

D'Urville Sounds Circular - 1995

by Conrad Edwards

In early 1995, Rob Patience and I planned a two week sea kayak trip down the east coast of Northland. By our start time in late February, the plan had been shrunk by work commitments and travel difficulties to a one week trip around D'Urville Island. I was happy - D'Urville beckoned me from my bedroom window, and being less reptilian than some, I'd rather tackle Northland by winter.

D'Urville Island lies just north west of the Marlborough Sounds, its exposed side open to the prevailing nor'westerly swell. The sensible start and finish point for a D'Urville circuit is the road end at Elmslie Bay by French Pass, from which a week gives a reasonable chance of obtaining four or five days' good weather.

Having more money than sense, and being broke, we decided to paddle from, and back to, the Picton ferry terminal. There are essentially two kayak routes from Picton to D'Urville. The inland route is to portage over to Kenepuru Sound and then to paddle the length of Pelorus Sound. The alternative is along Queen Charlotte Sound to Cape Jackson and then along the edge of Cook Strait - the heads - to the mouth of Pelorus Sound. Either route would take two or three days.

Rob had not paddled a sea kayak before, but had leagues of experience on surf skis and in K1s. He took two days off to prepare his hired *Nordkapp*. Being miserly with my leave, I prepared my beloved *Slingshot* by night. Early on Saturday morning we wheeled our craft into the hold of the Lynx and took our "wanted on voyage" items up to the cabin: for Rob, a cordage bag to continue rigging; for me, a pillow to continue sleeping.

We wheeled the boats to launch by the Edwin Fox, disassembled the trolleys and headed off across Queen Charlotte Sound towards the Te Mania portage. Glorious conditions, smooth blue sea and hardly a breath of wind, as we retraced the familiar route of the Picton Portage Race. Just behind the first point, a tiny, exhausted but happy shag was struggling with an orange scarpie twice its size, dragging it in jerks to shore.

At Mistletoe Bay we reassembled the wheels and started the long drag up and over the saddle to Te Mania. A beautiful track through the sunlit bush, along which we were fortunate enough to meet the owner of a key to the gate. My home made wooden undercarriage - a recent improvement of mine on Russell Ginn's design - creaked and groaned ominously and slopped to whichever side was downhill, so I tweaked the rig and steered carefully. It just made the Te Mahia coast before collapsing, with a final groan, into a contorted heap, unfortunately at the pier rather than beach. I borrowed Russell's trusty device back from Rob to lead my horse to water. The day was baking hot and we slumped on the beach, sticky with sweat and ice cream.

A light wind followed us down Kenepuru Sound, making the paddling unbearably hot and I was almost falling asleep from lack of it. The water was a filthy brown from the recent storm. We turned into Pelorus Sound and the relief of a cooling head wind and lunched on Pipi Beach with a German couple and the even more ubiquitous weka. I had developed blisters from not wearing gloves on the portage, which were to plague me for days of paddling. That night, tucked into the native bush at Jacob's Bay, we dined by the light of burning undercarriage.

We had arranged to share the purchase and carriage of food. Each obviously mistrusted the other's judgement in this regard, for we each ended up double catering. My camping habit of popcorn for breakfast having been commented on before. I experimented with pancakes on this trip and became responsible for the morning fare of bacon pancakes and strong coffee. Lunch tended to be cheese, salami, dried fruit and bread, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that Rob wouldn't partake of my bagels. As for dinner, Rob had cunningly taken tasty fresh pasta and sauces to my dried, so his boat got lighter faster than mine.

Our second day was an easy one, a cruise down the remainder of Pelorus Sound, helped initially by the ebb tide. More glorious weather, though with something of a sea breeze developing in the afternoon. We decided to camp in Port Ligar for final boat preparation before leaving the Sounds. There we beheld a most wondrous sight, a huge pod of bottlenose dolphins, spread out across the bay in small groups, circling, arcing and jumping. We spent an hour amongst them, before they drifted south and we ashore. We camped at Maori Bay, where Rob collected some fine blue mussels and, casting a jig at swirling water, a plump kahawai. Garlic did the rest.

