

A Weekend Jaunt to Port Underwood

by Malcolm Gunn

Off to a bad start - having been dropped off at the ferry terminal and rationalised my gear, it became apparent that my paddle was safely in the back of the car! Nothing a quick trip in a taxi couldn't fix. 30 minutes later I received the reception I anticipated from Brent, Peter and Paul. A gentle reminder of the time Brent brought the wrong tent poles, leaving us storm bound in a tent fly at French Pass shut him up, briefly. Peter went on a bit though. "Let's just hope you haven't forgotten anything", I cautioned.

We had toyed with the idea of starting the trip with another Cook Strait crossing, but the forecast was as discouraging as it was improbable - 15 knot NW decreasing and becoming 15 knot SW, rising to 25 knots in the western straits with seas becoming very rough. The reality - calm, seas smooth to slight.

On arrival at Picton, we were conscious of the late hour and we were away before the ferry commenced its return trip. Conditions were pleasant - calm and mild with light drizzle. We made Dieffenbach Point in 2 hours in fading light and against the incoming tide. A short discussion on where to camp the night failed to produce a consensus so on we went into the tide, into Tory Channel and into the night.

Darkness comes gradually on a calm sea, where reflections of a dim sky eke out the twilight. Phosphorescence provided a welcome distraction from the tide. Bow waves became flashing green ribbons and paddles created a swirling green cloud in the water with every stroke. Eventually we slid in to Ngaruru Bay. Drizzle had matured with the night into rain.

We soon had camp organised and a brew under way under the tent fly.

Saturday dawned wet and still. It was about now that both Brent and Peter realised that they had not brought any film for their cameras - not that I'm the sort to make fun at someone's forgetfulness! In the bay and indeed all the way to Port Underwood, countless red lobster krill (*munida gregaria*) swam near the surface, trailing their distinctive chelipeds. The 10 mm long crustaceans provide food for gulls and fish alike.

The entrance to Tory Channel was a maelstrom of confused waves. The incoming tide was producing a mixture of smooth fast water and steep standing waves. As we fought to assert ourselves in the tide, a fishing vessel zoomed alongside. I exchanged pleasantries with the sole occupant while trying to look composed in the wild waves. He reassured me that the forecasted nor'westerly was of the "no worries mate" variety and off he went towards Port Underwood. We were to find out later that what doesn't worry mates in a 25 foot boat can be a very different proposition from the perspective of a Puffin.

The coastline south of Tory Channel is similar to that to the north - high cliffs, caves, stacks and arches with precious few landing sites. Forget camping. A southerly swell sighed and crashed lethargically against the cliffs producing a backwash that reflected into the incoming waves in a seemingly random fashion.

South of Jordy Rocks, a 60 m long tunnel through a headland tempted exploration. We looked into it for a long time before deciding it was "Not on." We muttered things like "Another time." and "If only there was less swell." We continued around the

headland and looked through from the other side. It looked slightly less formidable. About 4 metre wide (no prospect of turning around), it had a roof height determined entirely by the swells passing through; no vast cavern this one. Cautiously I nosed the Puffin into the entrance and looked hard for any sign of shallowness. Almost involuntarily I committed myself to the tunnel - what a ride! Something like a slow motion rollercoaster in the dark on an untried track. Once through, I was joined by Peter, grinning from ear to ear and then Brent white as a sheet. Of course we did it again but it lacked the excitement of the first time.

Further south we passed gull colonies on offshore rocks and schools of fish feeding on aggregations of krill which had been mustered into a dense red mass. Not far south of Fighting Bay, the nor'wester arrived. It took a full five minutes to go from the "I think that's a northerly" stage to the "I'm going for shelter" stage. By then the williwaws were demanding vigilance and the occasional low brace interrupted the paddling rhythm. As we neared Robertson Point at the SE entrance to Port Underwood, we were having real doubts about the future of paddling in the conditions we were likely to meet around the corner. We cowered near the shore for a bit longer edging towards the point and were then forced ashore. With no lee shore for 3000 km and visibility reduced by the frequent spray flurries, we had no wish to tempt fate. In these conditions, a capsizing was surely only a matter of time.

So there we were on a beach the size of a tennis court. It had only one other similarity to a tennis court - no water. Tennis courts are flat and free of both driftwood and boulders. Our beach was steep, narrow and shrinking with the tide. We levelled a small shelf hard against the cliff for the tent and set about setting up camp.

The fishing boat we'd seen earlier came into the bay and we were told that we were in the best place - ashore. (This, you understand, was no revelation) "First thing tomorrow" we were told, "you'll be right to cross the bay". We were encouraged. The wind raged on and the tide continued to encroach on our little haven. Every 20 minutes or so one of us would shift a kayak further up the beach, closer to the tent - until there was no more room between tide and tent! The waves eventually advanced to within a metre of the tent. Fortunately high tide was at about 10.00 p.m. so once it had peaked, we knew we could sleep, not so easy with one's head 30 cm from the base of a cliff and feet a metre from the sea.

5.30 a.m. and the tent shook violently as it had all night. Surely we hadn't missed "First thing!" A clear sky and comparative lack of williwaws were encouraging signs. Deceptive ones. The marine forecast was hopeful: NW 40 knots decreasing to 30 and 20 by evening. In the time it took to eat breakfast, the wind was as bad as it had been the previous afternoon. We were still stuck. We decided to have a look around the corner, keeping very close to shore. We packed up, stowing everything below deck to reduce windage. We set off towards Robertson Point never more than a few metres from shore. The downdraughts gave no warning and tested our reflexes. We would never have paddled in those conditions had we not been so close inshore (we could have stood up on the bottom). We were pleased to find a navigable channel between the Point and the mainland. Through we went. We fought harder for the next 40 metres of water than any other section I've paddled. The funnelling of the wind through that passage was so severe that I doubt if I could have stood up on the rocks alongside. At the peak of the blast, progress was impossible and visibility was reduced to about 5 metres. Slowly, ever so slowly, we inched our way forward into Port Underwood. Once into the open waters of Port Underwood things changed

abruptly. The wind was still there but it was a constant 20 knots or so and the waves regular and benign. We had a lee shore again. The relief was universal. We had, in the space of 15 minutes gone from being stranded on a beach with no water to being “home and hosed” with two hours to spare. We engaged in some light hearted sparring and water fights in the choppy conditions as we made our way to Oyster Bay, our pick up point for a return ride to Picton and the ferry home.

We had all learned something about how quickly a wind can spring up and the hazards of turbulence in the sheltered waters of a windward shore. Although we were never in any danger, we were very conscious of that which was just a short distance offshore.