

Puysegur Point to Doubtful Sound

by Phil Handford 22-30 January 1996

Max & Phil Handford in the double sea kayak *Endeavour*.

January 1996 turned out to be the start of the trip of a lifetime for Max and me. Ever since our first aborted trip to Fiordland in 1992 there had been some unfinished business that was going to nag away at me until I had been to Puysegur Point. Since 1992 we had never really been in a position to both take three weeks leave from work and this was the year we thought we could stretch it. And even better, in Spring 1995 it looked like the El Nino weather pattern had gone and La Nina had arrived which meant typically more easterly and less westerly winds, ideal for paddling in Fiordland.

In 1992, six of us were going to paddle in two doubles and two singles from Te Waewae Bay to Doubtful Sound. That February, westerly winds forced us to abort the idea of going from south to north and we went up to Manapouri to start at the Doubtful Sound end. We spent so many days in Doubtful waiting for the weather to clear that we ran out of sufficient time to complete the trip. We never got past the Hares Ears at the entrance to Doubtful as the SW and NW swell persisted and the NW never seemed to stop blowing. We learnt some valuable lessons about Fiordland and did come home with memories of sandflies, rain and NW gales, and forgot what the sun looked like, but did end up with a good video thanks to Peter Garlick.

Departure date from Hamilton was 20 January 1996 and there didn't appear to be much sign that La Nina had arrived in Fiordland. The forecast was pretty shocking and certainly not paddling weather. The old nervousness and doubts returned as they do on these big trips. As much as I would like to paddle the southern coast from Te Waewae Bay to Puysegur Point it wasn't practical as the chances of it being suitable at the start of our holiday were about nil. We were fortunate to make contact with Gordon Johnston from Campbelltown Seafoods of Bluff who was taking the 60 ft *Cindy Hardy* from Bluff to Preservation Inlet on 22 January. They would be staying in the Preservation to Breaksea area until the end of March doing dive trips. Normally the *Cindy Hardy* transports crays back to Bluff from Fiordland in the crayfish season and harvests oysters in Foveaux Strait.

We arrived in Bluff, the day before one of those rare balmy hot Southland days. We'd left Hamilton in shorts and T-shirts and were still in them. The *Cindy Hardy* wasn't leaving until 10.00 p.m. so in the morning we loaded our gear and secured our 22 foot long *Endeavour* to the top deck, well out of harms way. We claimed the two bunks in the 'honeymoon suite', had a brew with the skipper Kevin, and deckhand Tracker, then set off to explore Bluff and various lookouts overlooking Foveaux Strait.

Soon after 10.00 p.m. a dive party of 15 arrived. It started to pour with rain as we lifted the mooring ropes and left Bluff Wharf at 10.30 p.m. It was going to be a long night as it takes 8 to 10 hours around to Preservation Inlet. We headed off to bed once we were clear of Bluff heads. Things soon got pretty rough with a big SW swell. I spent the night dozing in a state of semi-consciousness hoping not to get thrown out of the top bunk.

Day One: I set my alarm for 6.00 a.m. as I didn't want to miss going around Puysegur Point. I got up as we were just passing Big River, still a couple of hours from

Puysegur. There was a good 3 metre SW swell running and Puysegur looked as awesome as I had imagined, as swells crashed onto rocks around the point. It was still drizzling and the cloud was down as we steamed around the northern side of Coal Island in a classic dull misty day with poor visibility.

We pulled in behind Steep-to Island and dropped the divers off in pairs for a 30 minute dive, long enough to collect plenty of crays, scallops, paua and kina for breakfast. We had already got to know these Otago-ites from Milton and they generously gave us some of the catch. One crayfish for dinner and one for breakfast. Near Cromarty was to be our departure point and already the sun was coming out, the skies clearing and our bodies warming up. We loaded *Endeavour* on the deck, and with help, lowered her down about the 6 foot into the water. I hadn't practised getting into the kayak from this height and it's not very beamy at 28 inches. I could just see us taking a swim in front of all these people who already thought we must be mad to paddle up this coast. Luckily all went okay. We thanked them for the crays, said we might catch up with them in Dusky and then paddled the short distance to Cemetery Island. Here we collected our thoughts and let it sink in that we were actually in Preservation Inlet. Once the *Cindy Hardy* had gone there was just the two of us with one little kayak in about the most isolated place in New Zealand. As crazy as it seemed, all we had to worry about now was being able to get out of the place.

A SW of 15-20 knots was still blowing so we decided to run with it and paddle up Long Sound, pushing into at least one knot of tide in parts of Narrow Passage. These were the biggest tides for some time but would gradually drop as the days went by. We were only going as far as Sandy Point where there had been an old sawmill. This was a bad place to have our first camp. The sandflies were horrendous. On the brink of a mutiny we departed as early as we could the next morning. Fortunately nowhere else did we strike such bad sandflies. Overnight the wind had changed from SW to what was to be many days of SE and easterly winds and clear skies, as a large anticyclone moved south and remained south of Stewart Island.

