

Double Circuit of Lake Waikeremoana

Here's a story by a chap who was 78 at the time and I reckon NZ's strongest old bugger paddler. He could paddle 50 kilometre plus days with me or on his own. - Evan November 2008

- J. Flemming

It's a cracker of a day here in Rotorua, with a forecast of about twenty something and no wind (or breezes even) to speak of. The sky is brilliantly blue and it makes me wonder why we aborted the second half of our proposed paddle on the "Sea of Sparkling Waters" yesterday. Mind you, it was three hours away, on the other side of the Island, with a forecast of strong gusting winds to be followed by rain... so we scarpered. Not a big decision really, considering what was to be expected, and now we are stuck with it, and home again. At least we did get circuit number one done, though I missed out on about 5-6 kilometres at the tail end.

The trip started nicely and we paddled 27 kilometres before we camped up for the night. A head wind initially kept us busily swinging arms and paddling deep to make headway, but soon after the lake turned near to a flat mirrored surface and the only disturbance was caused by our paddle blades entering and leaving the water.

We paddled anticlockwise and followed the shoreline (in close) up the Whanganui Inlet to the far end by Hopuruahine Landing, then swung left and after exploring a backwater and stream famous for large brown trout resident there, carried on past Whanganui Hut (set back from the lake amongst the trees) and right back to an overnight stopping spot across from Mokau Landing. On our way through we paddled in and under the Waihirere Falls which fell gently down over the multi-layered rockface into the lake. We set up camp by a long sandy beach with a grassy area, and thick bush up behind us, and a fireplace set up nearby.

Unloading gear from our boats and setting up for the evening was followed by snapping the tops off one or two beers and then finally a sit down!! At last, eh!! We'd been hard at it all day. (Well it seemed like all day, but was actually only for the afternoon after arriving from Rotorua around lunchtime.) It was nice to relax without our arms gyrating frantically all the while, and the beers were pretty good too.

It wasn't long before the sandflies discovered my Mate - they came in hoards and as if fitted with their own wee GPS things, homed in on him in particular. A quick rub-down around the ankles and back of my neck with Dettol and baby oil, assured they gave me a wide berth but continued to give Evan the works. And as the Lad proved, swearing (profusely) at them does NOT deter them one little bit and they just persisted. It reminded me of our circuit around Manapouri some years ago - they actually fed off Evan, all the while, and left me without too much of a problem at all.

Then night fell... CRASH ! (just joking) and we had a near full moon. I set my stretcher up at the water's edge beneath the stars whilst my Mate tried to exterminate the many troublesome creatures that had managed to creep into his tent whilst he was erecting it. It took him awhile, but he finally settled down, except for the occasional expletive on discovering yet another little "bugger" that had escaped him. I looked up "expletive" when I got home, and found it meant "meaningless exclamation" so I guess that is why they kept at him, so to speak.

I lay comfortably on my stretcher, snuggled up in my sleeping bag beside the gently lapping water and in amongst the deer prints in the sand about me. Would they come down from the bush behind again tonight I wondered? Not the most spectacular display of stars I have ever seen but enough to brighten the sky and have me thinking how great it was to be alive, lying on my back alongside this beautiful lake with enough light from the moon to give me a grand view of the surrounding hills and out across the water. Just prior to dark Evan and I had spent time watching the kereru (wood pigeons) sweeping into the bush just to our left for their evening camp. There were dozens of them, and coming from all directions. We saw them daily during our paddle, feeding on the kowhai trees which border the lake, completely unconcerned as we paddled beneath them at times, and not much more than a paddle length away.

We both slept well and I was up before the Boy (both mornings) but last on the water. Evan has this “packing up a boat and getting away quickly” thing, down to a fine art. Like me, he has a boat-full of gear to be stored and yet only limited openings to his hatches compared to me, and I reckon that should slow him down. My boat has four openings, all a good size, which should make it simpler to “chuck everything aboard”, but Nooooo, he beats me every time. But then again he IS only about 30 years younger than me, and probably a little bit more supple in his movements and that must count for something ... that’s my excuse, anyway This same guy has been paddling about 7 years and has amassed something over 14,000 kilometres in that short time. A fanatical paddler, fully hyped up with a paddle in his hand, and always determined “to get away early next morning”. “Fifty” seems to be firmly etched in his mind these days ... “No good knocking off when you have only done 40 odd kilometres for the day, it’s got to be 50 or it’s hardly worth putting ones boat on the water”.

I reckon he is an inspiration (and a bloody pain in the neck at times) to some of us older guys, and probably others. He is an extremely safety-conscious guy, with a weird sense of humour, (some could see it sometimes as abrasive) and overflowing with his commitment to paddling, and organising of trips and days on the water. I think he is a great guy (I have to say that ’cos when he wins a \$100,000,000 (Yep, a hundred million) he is going to give me \$2.50.

