

## A Winters Tale

*Sandy Ferguson - Abel Tasman 2007*

This tale has some cautions for trip leaders and is possibly entertainment for others.

We were away on a mid winter trip recently. I can't complain about ice on the tent in the mornings if I'm silly enough to suggest in the *Sea Kayaker's Guide to New Zealand's South Island* guide book that winter is a good time to paddle the Abel Tasman. Our organiser, Jilly, hadn't paddled much of the park and I came in at the last minute, a question of "Did I have enough holidays available?" I was there primarily to look after my partner; us wooden kayak paddlers tend to stick together, probably something to do with the epoxy glue, and the secondary reason, to advise, if necessary.

The preliminary trip planning had envisaged using huts but there is really only one easily accessed at Anchorage and a second one with a bit of a walk from the beach at Bark Bay. The Awaroa hut is miles away from the water, unless you arrive and leave at high tide. You could also set up a base somewhere but that limits where you get to and isn't encouraged by DoC. Not like the good old days when I could camp in Mosquito Bay for a week and not see anyone.

We were taken to the water by tractor and trailer as Syd had hired a *Tasman Express*. I mention the type of kayak here because it is reasonably fast and has a ton of room. My kayak would have less than half the volume yet I was able to load it with our tent, my clothes, sleeping bag and mats, half the food, two stoves, and a large quantity of fuel. W. had the half cabbage, at least a bit less than a whole one that we'd had on a previous trip in the ATNP (got to keep the scurvy away), the wine, can't go without some perks, more clothes than she needed, more food than we needed, sleeping bag and sundry other items. Syd in the mean time had loaded his kayak and had a large dry bag on deck and was carrying his sleeping bag in a backpack on his back.

A note for trip leaders – how much experience do your companions have, how often have they ever packed a kayak for a multiday trip? Syd is a strong competitive swimmer but a backpack is not the thing to encourage on a kayak trip.

The first day we ambled up the coast and had lunch at Watering Cove. If you go up the stream a little way and look back at Adele Island, this is where D'Urville's painter set up his easel and painted the scene of collecting water for his ship the *Astrolabe*. This, Astrolabe Roadstead, is also the name of the channel between the island and mainland. After lunch we paddled on to Anchorage, diverting up the Torrent River a short way to fill in the afternoon.

The next morning, while attempting to boil water for breakfast, I managed to melt down the stove. Experience and stupidity can sometimes go hand in hand. My only concern was the secondary stove's fuel bottle wasn't as full as it should have been and the backup stove had been left behind. It turned out not to be a problem but was annoying. Note – make sure you know in which box the backup stove is hiding.

We paddled slowly up the coast, did a sweep round Bark Bay and filled a water bottle from the floating water hose just off the north side of the bay. It was low tide so we missed looking into Mosquito Bay but checked out the Arches and landed at Onetahuti for lunch and to set up camp. This allowed us to spend the rest of the afternoon playing with the seals. I suggest going round Tonga Island anticlockwise as that leaves the best for last. The little bay at the north end had about a metre of water in it and a dozen or more juvenile seals. They swam under and over the kayaks. When you have a tippy kayak, know how to instinctively brace as seals leap on to your aft deck. At least the cameras were rolling and caught it all. Note, DoC says you are not supposed to go within three kayak lengths of the shore in case you disturb the seals. If you ignore this, be prepared for close interaction with curious and playful

youngsters. At least they didn't leave teeth marks on my wooden paddle – this time.

The Onetahuti camp ground now has a cooking shelter, palatial, with a centre bench with three sinks and a stainless steel bench round three sides. There is a table just outside. You can (not me) sleep under the bench if you have trouble with a snoring tent companion but lookout for the mice eating your muesli at midnight!

It was about midnight on the second night that I woke up realising why we weren't getting any reply to our arranged VHF morning schedule with Abel Tasman Kayaks – the VHF set was probably still setup for USA frequencies. This turned out to be so. New VHF? Make sure the shop knows how to set it up correctly for you. It needs to be set to International, not USA or Canada (I,U,C).

Incidentally, I hadn't tuned my own VHF radio for Channel 78 as I didn't know that was the one that would be wanted – an old VHF radio with hardwired tuning.

We had a good tailwind on day three. The tide was too low to get into Shag Harbour but I got right up to the right hand entrance. I ended up with the bow and stern suspended on rocks and a seal pinned under the fore end. He appeared to be pinned there but eventually wriggled out before the next surge eventually lifted me off.

Harold was supposed to join us some time that day so we stopped at Goat Bay for lunch and this gave us a good view back down the coast. I actually spotted Harold 40 minutes paddling away and he joined us as we finished lunch. I've paddled Awaroa to Mutton Cove in the dark but the last part of this day was more difficult because we had the sun right in our eyes and those in front overshot the camp ground and had to turn back so we all reached the beach together. In winter, camp at the north end of the camp ground as it is warmer and a little more out of the wind. You will still get ice on the tent in the morning.

Next morning we paddled round Separation Point for a look before heading south into a head wind. Syd was very slow and we again had lunch at Goat Bay though the original intention was to have it in the little bay just out from the Awaroa Beach. The rest of the afternoon was still and sunny, perfect for taking photos and spotting animal shaped rocks. There is the iguana near Shag Harbour, a polar bear spread out on top of a rock further south, a lizard and a number of other things one's imagination can conjure up.

Now to the "crunch". The last day dawned grey and cold. Temperatures most days had been nice and warm, about 14°C. OK, cool for some of you but this wasn't Auckland and it was mid winter. This day was recorded with a high of 6°C in Nelson. Two of our paddlers wanted to have a look at Shag Harbour and were away by 7.30 a.m. to be there for the tide. They said it was worth it as the dozen or more seals in the upper arm were very friendly. I had to stay in bed to listen to the VHF weather forecast – someone has to suffer?

Syd had wanted to see the seals again on Tonga Island and arranged to be ready at 9.30 a.m. when Jilly & D. got back and to go with D. to Tonga Island. By the time Syd had eventually finished packing, we finally got away at 11.00 a.m.! No time for Tonga Island's seals.

Trip leaders – know if any of your members simply mentally switch off sometimes.

The day dragged and at 1.00 p.m. we at last headed in to Te Pukatea for lunch, about 20 minutes away from the originally scheduled lunch beach. That morning I'd given Abel Tasman Kayaks an ETA of 3.00 p.m. as the VHF had been reset to use the international frequencies. At 3.30 p.m., off the south end of Appletree Bay with the others getting cold, sitting waiting, I put a tow rope on Syd's kayak.

This is the message – if your group is being held up by a slow paddler, **don't hesitate to tow.**

That Syd suddenly decided to go into “competitive mode” and not let the tow rope go tight just showed that the 4 hour paddle should have been the 3 hours it normally takes. I “dropped” the tow near the beach, paddled back to check on Jilly & W. who were some way back because they’d stopped to call on the VHF for the trailer pickup. I then paddled for the beach and landed just behind Syd and beside our waiting pickup.