Day Two: Puysegur Point was one of the 'must visits', so off we went. By the time we arrived at Cromarty there was a good 20 knot SE coming out of the bay. We briefly met up with Peanuts, the Cromarty Lodge caretaker, on his way out of the bay in a dinghy, head down as he baled out rain water. The lodge is apparently pretty impressive, although not completely finished, it is now on its second owner and rarely used. We didn't want to hang around until Peanut came back to show us around. He did tell us an American paddler had recently paddled up the coast around Puysegur. I was a bit surprised to hear this, as this is only the second time it has been paddled solo. We later worked out it was Brian Roberts.

We arrived at the Oil Store, as the Puysegur landing is known, and enjoyed lunch in the sun on an old boat ramp with few sandflies. The building that housed boats and various stores is now home to a few old beds and rats, the roof is still good and the water tank is still useful. A note on the wall from two Nelson paddlers, including Bevan Walker, '*Stuck here for 10 days waiting for the weather*', reminded us that we too could be delayed getting home. Although spending a night here in these conditions was pretty tempting, conditions on the other side of Puysegur were quite different.

The graves that have been re-marked at the landing are a reminder of earlier hardship; all perished due to drowning between 1895 and 1914 when this area was at its busiest with gold and whaling. James Cromarty is buried here, drowned in 1895.

The old tractor track out to the lighthouse is rapidly growing over and subsiding. It is now mainly used by hunters following removal of the lighthouse keepers 15 odd years ago. There was plenty of deer sign and fat wood pigeons on the track out to Puysegur. On a fine day it is a really beautiful walk with surf breaking on the rocks and reefs in Otago Retreat. A sole crayfisherman, the only one in Preservation over the summer, waited for his craypot buoys to surface as the tide turned in the narrow gap between Puysegur and Coal Island.

There is only one building remaining at Puysegur now, all the other buildings and radio masts have been dumped over the cliffs into Otago Retreat, slowly rusting away and slowly hidden by the scrub. The lighthouse is not as big as I'd imagined but has an impressive bank of light bulbs. The large banks of solar panels, that charge the batteries for the light, are very securely attached to the ground to avoid being blown away. The skies were clear but a good 30 knots of SE covered the sea in whitecaps and as a SW swell crashed into the rocks below the point where the spray was caught and whisked away by the wind.

The wind was enough to keep you well back from the cliff edge. The view to the south was impressive with the prominent Solander Islands 50 km in the distance rising steeply up out of the sea and the swell breaking over the Marshall Rocks south of Puysegur. To the north we could see as far as Cape Providence and we could clearly see the swells breaking on Balleny Reef, offshore from Gulches Head. Inland there was hardly a cloud to be seen, we could see the prominent entrance to Long Sound marked by Narrow Bend and high mountains further back. Treble Mountain stands out as a prominent peak between Preservation and Chalky Inlet.

Paddling back up towards Cromarty we kept on the leeward side of Otago Retreat as the SE coming down off the hills around Te Oneroa was now more like 30 knots with the odd bit of spray being lifted over by Coal Island. When we reached the point between Te Oneroa and Kisbee Bay, we ran with the wind to the passage between Coal Island and Steep-to Island; it was an exciting ride and we were quite pleased that Steep-to Island provided some shelter for the rest of the paddle across to Cavern Head and the bay inside Spit Islands.

As we arrived the tide was receding and the sand spit out to Spit Islands dried. We cooked tea at Spit Islands where there was ample driftwood and few sandflies and returned to the mainland to camp on the sand dunes once the sandflies had gone to bed. Such a beautiful spot; with its gently sloping golden sandy beech and the gold pingau grass on the sand dunes with bush right down to the dunes. Easy to see why a small group of Maori once had a pa here. The large sandy beach, which is such a feature of this spot, is now used occasionally to land light planes.

Day Three: As usual the alarm went at 4.55 a.m. and I reached over and turned my head lamp on, turned the radio on, plugged the earphones in and got out a note book and pen. The 5.00 a.m. news and then the Marine Forecast at 5.05 a.m. '*Easterly 20 knots, SW swell 2 metres reducing, outlook, similar*'. The wind that was blowing that night had gone, and there was not a cloud in the sky, in fact when I could see clearly,

the water was oily calm. We rose early as it was likely to be a big day. The sandflies were bad that morning. Max and rice and apricots had a disagreement about staying down. We were gone by 8.30 a.m. on our way to Gulches Head and our first feel of the open sea. We paused before entering Gulches Head so Max could have some more food to replace the missing breakfast. Gulches Head is an impressive steep, 500 ft high, broken headland and not a place you feel like hanging around in the swell apart from a quick photo or two. As we rounded Gulches Head, ahead lay the white cliffs of Chalky Island which made an impressive sight in the early sun.