An early start had us out of the Sound and off Clay Point, the northern-most tip of the Marlborough Sounds, in a calm, silvery gray sea, a stark contrast to my previous kayaking experience there, of huge seas and whirling spray. Decision time. Usually anti-clockwise would be the best direction for circling D'Urville, tackling the exposed northern points of Cape Stephens and Nile Head early. But a strong southerly change was forecast for later that day, so we headed for French Pass and a clockwise circuit, hoping to round the south end of the island before the front came through and be sheltered or pushed up the west side. French Pass shares with the Cook Strait alone the honour of special mention in the "*Tidal Streams - Caution*" section of the *Nautical Almanac*. Apparently powered vessels of moderate size can, with prudence, pass through at slack water.

Racing for the pass, we arrived at Elmslie Bay at 12.50 p.m. for a 1.09 p.m. end of slack. We had time to race to the shop for ice cream and fruit, but not to wait until it opened. Dead on 1.09 p.m. we took the pass on the nor'west side with barely a ripple, a relief if an anticlimax.

A patch of seething water sped towards us - a dozen Hector's dolphins in line abreast, arcing in unison across our bows. I gave chase and for ten minutes we played tag, too close to the gathering momentum of the tide race for comfort. Intelligent beings get bored quicker, so they left me and continued north. Magnificent creatures.

Conditions stayed perfect as we headed around the south-west tip of D'Urville, with no menacing front apparent. A brief lunch on the sandy spit of Sauvage Point, only possible because the tide was so low, gave us our first taste of the fantastic rock formations on the west of the island. The land itself was less inspiring, the relatively low lying south end of the island being heavily farmed.

We passed through the Paddock Rocks, an extraordinary chain of pillars curving out to sea, and headed across the mouths of several rural bays, keeping a watchful eye behind us for rogue fronts. A solitary dolphin joined us briefly. The sky darkened and a breeze started up so we pulled into Sandy Bay to weather out the southerly, a false alarm as it turned out, but probably a wise precaution and certainly a good excuse. Sandy Bay is a bleak expanse of rocky shale, driftwood and weeds, but with water and good camping inland. The southerly hit that night.

The next day we awoke to twenty knots of gray southerly, but our route was largely sheltered from it only being exposed to it across the mouths of Greville Harbour and Otu Bay, where the southerly could reign free and the sea become technically interesting. The whole west coast of D'Urville is spectacularly cliffed, awesome rock formations dotted with sea caves, the whole rising too steeply to see inland. Two kayaks, one yellow, one red, insignificant against this impressive backdrop, headed north. Seal Point was appropriately named. A couple of snorkellers caught some paua for us and I soon had a clump of them writhing in the cockpit. We rounded Nile Head, the first seriously exposed point, through a slight tide race into the huge indented inlet of Port Hardy, with its blatantly anti-French English names: Trafalgar Point, Nelson's Monument, Victory Island. Terns were feeding and our paua were soon joined by a couple of kahawai.

Although the evening had fined up beautifully, we decided to camp on the west side of Cape Stephens, to leave some D'Urville for the morrow. Cape Stephens was the major challenge of the route, the end of a narrow, rock-fronted peninsula separating Tasman Bay from the Cook Strait. Two miles off it lies Stephens Island, now a tuatara haven. The *New Zealand Pilot* cautions that the passage between "should not be used, as the tidal streams are very strong", and that from a book not given to superlatives. The waters immediately off Cape Stephens are charmingly named the Bishops Cauldron and Hells Gate. In our direction, we would have to take counsel with God's representative before His Nemesis.

We chose the nearest beach to the Cape that, from Fleet Rocks in the middle of Port Hardy, looked habitable. Rob's boat floated away while we checked the beach and he swam after it, to my camera's delight. A small cove, but with just enough flat grass for two tents. Balanced with calves strained on a slimy cliff face, I slowly collected cupfuls of brown water. We retired early, after enjoying a glorious red sunset, planning on a fresh start to catch the 10:20 opening of the gate to hell.

The morning brought strong nor'westers, a sea of white caps, and surf that lasted until evening, stranding us. Having missed the previous day's schedule, we climbed the hill to consult Rob's cellular secretary. We learnt that there was a Police alert out for us and of a family crisis about which we could do little. Such are the mixed blessings of this remarkable technology.

Since becoming a founding member of the Wellington Ridgerunners, through being in the wrong pub at the wrong time, I have developed the unfortunate habit of running up hills, and did so that evening, carrying a backpack with camera to Cape Stephens. I obtained for my efforts some awesome if demoralising vistas of the effect of spring tides in Stephens Passage (at which point I gave up all ideas of suggesting a circuit of Stephens Island) and of the Cook Strait in the soft light of dusk. My log from that evening reads:

As I write this, I have the dying embers of a fire to my left, a slight surf pounding to the front, a candle flickering to my right and the first cold breath of the southerly behind me. My back is still sore from paddling, my legs from running, but my hands that I could only close with a grimace this morning have healed with the rest. A bellyful of rice, a smoking pipe and a mug with still a little red wine in it.

