

Pirate and Madam Salami Tsunami Adventure Kayaker

- Greg 20/5/10

I started to imagine myself paddling from Auckland to Great Barrier Island and back about 5-6 years back when I had a sit-on-top Scupper Pro. But it wasn't until after a few years of putting paddling on the back burner and then purchasing a Beachcomber 2 years ago and up skilling that I started to set a time frame to achieve my goal. I learnt to roll and practiced in the surf and in the weeks leading up to the trip did trips of 35-45 kilometres every 2nd or 3rd day for preparation. What originally was to be a solo trip developed into a group of six, then cut back to two as people I had invited to join me pulled out.

Dates were set to take advantage of the tides for a successful trip and what should be a good chance for settled weather. I departed solo from Clearwater Cove's Westpark Marina in the upper Waitemata Harbour just after 8.00 a.m. in the last days of February with 16 days of food on board. Things were packed tight and I had moved my front bulkhead rearwards for more volume and I had what I called my "last minute items" dry bag bungeed to the rear hatch. As I left the shelter of the bay I was exposed to the 20-knot southerly winds and steep chop that were hitting me from side on and the boat was so heavy that it was ploughing through the waves rather than floating over them and waves washed over the deck. I felt a little unsettled with the strange handling and was concerned as I thought I would be experiencing worse conditions than what I was finding in the Waitemata Harbour. The chop was extremely steep and large around Kauri point and the bow was ploughing through the waves but I got used to the handling of the boat and once I had passed Kauri point I had a bit of a buffer from the wind by the cliffs on the leeward side, if not the chop which was both from the wind and the bounce back from the cliffs.

I arrived at St Helliers Bay an hour before low tide to spend the day eating ice cream and drinking coffee and trying to keep out of the hot sun while I waited for my paddling partner Andrea to finish work at the end of the day and to press on for the end of Waiheke Island. We got under way just after 5.00 p.m. with whoops and yahoos to finally be under way for the trip that I had been planning for so long. We took advantage of the outgoing tide and a 20-knot wind from our rear quarter along with surfing on the waves from the following sea. The destination for the evening was to be dictated by the conditions and we decided to pull into Otakawhe Bay Lodge by which time it was dark and I had totalled 7 hours of paddling and 48 kilometres. The bay is rocks and we had to unload the boats of the bulk of gear before we were able to struggle up to the lodge grounds for the evening.

After dinner and a plan for the next day it was to bed only to wake early at 3.30 a.m. so I had an early breakfast before we were to get on the water at dawn to take advantage of the tide again. We were to cross from Waiheke to the Coromandel peninsula if the conditions were good and after poking out from the shelter of Ponui Island and getting a weather report it seemed like it could be a tough paddle with a south east wind with chop, but we decided to set out with the option of turning back if we did not feel good about the chances of getting across without too much struggle. As we got out further into the firth the wind dropped, as did the chop. Then about 2 hours into the crossing the wind got up again and we aimed for Goat Island about 45 minutes away for a lunch break and some shelter from the wind. In the shelter of the cliffs and under the midday sun things got real hot and the sweat was pouring off so I went for a dip to cool down, then we got under way for the camp at Papa Aroha. The

wind was still about 20 knots and we finally arrived at the camp after 32 kilometres and just over 5 hours of paddling. It was early afternoon so we had plenty of time for swimming and washing gear and relaxing.

Fish was supplied by a neighbouring camper to supplement dinner and we sat and talked with our new friend as we watched the sun go down.

Up at 5.30 a.m. to get under way by 7.00 a.m. to take advantage of the tide once more and to get around Cape Colville to Fletchers Bay before the tide turned, only to be alerted of a tsunami warning due to the large earthquake in Chile. People were packing up their camps and departing and we sorted out some high ground to drag our kayaks to if needed. We packed everything into the boats and listened to the latest news reports on the FM receiver that I had on my phone. Texts and phone calls were coming in from concerned friends and relatives. We assured them that we were aware of the situation and were monitoring the state of the alert and would not take any undue risks. We discussed our plans and decided to aim for a landing about 1 hour up the coast where we would re-assess the situation. All the reports were giving us a 3-hour warning before any wave or surge was expected.