The swell felt good as we progressed over to the inside of Chalky Island without a breath of wind. Chalky Inlet looked inviting with The Brothers forming a prominent mountain backdrop. There were places we wanted to visit in Chalky but the perfect conditions meant we could not pass up an opportunity to get up to Dusky Sound. You feel you are given these days as a special gift and to think you will get another tomorrow is being foolish.

The rock gardens in Bad Passage make another variation, but there was still some swell pushing in there and a lot of submerged rocks so we were a bit cautious. As we paddled directly for Landing Bay inside Cape Providence, the sea was still oily calm, apart from the swell. At Landing Bay it was low tide and I knew there was a reef sheltering the sandy beech, but the swell seemed to be breaking well out. The gap in the reef is on the western side where the waves weren't breaking and although needing careful navigation at low tide we reached calm waters behind the reef. Sitting in our kayak inside the reef taking a few photos I noticed a shark fin; the lagoon was full of sharks, obviously fishing on the incoming tide. Being so calm and clear it was like sitting on a 10 ft deep fish tank with about 20 ft visibility. Grey sharks, six to eight foot long, were cruising around us, not particularly interested in us but maybe a little curious. The fish life here was quite amazing.

We lifted the kayak up the beach ahead of the incoming tide. The kayak wasn't getting any lighter. The worst thing about paddling a fully laden double is that it's so heavy to lift. My worst fear was losing my grip and dropping it on some rocks and damaging the hull. Lunch, sitting on the beach was the standard bread, mustard, cheese, salami, cucumber and tomato. Occasionally there was jelly made the night before. Stopping here gave us time to assess the situation and decide to carry on around Cape Providence and West Cape into Dusky Sound. A very light breeze, only enough to ruffle the surface, came up and there was still not a cloud to be seen. We got extra food out on to the deck and departed at 1.30 p.m.

Cape Providence is one of those places where you can be extra cautious and go around very wide and add extra time to the open sea passage, or dodge inside the offshore rocks and breaking reefs and take the short route. We chose the short route, but you are forever watching for boils that mark shallow rocks or occasional set of swells that are about 3 metres instead of the average 2 metres. We bucked our way through here but by the time we got to the Providence lighthouse, about 2 km north, the sea was a lot more comfortable and the breeze had disappeared to nothing. West Cape (the western most point of NZ) lay ahead and Puysegur had disappeared from sight astern. Reefs along the coast protect the rocky beach, much of which you could walk along. Behind the beach, cliffs and steep faces which rise up to 1-200 ft and are covered in low stunted scrub, block out a view further back apart from the distant

mountains like Mt Inaccessible, The Stoper and Mt Bradshaw that rise up to 3500 ft about 15 km back from the coast.

We paddled a line direct for West Cape which kept us outside of numerous offshore reefs along the coast. We were well offshore and crayfish buoys made good stationary points against which to gauge our progress. The gentle swell was almost enough to send us to sleep on this long passage. West Cape itself is unimpressive but a major point on the voyage, as when you pass it you are looking up to Five Fingers Point on the northern side of Dusky and you lose sight of Cape Providence and all points to the south.

A light tail wind of 10 knots helped us along and woke us up. I had calculated our times based on 6.5 km/hr, which included stops, and this worked out perfectly as we reached Fannin Bay inside Dusky by 6.00 p.m. 'Duskey' Bay, as Cook named it looked so soothing. Such a huge area of low lying islands with a backdrop of steep mountains over 3000 ft. We paddled to Indian Cove on Indian Island. The sea-breeze that had been helping us along dropped away to nothing. Indian Cove turned out not to be such an exciting place to camp, so we made our 8.00 p.m. scheduled radio call on SSB mountain radio to the Invercargill base and then headed for Cascade Cove. It wasn't getting dark until after 10.00 p.m. and by the time we had set up camp and cooked tea, we didn't get into bed until midnight

Day Four: We had slept well after our big paddle (65 km) and decided a climb on to the tops would give the bodies a rest from paddling and a chance to see the beauty of Dusky from another angle. The forecast was still good and the weather was perfect with another clear day. We chose a steep narrow spur behind the beach and climbed clear of the bush and scrub within 2 hours. Within 3 hours we were on top of a 3,500 ft peak that gave us views in all directions, still blues skies and not a breath of wind, it was just unbelievable. To the west we could see South Point and Fannin Bay and the swell breaking on Seal Islands and Five Fingers Point. To the north we could see up into Goose Cove, Earshell Cove, Duck Cove and the entrance to Acheron Passage. To the east where the mountains rise over 5000 ft there was not a cloud to be seen. To the south we looked over to the Kakapo Range which rises up from Edwardson Sound in Chalky. We looked down on Pickersgill Harbour. This was exactly the same view of Dusky Bay that Dr. James Hector, the provincial geologist of Otago had sketched in 1863 and appears in John Hall-Jones's book, *Fiordland Explored*.

