

Four Round D'Urville

Yeehaa, what a trip.

On Saturday, 1 March, Mike and John from The Bay of Plenty joined Evan and myself from the Waikato. We piled our paddling, camping and other necessities into Evan's van for a weeks trip. Destination Wellington to catch the 2.00 p.m. ferry sailing to Picton then a short drive to Havelock. The main target was D'Urville Island but if the weather was against us there would be other options.

Before sun-up on Sunday we wound our way over the hills to the settlement of French Pass. Then, we got a view of the sea to the south west of the island. Huge white-caps as far as the eye could see. A few "Oh my Gods." passed our lips. The positive side was that the eastern side was going to be sheltered and easier to start with.

The kayaks were packed with the usual on-lookers showing a bit of interest then we were on the water at 9.00 a.m. Instead of heading along the NE coast first, a decision was made to have a look at French Pass. With time and tide in our favour we paddled into the flow, ferry glided across the top then back through with the current after rounding the marker. Even with the flow less than an hour from changing, large whirlpools and swirling waters meant a higher level of skill was required to negotiate this passage. Not recommended to be attempted when the flow is at its maximum.

The east coast shore line was followed to Penguin Bay where each set up their own tents. After unpacking my brand-new-not-out-of-its-bag-yet tent which was purchased on the way to Wellington, I could only find three out of the four poles. What the...ohhh nooo!! Then I found out some cheeky bugga had swiped it, hid it and kept quiet till the first assembly. Damn good prank. How the others kept it quiet is another story. Good one Evan!!

Was that thunder in the morning. No, just metre high waves breaking on to the shore and a messy chop from the southeast. The change in wind direction meant we could risk personal injury or damage to gear if we launched so we stayed for the day. Entertainment was damming the stream and skipping stones into the pond. Typical boy's stuff. The forecast had been for 35 knot winds.

By Tuesday, the wind was easing but water was still messy even though the forecast was for 40 knot SE winds. After a couple of hours the chief decision maker suggested we head out so we broke camp and were on the water again just after 9.00 a.m. Strong following seas caused a bit of concern and a couple of anxious moments. Brace Mike, brace. We sheltered near the Rangitoto Islands then crossed to Garden Bay and set up camp. Not an official camp area but it was going to have to do. The wind managed to grab two tents but they were caught before they could reach the water. No telling where they could've ended up. Here we had another afternoon of fishing from the shore. Four good sized blue cod for the four of us.

Our distance for 3 days was pretty minor considering we were aiming to get around D'Urville and not just up the eastern side and back. Weather conditions were improving according to the 5.30 a.m. marine forecast and we needed to be past Stephens Passage by 8.30 a.m. so we could use the current instead of fighting it. Lo and behold, it was calmer than we ever expected and we managed to glide over reefs and do more rock gardening. With names like Bishops Cauldron and Hells Gate, the mind can cause all sorts of images. What do you expect!

The western side is a paddler's dream. We followed much of the coastline then continued to Fleet Rocks and Victory Island where we found plenty of caves, caverns and long arches to go through before heading across to Nile Head. Down this rugged coast still in calm conditions we went into Otu Bay to collect water then past Seal Point. Obviously named due to the fairly large numbers of seals on the rocks and some in the water having a good look at us.

We didn't paddle the shoreline of Greville Harbour fearing the weather could easily change and trap us for a day or two. We checked out a couple of spots before camping over some sand dunes near the Southern entrance. The wind had picked up slightly but wasn't a problem. Our average distance had increased after clocking up 40 kms for the day. Apart from one beach back further this was the only place phone reception was available. A short climb gave good signal strength and most took the opportunity to phone home to say all going well.

A 7.30 a.m. start on the last day. Only 25 km to go including once more through French Pass. We followed the shoreline and took our time exploring coves, more caves and caverns. We crossed over Manuhakapakapa Bay and before we knew it we were around into Current Basin again. We stopped for lunch and headed off through French Pass about half an hour before the tidal stream changed. Evan, using his GPS unit recorded only 12 kph when he went through the pass. To finish off we paddled an extra couple of hundred metres past the French Pass camp site to clock over 25 kms for the day giving us a total paddle distance of 100 km. This trip can be done easily in four days giving time to explore the area but make sure you do your homework with tide changes and as always check weather conditions.

After packing up we stayed at Okiwi Bay camp ground at Croisilles Harbour then in the morning paddled the shoreline of the SW side out to just past Cape Soucis. We covered 25 kms with lots of rock gardening and some great sandy beaches to land on. We took a break for lunch and I decided to do a bit of surfing. After all the paddling done in choppy seas earlier and not having any problems I tried to straighten up in small waves and ended up in the surf...not far from shore...3 metres actually. John was taking photos and got a beauty of my hull.

We used the tail wind and swells to get back to Okiwi Bay, rinsed all our gear and got everything packed ready for the long haul home Sunday.

Especially for the likes of a trip such as D'Urville, we felt the most important things are timing and weather. If the tidal stream changes at 10.00 a.m. make sure you are there well before that as wind and other factors can change that time. It is better to have to wait for a while than miss the chance to get slack tide and be forced to turn back or risk rougher conditions. All in all a fantastic destination.

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