We informed concerned people at the camp that we planned to be off the water in an hour and got underway later than originally planned due to the uncertainty of the situation. Andrea was on a mission to reach our destination on the other side of Colville Harbour. I was stripping of my paddle jacket due to the heat build up as I tried to catch up to her. However she was on a mission and paddled right past the Island with the hole through it where she wanted a photo taken without even seeing it.

I stopped to talk to some boaties about the latest news, however they were not even aware of the alert but were grateful for the warning from me.

We landed as planned and had a bite to eat while listening to the news at the top of the hour. Warnings were still in place but we still had a couple of hours before we were under any threat. Looking at the maps gave us a few landing options but we agreed only to paddle where we could see landing spots ahead of us and to continue to monitor the news. The latest reports were that a 1.5m wave had hit Chatham Island and we were about 3 hours away from getting what they got.

As we paddled and I looked at the horizon with my ex-builders eye to the west I remarked that there seemed to be a bulge in the Ocean. I also noticed that the rocks on the coast were not wet as they should have been on an outgoing tide and we did seem to be paddling against what might have been an eddy or a change in the tide although it was not due to turn for another couple of hours.

We stopped at Fantail Bay for lunch and to decide if we made camp here or to push onto Fletchers Bay which was our planned destination. Reports were that Tutukaka was experiencing strange tides, Port Jackson had reported strange swells and that Fullers had cancelled ferry sailings for an hour but the warnings were now that tidal surges maybe expected but no wave. We also had weather reports that were favourable for the next day for the crossing over to Great Barrier Island but the wind was to get up over the following few days which could put the whole trip at jeopardy if we did not take advantage at dawn for a crossing while the wind and tides were in our favour. We needed to decide soon as the tide would be against us with too much delay and we were risking getting pushed back around the point at Cape Colville once the tide turned. I convinced a concerned Andrea we should push on, as I felt it would

be the safer option to deal with tidal surges today and cross tomorrow than to risk a crossing later in the week with less favourable conditions.

As we rounded Cape Colville we were now paddling into an incoming tide due to our delayed start but also the swell and the wind was blowing 20-25 knots with stronger gusts. Our heads were bent into the wind as we searched for any shelter we could to make our way along the coast to Fletchers Bay. This was the hardest hour we had paddled on this trip and we finally landed at Fletchers bay camp after 5 hours paddling and 34 kilometres.

Landing at Fletchers Bay we met some other campers who helped us drag our kayaks up the beach to the camp and invited us to a hangi that evening of lamb and vegetables and they even gave us some fresh water and beer.

After washing our gear and setting up camp I went for a walk up to the Sugar Loaf to observe the water that we would be crossing in the morning and get the latest weather reports. I saw some disturbed water to the left of Square Top Island and planned a route through the reef and around to the right of the Island, then over to Tryphena.

The next day was the 1st of March and was the date I had planned the trip around, as the tide was about to turn from high tide at an hour and a half after dawn. I wanted to cross in the early morning due to the lighter winds and to allow us to take advantage of incoming tide for half the crossing and the outgoing tide for the other half.

Stage one (reaching the Barrier) was almost complete and stage two was about to begin.

As we left Fletchers Bay under the full moon into small dumping waves just before dawn we could make out the white water of the waves washing over the reef before Square Top Island and this turned into what was to be my favourite day of the trip. A half hour into the crossing we had the full moon on the left of us and the golden dawn rising in the east and a flying fish went past us and glided for a good 50 meters showing us the way. The wind was blowing 10-15 knots from the east on our starboard side, a small swell and some chop but not enough to bother us to any degree. Half way across and I was thinking this is what sea kayaking is all about.

