

On the Dark side of the Moon

by Marie Riley – Sea Canoeist Newsletter No.60, Dec 1995

“I don’t think we can land there,” I shouted to Tim, as the nearer we came to the beach the worse the surf looked as it crashed on the boulders. This would make landing in our kayaks a hazardous undertaking in fit conditions let alone in the state of exhaustion I had got myself into today. I was hungry, tired and absolutely sick of the sea swell. We had already come a couple of miles inside the Sound and morale was pretty low but this was the only landing site we had spotted so far.

“What do you want do then, go in or what?” Tim got impatient as he always is when I start whimpering. “The further we go into the Sound, the further we have to come out.”

“Let’s go on a bit further,” I said,

“Maybe we’ll find something better.” More wishful thinking perhaps.

The morning had brought new promise with almost clear skies and a mild breeze from the south, just that good day to venture out of Doubtful Sound and what this so-called three to five metres swell really looked like. Did New Zealanders, in the switch to the metric system, think that feet were the same as metres? How would it feel to go up and down every 12 seconds with the height of a bungalow. After all we were only going to have a look, to plan for our two major open water voyages. On return we would go to Deas Hut which would take us further from the mouth of Doubtful but we had plenty of time and the weather seemed so unpredictable that perhaps it was better not to worry about it too much. But worry about the weather and the inaccuracy of the forecasts we did all the time.

The wind was a bit strange, coming from all directions, the sea was far from calm but it wasn’t as bad as we had seen before. We had come from Deep Cove, the head of Doubtful Sound in two half-day trips in quickly deteriorating weather. Today was a lucky break and so far it looked good. It took a long time to get out of Doubtful Sound. The scale is just so enormous that you tend to imagine that you are travelling faster than you really are. The sea was very confused with fresh water pushing out into the Pacific and the Pacific trying to push in and both flanks of the Sound turning the swell towards the middle. It seemed to go all right and without saying too much to each other, we gradually committed ourselves to the first big ocean hop. Dagg Sound here we come.

Well it took some paddling to get there. With the tremendous swell breaking against the cliffs, we kept about a mile offshore. The gentle breeze was building to a more substantial wind and the swell began to get a chop running on top of it. Whitecaps started to appear and because of its enormity, the scene didn’t change much, it seemed to take for ever. With one eye firmly focused on the dark clouds above the mountains we continued to make progress of 4 kilometres per hour. Dagg Sound has a very wide opening and the ocean rolls in unhindered. That’s what I had imagined but we cut the corner a little too much as we entered the Sound and had to struggle through the clapotis produced by the cliffs of the entrance. I know such a mistake should only be made by beginners but we had been sitting in our boats for about six hours and this may have impaired our judgement.

The New Zealand Fiords (called Sounds) are amazingly steep, rising to 1500 metres in less than a kilometre from the water’s edge. They are densely forested with all sorts

of trees and ferns and have much unusual wildlife. To go for a walk in Fiordland is a major undertaking and you will not be able to cover much ground due to the lush, dense rain-soaked vegetation. It's not called rain forest for nothing! The tops and peaks are not forested but are difficult to reach due to the dense forested lower slopes. Another problem is the rain. It is claimed that this is one of the wettest places on earth with an annual rainfall of approximately 6 metres. When it rains you are able to fill up your billy as if you were holding it under a tap.

The Sounds penetrate the mountainous region up to about 45 kms and are remarkably deep. At the head of the Sounds the water is fresh on the surface as the run-off from the surrounding land is tremendous and fresh water is lighter than salt water. The colour of the water is dark due to the peat and tannins from the leaves. There are no people living on the west side of Fiordland because of its inhospitable character.

So we went on and spotted another boulder beach about four miles inside the Sound. It looked good. Fantastic as all I wanted to do was get out for a wee and eat and sleep. Holiday of a lifetime? We both agreed and made camp. We were astonished by the number of sandflies. They rattled between the flysheet and inner of our tent and made a noise as if it was drizzling. When you looked out of the mosquito net, it was if smoke was drifting from our tent and surely they were out to eat us alive.

In the night some deafening sound from nearby kept waking us up, surely one of those strange flightless birds, I thought, comfortable with the idea there were no man-eating animals in New Zealand. The next morning was so gorgeous that it was hard to take in, but you had to be on the water to escape the sandflies. Totally weakened by the previous day's experience, we set out to explore Dagg Sound, surely one of the least visited Sounds.

All day long we worried and discussed how we would get out of Dagg Sound, by foot via a mile long portage which would bring us back to Doubtful, paddling on towards Breaksea (seemed foolhardy and reckless) or catch a lift either way from the crayfishing boats which use Dagg as a night anchorage. This of course assuming they would offer a lift. Paddling didn't seem to be an option. I had been rather scared by the unpredictable weather and the enormous scale of the seas and disappointed with our very slow progress at sea.

