

Fighting the Easterlies

Auckland to Waikawau Bay

by Andy Wurm

2 - 6 April 1995

Distance: 110 kms in 4 paddling days.

Ron Hepworth and I set off from Auckland to Tauranga. A new part of coastline which we hadn't paddled before, was our goal. On 2 April we left Eastern Beach, Howick, hitting out into the Hauraki Gulf and decided to paddle the southern part of Waiheke. We needed three hours till the south-eastern point of the island and had a lunch break. Ten to 15 knot northerlies with an outgoing tide was perfect for the day. Looking back, we saw clouds and thunderstorms moving south over Auckland. The last bit through the channel to Pakatoa Island brought a 15 knot headwind and slight choppy conditions.

Before we left Auckland I had obtained permission to land and camp on Pakatoa Island for one night, on a spot where we would not be visible to rich holiday makers. This was in order to leave early next morning for a crossing of the Firth of Thames.

Our objective next day was the west coast of Coromandel Peninsula, north of Colville Harbour. We paddled about 50 metres apart for the four hour crossing without land protection. Two fishing boats greeted us and were shocked when hearing where the end of our trip was - Tauranga. The closer we neared Happy Jack, the windier it got and sometimes I thought the island was never coming closer. Entering the crystal clear waters of Elephant Cove, with stingrays visible, reminded me of Arid Island. It was warm, with great views to Waiheke and Pakatoa islands. We took our time and enjoyed a substantial feast of salami and cheese sandwiches before continuing to a pebble beach near Ohohi Stream where we pitched the tent. Huge old Pohutukawa trees gave a magical and special touch to this place, especially when the sun set.

The forecast next morning brought bad news, 25 to 30 knot north-easterlies. We called the day off and filled in the time with short walks, a great bath in one of the streams and reading books. Late afternoon, heavy wind squalls and lots of rain in the ranges. I wanted to continue and was tired of sitting around looking out to sea.

Next day, my wedding anniversary, the forecast was reasonable, 20 knot north-easterly winds with a two metre easterly swell. We packed and two hours later hit Cape Colville. Kaiiti Point started with a tide race while the other points had minor tidal streams. The coast became more and more beautiful the further we paddled south.

Just at the wrong moment off the Cape, Ron's steering cable clicked out in the cockpit, at his feet. He managed nicely in the conditions and we landed in a sheltered comer of Jackson Bay where the rain started. After Ron fixed his steering, we decided to continue although it was tempting to wait for better conditions. After leaving the bay, 20 knot headwinds hit us. Rain sprayed in our faces but worse was the so called moderate sea. It looked pretty wild out in the channel. Ron paddled further offshore in the channel to avoid the rebound waves from the rocky coastline, while I remained closer to the cliffs. The swell was around 2metres in height. We fought our way eastwards but soon decided to surf into Fletcher Bay. We had had enough. Landing

was OK on top of a tiny bar near a stream. The west side of the bay had dumping surf on a stony beach.

We had coffee from my Espresso cooker before walking up to a viewpoint on the walkway to Stony Bay. After observing sea conditions on the east side of Coromandel with binoculars, we should have gone on. Anyhow I promised Ron a birthday cake next day, but not in Fletcher Bay. We walked back and met a farmer and Wayne, a local sea kayak operator, who was helpful with marine forecasts. Later I looked at a notice board at the tiny DoC camp and guess what I read: 'Cakes made to order.' I couldn't believe my eyes. My order that night was for carrot cake with a creamy coffee dressing.

Next morning, I had an unforgettable birthday, with a cake and a candle which would not light because of the wind. All the residents enjoyed eating with us. Soon after 10.00 a.m. we left through surf while the camp residents waved farewell. We headed for a gap in a reef off the pinnacles. Again strong currents and a seagull feather was splashed on to my foredeck. The only but special birthday present - but what a way to get it. Conditions improved as we paddled, but after a good hot cuppa on one of many pebble beaches in the bay, we hit the open sea again. A perfect 10 knot north-east breeze turned into a 20 east-southeasterly within half an hour. Rebound waves off the cliff built up. We were soon fighting bad weather, rain, confused seas and a two metre plus swell. The beautiful coastline was hidden by rain, spray and clouds. Conversation was impossible and we paddled apart quite a distance.

Waikawau Bay was in sight and we landed though a gentle surf. The lady caretaker of the DoC camp gave us the latest forecast, 25 to 30 knot north-easterlies, with thunderstorms and gale force winds up to 35 to 40 knots. That's it. We gave up. The ever blowing easterly winds were too much.

We left the kayaks to be picked up later and hitched a ride with DoC to Thames. One day later Coromandel was flooded and the bay had West Coast surf conditions. When we picked up the kayaks a week later, DoC told us the kayaks nearly floated next to their house.

We hope to find the time next summer to finish this leg to Tauranga before continuing around the Bay of Plenty and further south.