Still, we were grateful 3 hours and 21 kilometres later to be landing on a beach within Tryphena Harbour and were happy we had accomplished stage one of the journey. There were a lot of leaves in the water from the high tidal flows. We celebrated with a big breakfast from one of the Cafes and were entertained by one of the eccentric bearded bicycle-riding locals who couldn't believe we had paddled from Auckland and said we looked a bit too old to be doing such crazy stuff. We responded by telling him you don't stop adventuring when you get old, you get old when you stop adventuring. He stroked his waist length beard as he considered this and I challenged him to a race to Whangaparapara, us by kayak and he by bicycle. He declined citing the need to write some legal papers to gain custody of his children, one of whom was supposedly in her 30s.

We decided to take advantage of the next few days' predicted southwest winds and tidal flow to paddle around the Island in a clockwise direction. So we left Tryphena and paddled up the coast line exploring all the bays, all the caves, some of which were covered in bright yellow, orange and pink sea life and had kaka screeching overhead and a light drizzle bringing out the fresh smells of the bush.

We pulled into the empty Green Camping area at Whangaparapara and set up camp. As dusk approached a morepork landed silently in the tree above our camp.

My tent was on high ground near the bush; Andrea's was down by the waters edge. She started to get concerned when we noticed that the tide would come in and recede by sometimes a meter, a result of the tsunami surges and it would do this 3-4 times every twenty minutes. With the tide not full in yet and the water only about 300 mm from coming up onto the grass I suggested we move her kayak to higher ground so it would not float away that night and that we tie her ankle to a post.

As it turned out Andrea got a better night sleep than I did as up by the bush I had rats screeching and scurrying around the tent all night and I would come out and throw rocks into the bush every now and again to scare them away, only for them to return as soon as I was back inside my tent. Even the rain falling did not keep them away long. At one stage I could hear them gnawing away on something but I could not find what it was. All the food was inside the kayaks. It turned out in the morning that I had left 3 empty dry bags under the cooking shelter that were for my tent and fly and map bag and these had all been chewed and were full of holes.

The next morning Andrea was in a hurry to get going but I was tired from lack of sleep and I was also in holiday mode with no urgency to get anywhere so I took my time to have a good breakfast and break camp. It seemed that I was missing a dry bag as everything now fitted inside the kayak as the food had gone down a little. We finally left for Port Fitzroy at 10.00 a.m.

On the way we again explored the many caves and bays and I showed Andrea where I had once stalked and caught a wild goat when I was tramping around the Island many years before. We paddled through a 60 metre hole in the cliff, which provided a short cut out from Bowling Alley Bay. Shortly after I spotted a stingray in about a meter of water and drifted over him and lowered the camera to take some photos. The sea floor was littered in sea eggs.

Just before entering Man of War Passage I found a spot between two rocks where I could get cell phone coverage to call my wife and this was the last contact we could make for several days via cell phone.

After lunch at Oneura Bay we pushed on to Coffins Creek where we spotted another huge slow moving stingray. I was trying to get photos of him but he was only a foot deep and as my kayak drifted over him I was concerned about receiving a barb through the thin hull of the Barracuda.

When we landed at the Doc Camp near Port Fitzroy after 5 hours paddling the tide was a long way out and we emptied our kayaks of some gear and dragged them over the mud. Some observers who we later met were amazed at how much gear we were pulling out of our boats.

After finding a campsite and before setting camp I went for a walk to the store before they closed for some lollies and ice cream and fruit juice. We made friends with an older couple who were on the Island for about a week with their car and a German Doctor who was tramping around by herself and after diner just before it was dark the rain started to come down so Andrea and I sat under her extra tent fly and ate lollies before retiring to our tents to the sound of rain and a few lightening flashes. We were woken early by screeching kakas in the trees.