We woke to a brisk southerly that had flattened the sea to our front and were on the water in good time for our eleven o'clock appointment with the Bishop. Nearing the Cape, we could see a furious swell running, the Styx perchance, and the inauspicious

sight of two large launches towing a fizza boat to shelter. The swell out there was apparently “bloody awful”. We waited nervously in a small bay just short of the Cape, wearing jackets, life jackets and pale faces. We headed out together 20 minutes before H Hour, passing easily through into the Bishops Cauldron. Hells Gate was aflame with spray. We circled around there for a while, like penguins waiting for another to take the plunge, out of the cauldron and into the fire.

Once in the maelstrom and paddling furiously, we didn't have time to regret it, or at least to voice our regrets loud enough for the other to hear. A 25 knot sou'easterly, gusting around the Cape, threw the water around, but our steeds rode beautifully and reassuringly through it. Billhook Bay offered shelter, but adrenaline carried us on south, abeam to a metre and half of swell, breaking occasionally. The water around the outcrop of Hapuka Rocks was, I recall, particularly thought provoking. The Rangitoto Islands came into line to windward, but gave no discernible shelter until we reached Kidnap Point, where we pulled out to rest. A couple of leagues south we could see huge white caps racing. We waited until the wind dropped, about four hours, most of it slept through. When the wind did drop, it did so completely and we had a wonderful evening crossing from D'Urville Island back to

Clay Point, about twelve kilometres of silvery sea, and on to the mouth of Pelorus Sound.

I have learned - and keep re-learning - to make the most of good weather and so was keen to press on but Rob had hardly eaten all day and was burnt out. Besides, as Rob said, did we really want to do the whole Sounds in a day? So back to Port Ligar, this time to Fishing Bay, for a roaring fire and some serious eating.

We decided to return to Picton via the exposed heads. We had lost only one day so far and could afford to lose two more; neither of us had been there (except in dive boats, which don't count); and it saved the anguish of another portage, this time with only one trolley. Anyway, why restrict the circuit to D'Urville?

To attain Queen Charlotte Sound from Pelorus, one has to negotiate the northern extremities of the Sounds, characterised by a series of increasingly long peninsulas, the three last and most inspiring being Alligator Head, Cape Lambert and, finally, the dreaded Cape Jackson. This whole coastline, from Cape Stephens at the top of D'Urville Island to Cape Jackson, is for the most part barren, windswept and inhospitable, a rugged backdrop to the western Cook Strait, beautiful in its starkness.

The weather did deteriorate next morning, to a brisk gray sou'easterly and we fought across to the Alligator's nostrils, point by point and bay by bay: Te Akaroa, Waitata Reach, Kaitiri, Forsyth Bay, Allen Strait, Anakoha Bay, Tawaroa Point, where there were some amazing bush-clad rock formations, and Guards Bay. Across each bay there was a tiresome side-on chop, especially in Anakoha, which the wind found particularly to its liking.

It wasn't clear how best to proceed from Alligator Head. A sea of white-caps lay between us and Cape Lambert. The southerly had risen to about 20 knots and was forecast to increase to 25 then 30 knots that afternoon. Should we tackle both Lambert and Jackson, heading for Cannibal Cove, the first campsite in Queen Charlotte Sound? Or should we aim to shelter in Port Gore, the bay that separates Lambert and Jackson? A decision was made for me when Rob, who was ahead and out of hail, plunged off into the bay that separated us from Lambert, Waitui Bay, staying close to the cliffs to fool the head wind. I guessed he was heading for a blue line on the map

that he had reckoned would make a camp site. I could do nothing but follow and, seeing that Waitui Bay was surrounded by precipitous cliffs, curse him for leading me on this wild goose chase. Eventually we rounded one last wind blown cornice and there lay an idyllic little cove. A steep shingle frontage, a mountain stream tumbling down from the heights and enough grass to stand a good chance of a restful night. A classic enough spot to soothe my anger in an instant.

Rob and I had similar thoughts on paddling routes, so we took the days as they came. No point unnecessarily suffering the foregone opportunities of rigid route planning. This approach can lead to misunderstandings, such as Waitui Bay, but nothing that couldn't be remedied with a whistle blast, if need be.

