

Fiordland Yet Again

Te Waewae Bay to Doubtful Sound

A trip by Erica Beuzenberg & Andre Gygax Easter 1989.

From The Sea Canoeist Newsletter No. 13

Erica Beuzenberg died on a climbing accident on Mount Cook.

We only had to wait three days for the suitable uncommon easterly forecast; filling in the time with mountain biking. We had arrived at Invercargill to discover that no mountain radio was available, no primus spare parts for our failing primus, and no 10 Minute forms at the Police Station. The policeman said, “You do know, don’t you, that it is the roughest piece of water in the world?” At Tuatapere the local policeman drove with us to the take-off point three-quarters of the way along Te Waewae Bay and drove our car back, “It won’t be there when you get back otherwise!”

He asked if we could get through the waves. “No worries - we play in them.” The first ones were no worries, but half an hour later I broke through the last set of them, airborne, exhausted, and shaken. Grey sea, sky and land didn’t look welcoming but the sea is always interesting with a 2 m back swell crossing the predominantly southerly roll. Occasionally waves that looked like tidal waves thundered on to the reefs. Luckily none picked me up, it would have been the grandé finale. We motored along with the 20 knot tail wind and were amazed at the abundance of mutton birds with the occasional mollyhawk and albatross skimming over the wave crests and flying just out of reach. The landing at Sandy Point for lunch looked like certain death but turned out alright. It is always hard to assess a landing from the sea, and being committed on the crest is not the best time to make that assessment. We gulped lunch, nervous and freezing. We then paddled on to Big River and found a calm landing and perfect campsite - all that worry for nothing. We started feeling at home here – 57 km in 7 hr 30 mins.

It rained all night but was calm and the morning forecast was for 2 metre easterly swell and easterly gales from midday. We set off in thick rain and visibility down to 1-3 km which made navigation tricky. We stopped off at Gates Harbour, a lovely sheltered bay with a very wet campsite. 23 km in 4 hours. The gales never came but it rained all day and night.

Sunshine and blue skies certainly made everything look breathtaking. The forecast was for strong winds and swell diminishing. We walked around the bay all morning, admiring wild seas and finding caves. One had stalagmites and stalactites, stank and had a slimy floor of ratting seaweed and driftwood that we slithered over. There were plenty of deer signs on the beach — normal for Fiordland. We dried our gear in the sun then set off with a back wind and slight seas around Puysegur Point and into Otago Retreat. Suddenly dark clouds arrived with calm seas, a hush fell over the inlet. A school of dolphins escorted us to Weka Island, then on to Codling Island where we camped. 25 km in 5 hr 30 mins.

Forecast NW gales from midday. Just as we got up it started raining and it was not hard to decide on a pit day. Andre went fishing and was back in no time with three large cod; nothing but the best eaten here. In the afternoon we went for a two hour paddle into Isthmus Sound. A rainy windy day.

Forecast strong westerlies and 3 m swells. We paddled to Welcome Bay for lunch, stopping at several long golden beaches. Then we paddled round Gulches Head in a furious but fun sea and a wind that got so strong that we no longer made forward progress. We turned back and in calmer waters met our first cray boat. They were dancing with the rocks between the waves. It looked a bit dangerous to me. They said

that they were going to Dusky Sound tomorrow if we wanted a lift. After much ‘Umning’ and ‘Ahning’ we agreed as we were keen to discover what cray fishing was all about. We then paddled to Kisbee Bay where they were to anchor for the night. I had a guilty conscience accepting a lift on a kayak trip. We got there in no time with a strong back wind, but it was freezing. We spent the night on the cray boat and had our first taste of the amazing hospitality of the cray fishermen.

We didn’t sleep much, with the sounds of the storm raging, the boat rocking, thumping and splashing, and I thought we were sinking. Next morning it hailed with 50 knot squalls. We had a great sleep-in before they shifted the boat to calmer waters in Isthmus Sound. We caught cod for lunch and went for an afternoon paddle up Isthmus Sound in a back wind hail storm. A 10 minute portage brought us into Long Sound and luckily we had only a few squalls coming back to the cray boat. We were then offered a shower and what a surprise - you can sit or stand in the toilet while showering and sandflies can bite simultaneously!

Fresh snow! The boys fished for cod and groper for lunch. Andre’s rod got shorter every time he caught a dog shark and I became a professional filleter. The restless fishermen steamed to Gulches Head to see if they could sneak into Chalky Inlet but huge swells turned us back and we steamed into Revolver Bay in Long Sound. Andre spotted a deer on the beach and the boys went after it but no luck. More yukky weather.

A bit of a rough night, SW 40 knots and showers but the days went by fast with such a great bunch of people. We pottered on the beach for a couple of hours and spent the rest of the time chatting on the cozy boat.

The fishermen had had enough and wanted to go home. It was alright for us, as it was still a novelty to be here. We steamed back to Kisbee Bay and tied up next to a yacht. The chopper arrived and flew the fishermen home, leaving the cray boat in our hands. The weather deteriorated and forecasted SW 60 knots and 6 m swells. Thankfully the inner sounds are protected.