The tide was right at our doorstep now and it was easy to push the fully loaded kayaks into the water and continue up the coast. I wanted to paddle into Katherine Bay where there used to be a bakery that baked most of the bread for the Island but found out once we arrived that it had closed a few years ago.

We pushed on for the day's destination of Miners Head, but once we arrived the 20 knot plus south westerly was cool and blowing right into the bay and it was not pleasant. I hiked up a hill to get the latest weather reports which were for a southwest wind of 30 knots, and when I returned we decided to abandon this spot and push on around the north end of the Island.

This was another great day, from the copper in the rocks at Miners Head to the massive cliffs and caves that we explored for the rest of the day. I got a sore neck from craning my head upwards all day. The wind had increased to 25 knots and blew us around the top end of the Island where Andrea paddled into a huge archway that the water was surging through and as I went to follow a huge wind gust blew from inside to out and held me in place as I tried to enter the passage. After the gust died Andrea came out the other side and I sat inside it trying to get a photo as she paddled back past the entrance. The swell was surging and I went back out the way I had come in, glad to get out without the wind or swell causing any issues. We were a bit more sheltered along the northern face of the Island as the wind was forecast to reach 30 knots from the southwest and 500 meters out you could see the sea being whipped up by the wind. The swell was not too big coming into the sheltered route we were on and we were able to explore all the caves and passages while keeping an eye out for the bigger surges.

Around one point I came across a huge school of Yellow Tail sized fish, yet they were sky blue. I had never seen fish like this and as I got my camera out they dropped from bathing on the surface and swam around a few feet under us. Later I was told these were probably Blue Mau Mau.

In one cave there was some fresh water dropping from above which Andrea dutifully paddled underneath while I took a photo.

There were two helicopters perched on a large rock with fisherman enjoying the hot sun but the fish were not biting that day. Looking out to see the wind on the water further out I expect the flight back to Auckland would have been a turbulent one.

Time was slipping by and as we had expected to round the north end of the Island after a night at Miners Head we were now getting near the turn of the tide and still had a way to go to get around needles point. With the state of the wind there was a real danger of getting blown right past and out to sea so thankfully we found there was enough water through the hole in the rock nearer to the main body of the island so once through that we pulled into a little rocky bay and timed the small waves so that we could land amongst the rocks for a break and a good feed. It was already 5.00 p.m. and as we were unsure about the size of the surf down some of the East Coast camps we decided to pull into Rangiwahakaea Bay for the night. By the time we got there it had been 6 hours paddling for a distance of 43 kilometres. We made the surf landing OK and pulled our boats up on the sand to discover that there was not meant to be any camping here. Things have changed since I was last tramping around and spent 3 nights here. However we were both tired and decided we didn't really have much choice but to stay the night here. We briefly considered paddling back up to Needles Point the following day to explore what looked like some interesting coast but the

weather forecast was for the wind to switch to the South 20-30 knots and then the Southeast so we were going to have head winds and increasing in strength over the next few days. The swell was also due to increase to 4 metres.

We were actually ahead of schedule after missing the overnight stay at Miners Head. Having no shore bound days so far so we planned to paddle down the East Coast until we found the next camp we could land safely but looking at the swell and the maps it was looking like it was going to be Harataonga although there was a slight possibility we could land at Whangapoua. As we reached the north end of the beach the surf was rolling in and I had great fun skirting around just outside the breaker zone, riding the swells in towards shore then getting back out before another huge wave could break and clean me out. I was trying to get some shelter off the land from the wind while Andrea was paddling much further out. I looked at the surf at the south end of the beach and decided that we should push on, as any landing would be rough with the size of the surf. It was another beautiful day with clear blue sky and blue water but the wind was increasing.