Fretting about this dilemma we had a marvellous day, playing with the dolphins, observing the penguins, our neighbours who were responsible for the astounding amount of decibels produced at night, and generally enjoying the magnificent dynamics of the landscape. It was not too cold but cold enough for us to have permanent woolly hats on. There was still a lot of snow on the tops, almost down to the treeline. We explored the portage and were disappointed by the track which would cause a limbo dancer severe problems let alone two fully laden kayaks and two exhausted paddlers who after all had taken up paddling because they didn't like carrying heavy packs. And those sandflies were something else.

We made our meal and settled for the night by listening to the BBC World service and Radio Australia when suddenly Tim heard a diesel engine gently coming nearer. Adrenaline rushed through our veins; perhaps we could have a lift after all. We rushed out. Careful not to stumble over the driftwood, we made our way by torchlight to the beach. Great spotlights were focused on us while we shone our miserly Petzl back, which was just as well as the skipper and his mate had thought we were deer which

would have supplemented their dinner. Deer don't carry torches so Tim paddled out to meet our saviours. Full of hope I waited.

“They are the Doubtful boys, but probably tomorrow there will be some Breaksea boats coming.”

Another day in Dagg Sound with the sandflies. During the morning it started to drizzle which later turned to rain, so we settled for playing chess and did not leave the tent until 4.00 p.m. to stretch the legs. Fully covered against the sandflies and penetrating rain we had a walk up a nearby hill to get a view. You get soaked quickly as all the trees are covered in an inch of spongy moss which on touch will release half the water it is holding. It is also amazingly slippery and the forest 'floor' is covered with half rotten trunks which are covered in moss, making walking a balancing act. And unless you walk for a day and reach the tree line, you will not be rewarded with a view as the vegetation is so dense. Returning to the tent we scanned the horizon and a cray boat was heading in. Tim paddled out and was told another boat with a skipper called Cyril would take us. All we had to do was be ready at first light. Totally relieved we settled for the night.

At night the lovely stream which provided us with excellent fresh water burst its banks. A rain storm was raging and many trees fell or cracked. The pebbled bar created by many ocean storms, which almost provided a bridge to the other side of the stream, was washed away and the stream changed into a raging torrent. The noise was deafening. Huge boulders and tree trunks swept past with the cascading water. At least it kept the sandflies quiet, which was handy when we checked the boats. I didn't sleep at all in fear of being drowned by the river rising.

Next morning we overslept. Not by much but we were not ready at first light. We saw the first boat head out, and a second but the third boat never came. So we headed out into the Sound to suss out what was going on. Tim went to Anchorage Arm where the boats spend the night but it was empty. Our hopes of a lift were dashed.

The weather seemed to have quietened down although it was gusty at times. The sea seemed pretty big. We discussed the options and re-arranged the kayaks so emergency gear was easily available. I kept on thinking, 'We can not risk this, look at the weather, it is a hell of a distance. We have to play it safe.' But we were going to have a look at the open sea and then make a decision.

Getting out of Dagg was not too bad. Some expected confusion around Towing Head but nothing too dramatic. We were actually going quite strongly and the weather improved. So we pushed on and passed our halfway mark. Coal River, to us would be a landing of sheer desperation if we had to try there. We were about three miles off the coast and you could see the surf crashing on the beach; not a good sign for an emergency landing.

It was now about 12 noon with another three to four hours of paddling to go. I was going full throttle but could I sustain it? Little bits of Mars bars kept up energy but I got a bit thirsty. We met our first squall and I didn't like it but there was an end visible and you only had to hang on, and that's what we did. This cleared relatively quickly and in 15 minutes we were back on track, Time taking pictures and me just wondering why Breaksea Island did not get larger. We saw lots of petrels and gannets, and passed what later turned out to be Cyril but he never saw us as we were quite small in such a big sea. Quite often Tim would disappear out of view for some time

when we were both riding in a trough. As the chop on top was not from the same direction as the swell, this made the kayaks crash up and down for an exciting ride.

All of a sudden, there was another squall. It got pitch black and the wind picked up very quickly. Whitecaps formed and progress was extremely slow with the kayaks crashing through the waves. The noise was overwhelming. I started to panic but thought at the same time that all I could do was keep paddling. I screamed to Tim to stay near to me. I'd lost control of one of the footrests. Tim shouted to paddle harder. The sky did not change colour and clouds were racing inland. Then it stopped and after 40 minutes, we got back to normal. Determined to get to Breaksea before another squall hit us, we really went for it.

It was really great to enter Breaksea with the swell on our backs. We headed for Sunday Cove and the fishermen's barge and what a lovely surprise it was. We were invited on board for a shower, to dry our clothes and to stay in a fantastic cabin for as long as we liked. I thought it was all worth it.

We stayed three days and sat out another of those amazing storms in which the fishermen didn't venture out. We had a great time with the fishermen of *Electra*, *Trojan*, *Surprise* and *Rat*, and learned about their plight and how familiar it sounded with quotas and overfishing. We met up with Cyril who never made it to Dagg Sound due to the poor weather. He assured us everyone was on the lookout for us and in radio contact and that we would have been picked up the next day.

They entertained us with meals, beers and endless cups of tea. Our trip had not quite finished but the major hurdle had been taken and passed; if only just.