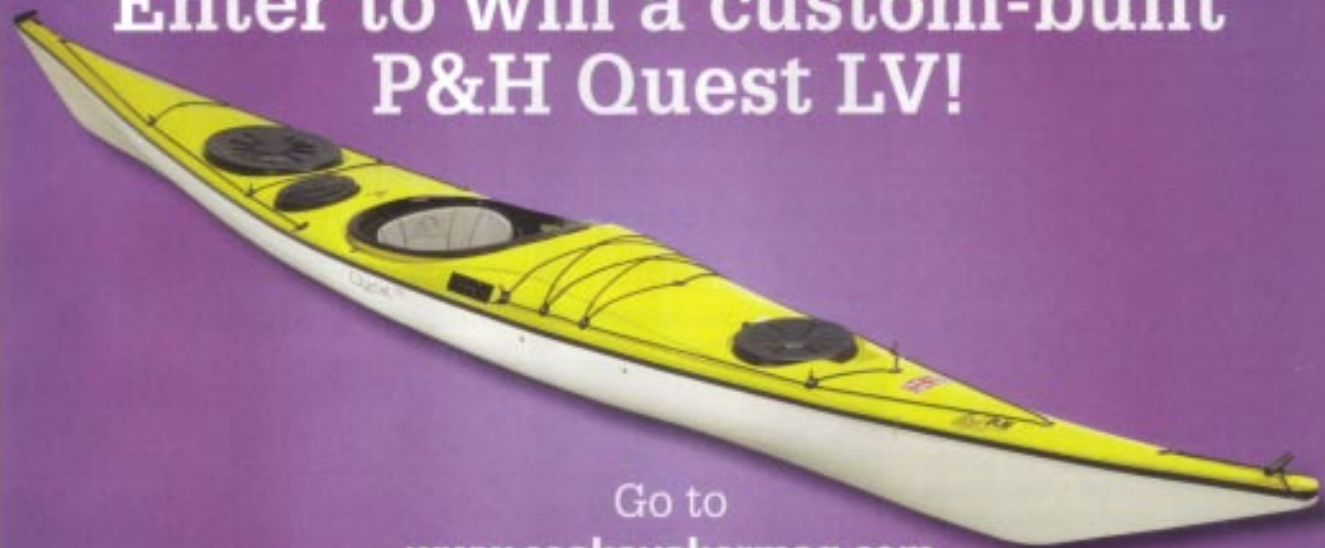
South West Cape

On our 30th day, we rounded the South West Cape—the end of the southwest coast and a major milestone for all of us. We felt like we'd completed the expedition, as the most treacherous section was over. We still had 150 miles to go, but we had 11 days before we were due to fly home. Ironically, once the pressure was off a bit, my motivation dipped.

I was surprised by how tired I felt after 30 days of paddling. The constant exercise, getting up early, always being mentally alert, and even the time and effort it takes just to cook a meal all takes its toll. I started to feel exhausted and fed up. It wasn't a good feeling, and sometimes we just needed to get off the water to gather strength. A 25-knot headwind forced us to rest for a day at the beautiful Anchorage Cove. Full of pancakes, burritos and just about everything else, we were back on the water the following morning. The forecast was for at least three days of up to Force-5 headwinds, but we decided that we'd edge along the coast slowly.

To some extent, the scenery made up for the weather. Steep mountains and precipitous ridges rose from the shore, and lush forest covered it all. The odd

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gannet or albatross hovered above our heads, peering down at us. An easterly wind persisted for five days but gradually decreased in power. On our penultimate day, we had a 25-mile crossing of Storm Bay to reach the Tasman Peninsula. Gemma put her radio in a dry bag on her deck so she wouldn't get bored. She soon memorized the radio station's phone number, and we called them on a cell phone to request a song. They didn't play our choice of Queen's "The Show Must Go On," but they did play our conversation on the air, which helped us on our way!

On our last day, the wind turned around behind us. We surfed past stunning diorite columns and through the gap by the Totem Pole, a towering needle of rock rising over 200 feet from a base barely 10 feet across.

As we paddled toward our final landing, I only had to look at Trys and Gemma to start laughing with shared pride and excitement. After all of our disappointments and worries, we'd made the circumnavigation with five days to spare. It had taken us 37 days to paddle 900 miles around this beautiful, moody island, and finally we had made it. A TV crew was waiting to meet us at Eaglehawk Neck as we pulled our kayaks up onto the slipway. I took one last glimpse at the sea that had been our constant companion for so long and couldn't resist saying to the girls: "It's a shame not to make the most of this following sea. Shall we just carry on?" **SK**

Justine Curgenvin is an adventure filmmaker and perpetual explorer. Her films about expeditions, travel and adventure racing have aired on the National Geographic Channel and the BBC. Her latest kayaking DVDs are This is the Sea 1 and 2, the latter of which includes a 30-minute documentary about her Tasmania expedition. Visit Justine online at: www.cackler.com

The expedition used 4-piece Kinetic paddles from Lendal; Aquatherm touring cag, coverall cagdeck and fleece kayaking thermals from Reed Chill Cheater; 2 Explorer sea kayaks and 1 Greenlander sea kayak from Sea Kayaking UK; Armortex reinforced spraydecks and Hot Hands pogies from Snap Dragon Design; and a VE25 tent, foul weather gear and insulating garments from The North Face. The author would like to thank The North Face and the Sports Council for Wales for their support, Kayanu for logistical support and Tasmanian paddlers Matt Watton and Jeff Jennings for their invaluable assistance.



Paddling off of Waterhouse Point, northeast Tasmania—one of the first days with a tailwind, hence the smiles. (Photo by Jeff Jennings.)

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