We stopped at a sheltered bay just before Harataonga to see if a predicted wind drop would occur later in the day and we might be able to push onto Awana or Medlands. The forecast was indicating that wherever we would end up on the Friday evening would be as far as we would get for at least 2-3 days and it was now Thursday. So we wanted to get as far down the Island as we could. After a few swims to cool off and relaxing in the shade of a tree for a few hours the wind did not drop in the late afternoon so we pushed around the point to Harataonga only to be almost blown over by wind gusts that must have been around 30-35 knots. It was only a short paddle to the beach and it was sheltered from the big swells and we bent forward and I tried to see under the brim of my hat that was flattened against my face. Some fisherman, on a trawler that was sheltering in the bay, were yelling something to us which we couldn't hear as we struggled by. I think they thought we were crazy or something. We finally made the beach and although we had only paddled 15 kilometres it had taken 3 hours. The estuary was banked up due to lack of fresh water and we dragged our kayaks over the sand bank then towed them up the estuary to the gate, which crosses a paddock to the camp. We put my kayak on wheels, which I carried inside my cockpit behind my seat but at the other end of the paddock the next gate was locked! So back we went to the estuary and put our boats in the water and paddled up to the camp and the other side of the gate.

That night some other campers cooked us up some "sausage" (crayfish) and we made plans for an early start to miss the worse of the wind and try and make Tryphena. This would complete the circumnavigation and worse case scenario Andrea could catch the ferry back to Auckland and I could wait out for better weather to paddle home solo. We still had a week to get to Tryphena at the latest so there was no panic. I actually would not have minded using the south east wind that was coming to paddle back around the top of the Island and paddle back down to Tryphena on the west side but Andrea was not keen on this idea and was determined to try to finish the circumnavigation in the direction we were going. But our plans were about to have an unexpected change.

The alarm went off at 3.30 a.m. with the plan to paddle from Harotaonga to Tryphena but Andrea said that she had been sick during the night and was not up to paddling. I had already had half my breakfast so made plans to walk to the top of Mount Hobson. I left an hour before dawn for a seven hour walk there and back and a half hour break

at the top. It was another beautiful day and I had missed the hot part of the day walking up, but by the time I returned the heat was baking and Andrea was keen to push on for Tryphena. After lunch and sweating through packing up camp the nicest part of the day was paddling out through a wave and having it wash completely over me to cool me down. Around the next point I went for a gap between some rocks and a wave came in from the side and washed completely over me again, but with some low bracing I came out whooping at the other side and refreshed.

The wind was a light headwind today and there was a nice big swell coming in, but we were to pull into Medlands for a bite to eat and to set up lights for an expected evening arrival at Tryphena. Andrea decided that we should not push on for Tryphena as she was concerned I might be too tired after my big walk, however I was fine for paddling but I preferred to stay at Medlands than Tryphena if we were to be shore bound with predicted 4 meter swells and 35 knot winds over the next few days so I didn't argue. I think she was disappointed with how the day had turned out due to the late start and not getting to Tryphena but for me getting to hike to the top of Mount Hobson was another highlight that I had wanted to do. The surf landing went without incident and was quite fun as the bay was sheltered where we had to land.

After wheeling the kayaks into camp it was discovered that a pin had dropped out of Andrea's rudder. Good thing we hadn't pushed on around Cape Barrier and it was fortunate that it had come out on land. We searched but could not find the pin so improvised with some number 8 fencing wire for an effective repair. That evening the wind increased and the next day any paddling was out of the question with huge surf rolling in.

Andrea walked with me to the end of the beach and I walked by myself over the headland to Kaitoke Beach and on to Claris where I went to the café Claris Texas for a good feed and coffee. After loading up with lollies and fruit and juice a truck pulled up and gave me a lift back to Medlands camp.

The next day was still windy so we both walked over to Tryphena and had a feed at the café, then on leaving I was able to get within a few feet of a kaka feeding on berries in a tree next to the road and take some photos. Halfway back a four-wheel drive pulled over and gave us a lift down the hill to Medlands.