We decided not to venture out until the sou'easterly front had passed over. With nil reception of radio or phone forecasts, we peered through Rob's binoculars at the violent sea and gazed up at the clouds racing over the ridge ahead. I took my camera for another magnificent run, again previewing the next stage of our route. Watching the sun set over D'Urville cost me a precarious twilight descent to the beach, where I found Rob in rapt contemplation of a splendid little fire he had built into the bank. We ate and talked about our respective relationships, but what was said, will not be written here.

It was Saturday and Rob was hoping to catch the late ferry from Picton that evening to allow a recovery day. I would rather enjoy a last night in the bush and recover in the office. We headed off into alight easterly, gusting enough to test one's hat cord, with the aim of catching the late morning slack at Cape Jackson. There were some particularly awesome rock formations along the east side of Waitui Bay and we had a pleasant run to Cape Lambert at its eastern end. There, we confronted a strong southerly whistling past the other side and a sea of breakers from there to Jackson. Jackets on for the crossing and off again as we opted for discretion, a tour of Port Gore and the evening slack at Jackson. Fine by me - another day on the job.

Furthermore, Port Gore turned out to be a lovely bay, ringed by the highest hills of the Sounds and with a predominance of native bush, a pleasant contrast to the stark headlands that had been our lot since D'Urville. The wind was gusting strongly and we paddled Port Gore's perimeter close to shore, only cutting off Melville Cove. We stopped for lunch at the penultimate mapped stream, a delightful retreat, although without any camp spot. The right decision, it turned out, for that cove was the last before Jackson, excepting a miniature haven that we found in the bleak tussock a mile south of the Cape and which might make a passable refuge. Even within Port Gore the wind and chop were tiresome, so we had been wise not to cross its mouth.

I'd noticed throughout the trip that, on any length of crossing, Rob and I would drift apart, not only lengthwise but invariably also sideways and always in the same direction: from my perspective, Rob would drift further and further off to the right. Did we operate on different geometries: the engineer on Euclidean, the mathematician on spherical, perhaps? Or maybe, as our course tended to keep land to starboard, I didn't have the sense to use its lee. Or perhaps again, after days under canvas, Rob just preferred to stay upwind of me.

We hit Jackson right on slack and played with the seals in translucent blue water, before donning jackets and life jackets and plunging into the dread sou'easter and the wall to wall breakers of Queen Charlotte Sound. The evening was getting prematurely gray and we were side on to a metre and a half of breaking sea, the slop between chop

and swell. We progressed in our usual formation, Rob in close and myself out to sea, keeping an eye on each other but otherwise grim faced, mechanically chewing through the water, eyes to seaward, always ready for the support stroke: or so I was and imagined Rob to be too. The Cape Jackson peninsula was magnificent, vertiginous rock crowned with native bush, swirling mists above and crashing seas below. I mapped our course cove by cove, in one bay expecting to see the flat pasture of the marked farmstead and being amazed to see only a cluster of buildings tucked into the base of cliff and bush. Eventually we rounded the last point, but even then had to fight the final mile into Cannibal Cove. Despite maximum effort, we only managed half our normal cruising speed along the peninsula, such was the wind and sea. Over dinner that night - our first at a table - phrases like "hardest paddle ever" slipped into the conversation.

The front passed over that night and on our last day we were paddling by dawn to the promise of a glorious still day and with a flood tide to help us along. Hats pulled down, shades on, bellies full of pancakes, and we were on a mission from God - to enjoy the pubs of Picton on a Sunday. Straight down the centre of Queen Charlotte Sound, taking in the glorious scenery only in passing, a marathon race against ourselves. It took three hours and three quarters to cover most of the length of Queen Charlotte Sound, from the furthest campsite at Cannibal Cove to Picton. Rob, handicapped by his appropriately named boat, took a little longer, but overtook me soon enough in the Guinness drinking.

Over our recuperative ales, we recounted our adventures and mused over the next Memories of discomfort, desolation, fear and frustration still fresh, Rob talked of sticking to short sojourns on his surf ski. For myself, this was just a reconnaissance of the Sounds' main thoroughfares and coastlines. Plenty more to explore there and further afield: Northland by winter? I'm sure that, once the bad memories wear off, Rob will become as hooked as I am on the good parts - the discomfort, desolation, fear and frustration!

Conrad Edwards

Titahi Bay

14 June 1995