Right - back to our trip. Day two saw us proceed on around the shoreline, thru the Narrows, and turning to our right, up to the top end of Te Puna Bay and beyond to the site of the new DoC hut. A short break here where we met up with a group of two couples from South Africa. We had spoken with them at the motor camp previously. They were out for four days and having a leisurely trip, despite battling the winds (like us) the day before. Also made contact with a friend from Palmerston North, fishing and hunting with family members for a few days. Have run into Brian several times on this lake, which is one that he usually has success with and manages to take home yet another deer to top up his larder. We paddled on and into Marauiti Bay, and passed the hut where two trampers were obvious. Next stop was Maraunui Bay and a leg stretch adjacent to the DoC campsite there. No one in residence, the whole area had been freshly mown and it was clean and tidy. Onwards again and eventually turned into the wee bay at Korokoro DoC camp and found the South Africans setting up their gear. Their paddle being from point to point and not along the shoreline, We saw them arrive not long before us. Evan and I carried on down to the site of the Waiopaoa Hut and had another rest break. Just one tramper there, a young German chap who had only been in the country five days and was thoroughly enjoying Kiwiland and what he had seen so far.

Off again, and for the next few hours we skirted all the shoreline right back up to the Narrows. It was near to dead calm as we proceeded through. Continuing on (we had to as we hadn't reached that magical number of 50 yet) and began sussing out a campsite. It was down by Paengarua Bay we finally went ashore. This was the area I stayed at over Labour Weekend with Evan's wife Linda and her crew. We didn't go up into the camp, but set up on the beach by the water. Hopefully there wouldn't be a heavy frost on the ground (or the boats) next morning as it was on our previous visit. There wasn't, and in fact we had a light shower of rain in contrast, but it didn't last long and we paddled off next morning in fine calm conditions again. A good camp and even managed to crack a couple more tinnies as we relaxed after setting up our gear. I again slept under the stars (though in fact there were none showing and the skies began to look a bit ominous) so I laid my flysheet beside my bed so that I could pull it over me if it rained at all. It did so about 5.00 a.m. I got up not long after and we were back on the water a little after 6.30 a.m.

We had about 3 hours paddle ahead of us back into Home Bay where we would restock our tucker and then begin the reverse paddle back around the lake. Conditions were good until we got to Papaotewhaka Point and below the Otiringa Bluff which towered high above us. Things changed markedly from here. The gusting winds began again and chased us around towards Onepoto. The further we went, the stronger the winds became and paddling became uncomfortable as we cruised below the Bluffs. The size of the waves increased as we passed through the sloppy disturbed waters which bounced off the rocky shoreline and had us bucking and bouncing as we proceeded down into the bottom of Sandy Bay. It was hard to get a paddling rhythm and was very uncomfortable. I can't imagine why they called it Sandy Bay ... it was completely lined by jagged rocks, big buggers, with absolutely nowhere to land or get ashore in case of mishap. Both Evan and I agreed that the waves which were bearing down on us continuously, with little space between them, were about a metre high (some a wee bit more, some a wee bit less). The cold spray was being whipped at us as it was blown free of their tops and we were cold and wet even before we landed. We had to turn back into them as we reached the bottom of the Bay, and swinging left, followed the curve of the beach and then finally back to our right again and around the point of a small headland, and followed (and were pushed by) the waves into a sheltered spot deep in Onepoto Bay where we drifted ashore. Thankfully none of the waves were dumping on us as they raced down the lake, but they lifted us high, and dropped us down again into the trough between, as we tried to ride them safely and stay right way up. An interesting time to be sure.

It was good to be ashore and safe. I was absolutely soaked and cold. I poured myself a hot drink after dragging my boat clear of the water and put on some warm gear. I walked just above the beach and looked back up over the lake. It was covered entirely as far as I could see with white caps, rolling waves and gusting wind shifts.

I think Evan was in his element

We discussed the conditions and the fact it didn't look as though it was going to improve (not soon anyway) and I accepted the option of aborting at that point. I would not have been happy at the prospect of maybe two hours or more, fighting my way back up lake in THAT!! After a short break and a promise to drive back to collect me, my Mate donned some additional clothing, climbed back into his boat, skirted up and pushed himself out from the shore. I saluted him but don't think he saw it. He seemed

to be concentrating, eh. Before he could head north again, he had to complete the bottom curve of the Bay. I didn't envy him. I watched as he moved off, quickly at first as the wind and waves caught him, and then slowly as he made the turn, e.v.e.r s.o s.l.o.w.l.y, he began to inch forward. He was barely moving, his arms were swinging and his paddle seemed to be doing the job it was designed for, but he seemed to be doing it without going anywhere. I reckoned I could have taken a dozen photos of him and they would have been perfectly superimposed over each other, except for the bucking and bouncing and blurring of his paddle. I sipped my hot drink and thought, "the bugger's Mad". But then after what seemed an eternity, he began to inch forward and finally made some progress. I moved around to a different angle to watch him, and he appeared to be stationary in the same spot (except for all the waving bits) and eventually just became a small dot in amongst the rubbish, far in the distance.

Another hot drink before I cleared out my boat and carried it and all my gear to the head of the boat ramp, then walked around for a bit to warm up before finally sitting with my feet up, reading and waiting for Evan to return. I got up several times to check conditions on the water - they eventually began to ease slightly, but still didn't look too inviting, so I stayed put. Eventually the Lad arrived back and we loaded up. He said it had been a "busy trip" getting back to Home Bay - and I believed him. An ice cream at the Camp Shop and then a visit to DoC to check the forecast. We talked about carrying on with another anti-clockwise circuit but the forecast wasn't too good. Strong gusting winds with rain to follow the following day.

Nahhh, let's give it a miss, seemed to be the general consensus, so we came on home. And that decision in itself conjures up thoughts of another return visit sometime to try and achieve what we missed out on this time.

I'll be a starter!

J. Flemming (Shakey, but happy)