The forecast for the next day was for variable light winds and a decreasing swell. We decided to get an early start to take advantage of the tide and not have to go around Cape Barrier with too much tidal current. A screeching kaka alerted me that it must be dawn but on checking the time it was only 1.30 a.m. Up in the dark for a dawn start and the couple that we had met at Port Fitzroy and were now at the Medlands camp were there to see us off as they were quite concerned about us leaving into the surf. Andrea got pushed sideways on to the beach but then had a good run out after being pushed off at the right time by our friends. I got distracted talking to them and saying our farewells and left my sunglasses on top of my hat. So after punching out through three big waves that washed over me they were gone. But we were on our way and the wind was light but the swell was big. With the swell rebounding off the cliffs there was some really choppy water in places and I tried to wait for Andrea before entering any rough patches, but sometimes I would just get swept along by the tide and swell and I would look back and Andrea would be like an ant on a ice block stick on these huge swells. Some places I couldn't stop, as it was so rough I needed to keep paddling for stability. We were almost 1 kilometre off shore in places to try to avoid some of the rough water. Once we were around Cape Barrier the swell and tide were behind us

and things were a lot calmer. Some huge surf was breaking on the rocks on both sides of us as we timed our run through one rocky out crop.

We pulled into the next available bay that was sheltered from the swells, had a bite to eat and set off for Fletchers Bay. The wind was only 6-10 knots from our fore quarter, the sea was glassy and the swells were long large and slow moving. The crossing only took us 2 and a half hours this time.

We followed the same route around Square Top Island and through the reef and as we approached Fletchers Bay a few big swells rolled in forcing me to paddle back out and wait for the set to pass. I saw my opportunity and landed safely on the back of a smaller wave. I looked back to see Andrea paddling in with a wave looming up behind her. I wanted to yell for her to wait but behind the wave that was catching her was an even bigger one so any hesitation could have been disastrous. The wave caught her and her boat broached, she had the paddle in the water trying to straighten it and I thought she was going to capsize but at the last minute she low braced on the other side and rode the wave in sideways. I rushed down and grabbed her boat before the next bigger wave rolled in over her.

She got out and we high fived after completing stage two of the trip successfully. But her heart rate was racing and she needed a breather before we dragged the boats up to the camp. We had covered 40 kilometres in 5 hours, one of the fastest days paddling.

The next day was another surf launch, which we pulled off without problems in front of an audience as the camp was quite busy. It was an uneventful paddle to Papa Aroha and Andrea got her photo inside the arch this time.

The forecast in two days time was not good with a gusty westerly of 25 knots so we got away the next morning for an early start with the intention of going up the northern side of Waiheke Island and staying overnight at Home Bay, Motutapu Island, a distance of 50 kilometres. It was a light headwind but the crossing was slow and the weather overcast and I was getting cold so I had to keep paddling without waiting as much as I should have for Andrea and we used 2 hours of outgoing tide and an hour and a half of incoming tide to reach the end of Waiheke Island. We then paddled to Onetangi where we had lunch and then on up to the Auckland city end. When we reached the end before we were due to cross to Home Bay, Andrea announced she had decided to push on for Saint Helliers, instead of waiting for the next day. Good choice with the wind forecast but my destination was back at the Westpark Marina where I had started from so we went our separate ways.

The next day was the toughest paddle of the trip with a strong gusty 20-25 knot headwind all the way, but I was feeling strong and the distance was only 33 kilometres so I put my head down and time seemed to fly by and I was home in 5 hours. The sense of achievement and jubilation as I paddled the last stretch of water into the wind and sea and spray and felt strong and invincible and feeling like I could take on anything the weather could throw at me was one of the best feelings I've ever had paddling.

Total distance was 417 kilometres and we had been away for 13 days, 3 days shorter than planned due to missing a few camps and the rush to beat the bad weather forecast. I had enough food on board for another week when I returned. I now have to return to explore around the Needles Point and Arid Island, areas that we would have explored if the conditions had been more favourable.