Sunshine, between rain squalls and very cold, SW 35 knots. We paddled to Puysegur Point where the sun shone. What a sight the 6 m swells were, as they broke like bombs, and what a waste that no one lives in this prime piece of real estate. We passed two deer on the track. When we returned the yachtie said that it had rained and hailed all day - the further into the sounds you go, the wetter it gets.

Calm weather but heavy clouds and still a 5 m swell. The yacht departed for another bay for better shooting. Andre didn’t seem interested in doing anything so I paddled to the head of Long Sound and camped at the head near a thundering waterfall. Glimpses of surrounding peaks between clouds revealed snow caps. 35 km in 5 hours paddling.

I paddled back to the cray boat in completely calm and overcast conditions. Occasionally the mirror reflections on the water unbalanced me and I became confused as to which way was up. Andre wasn’t happy that we had missed an opportunity to paddle the next piece of exposed coastline.

The forecast was for a bit of everything. I tried boiled cod head for breakfast. It was dark when I started eating it. Most of it was really nice but it had a few slimy bits. As it grew lighter I noticed that the head had one empty eye socket - I didn’t feel very well that day! It took two and a half hours to pack. We paddled in calm waters and dull skies until Gulches Head where three tides meet creating jobbly seas. Then through to Bad Passage and a lunch stop on the contrastingly white Chalky Island. We decided to try for Dusky Sound and made hasty progress until a head wind slowed us to a stop just past West Cape. We spotted a possible landing which turned out to be a picture postcard beach

with ideal camping and easy landing. Drizzle soon became rain.

Seas were slightly calmer with a southerly tail wind. We packed up in heavy drizzle but as we paddled the sky cleared. Sunshine at last but now it blinded us as we tried to find Luncheon Cove and the barge that the fishermen said we could stay on. We found it in an unusual maze of little islands and just after making ourselves at home it started raining again. The barge was a dream with all the mod-cons and if you looked between the floor-boards you could watch the seals swimming underneath. We dried everything and caught fish.

It rained heavily and blew that night but at dawn we got a few minutes of sun as we paddled through Many Coves to Cascade Cove. The hut was derelict but two Christchurch couples had erected a tent city and invited us for lunch (their breakfast). We ate Bambi and Beans and left with Easter eggs. We arrived at Supper Cove Hut on dark after a boring dull day paddling in heavy rain. But the hut was perfect with a fire and some Easter trampers. 45 km in 7 hrs 30 minutes.

Again it blew and rained at night but was not so bad at dawn with a few minutes sun. This was the last time that we got reception from our walkman radio, other than several Australian Stations that were loud and clear. Further south we had received Invercargill National Radio quite clearly for the 5.00 a.m. marine forecast. Reception normally fizzled out during the day. We paddled to Disappointment Cove via the Acheron Passage. The day was dull and boring but not much rain fell. Unfortunately the clouds concealed the magnificent mountain tops although the rain did feed endless waterfalls cascading down into the sea. Fishermen in the neighbouring cove steamed over in the evening to ask if we had enough food. We suggested that a bit of bread would be nice. As usual it rained all night. 45 km 7 hrs 30 mins.

We were just leaving in the drizzle when the fishermen arrived with a huge box of food, even worse, Andre accepted it. Then we had to try fitting it into the kayaks. We paddled up the coast for Dagg Sound but gave in to the relentless head wind and headed for Breaksea Island instead. It was a great hut with a shower and no sandflies apart from the cloud that came out of our tent when we hung it up to dry. The sun came out for a moment and we even wore shorts.

NW gales shook the hut and the rain dropped in torrents like waves breaking on the roof and windows. Some time to read at last.

A southerly change meant a sleep-in. We left at lunch time for Dagg Sound, this time with a back wind and very exciting seas. We got there in four hours but unfortunately Andre was too seasick to continue. We caught some sun in the afternoon bringing the total sunshine hours to 11 in 19 days (this was actually the same total for the complete trip of 21 days). Camp was great, set on an island next to a lagoon and with big breakers at the head. We had our first campfire and I had just remarked that it was our first night without rain when it started to rain again.

It poured in the night and all the next day. We paddled out to the heads to discover it was now a strong side-wind, so we decided to do the Dagg Portage. This portage took four and a half hours and was most unpleasant, requiring some trial and error to find the best way to shift the kayaks comfortably. The track is easy to follow and is now blazed with red gel-coat. We paddled down the steep sided Crooked Arm and camped out at Doubtful Sound. A few stars looked good. 6 hours paddling.

A bit of blue sky! Paddled to Deep Cove where Fiordland Travel make regular connections to Manapouri and will transport kayaks and people for \$27 each, one way. 3 hrs 30 mins paddling.

We were delighted with the overall performance of our kayaks - A Selkie and a Puysegur, the latter not so good in cross winds - both built by Grahame Sisson. It was indeed a canoeist's paradise down there, especially if you get fine weather. The locals say this can happen any time of the year and without warning and they mumble about equinoxal gales. Between November and March seems the best time, especially in mid-summer. They say winter is cold but beautiful. They also take forecasts with a grain of salt, when you ask them the weather they look at the sky and say "Who knows?" The cray fishing boats are in the area between August and March.