We had watched the *Cindy Hardy* cruise up the far side of Long Island, so when we heard a boat coming into Cascade Cove that evening, we knew who it would be. They were coming in to restock with fresh water at the crayfishermen's barge and to stop for the night. They invited us on board for a shower which we couldn't say no to, so collected our gear and paddled the 500 metres around to the barge. By this time it was about 9.00 p.m. After showers it was crayfish on bread with mayonnaise, Speights, leftover roast and veg, more Speights, a few lies and by then it was well after 11.00 p.m. We managed to enter the kayak from the boat which was now anchored in the middle of Cascade Cove and paddled off into the dark, much to the amusement of the divers. What moon there was, had gone down, and we had a little bit of a discussion as to where our camp was but managed to find the landing without too much difficulty.

Day Five: The weather was still very settled but there were forecasts of NE in the outlook. We wanted to paddle up to Breaksea as it looked like the weather might hold long enough to get up to Doubtful Sound the following day. With the settled weather, it meant we could do the portage at the head of Goose Cove inside Five Fingers Peninsular and around the top of Resolution Island into Breaksea.

We took a bit of a zigzag route. We visited Pickersgill Harbour and Astronomers Point and moored *Endeavour* where Cook had moored *Resolution* for six weeks in 1773. Then across to Luncheon Cove on Anchor Island where the first European house and boat were built in 1792. Here we met an interesting Swedish couple on a yacht who had been sailing around the world for the past three years and had last sailed into Dusky 10 years ago. We carried on to Earshell Cove on Resolution Island with its beautiful white beaches and brilliant red rata flowering all around us. We had lunch here, but didn't linger as there was a bit of wind coming up, and we were getting behind schedule to catch high tide at Goose Cove. We wove our way inside Pigeon Island and into Facile Harbour for a look, before carrying on around Whidbey Point into Goose Cove.

There is a 2 km tidal estuary at the head of Goose Cove and the tide pushed us in strongly. It was the most picturesque place I think we went to with clear waters, bush down to the water and rata flowers. We only had to get out of the boat for the last 20 metres. It is a portage of less than 200 metres to Woodhen Cove on the Breaksea side of Resolution Island. It is all grass and only rises a few metres above sea level. By the time we had transferred gear and boat to the other side and had a feed it was 7.00 p.m.

Paddling out of Woodhen Cove we saw a hind and fawn grazing the high faces of the cove in the evening sun. Out into the open sea proper there was no wind and only about one metre of westerly swell. Once around into Breaksea, the last of the afternoon sea-breeze helped us along. From this angle you get views of the rugged outside of Breaksea Island with its many pinnacles and vertical faces rising up out of the ocean. We paddled inside Gilbert Islands and set up camp on a sandy beach inside Disappointment Cove on Resolution Island. It was after 8.30 p.m. and we had missed our radio sched. The bird life on Resolution is impressive but the deer population seems to have exploded and the undergrowth has been grazed very hard.

Day Six: We awoke to an even better forecast of variable 10 knot winds and one metre SW swell with a similar outlook. We were packed and gone by 9.00 a.m. on our way to Doubtful Sound. There was low cloud around the hills but this was burnt off by 10.30 a.m. Breaksea Sound has much higher mountains rising up out of the sea than the outer parts of Preservation and Dusky. We paddled over to Entry Island and the entrance of Acheron Passage hoping for a good view down the passage but with the low cloud and darkness it didn't look as impressive as we had hoped, just rather gloomy.

We knew the *Cindy Hardy* was going to be in Breaksea at Sunday Cove, the same night we were, to change dive parties, but didn't think we would meet up. Shortly after, the *Cindy Hardy* appeared from Sunday Cove, another crayfishermen's base, and headed for Entry Island. It made a great scene; this large wooden fishing boat heading out in the mist; the dark mountains behind on a sea that was so calm that it looked like a piece of glass. We stopped briefly for a chat with Tracker and replacement skipper Gordon who warned us of the sea breezes that can blow up or

down the coastline between Breaksea and Doubtful. Fortunately we hadn't chosen to paddle up Acheron Passage the day before as Tracker said there was a 20 knot breeze blowing in Breaksea. He was quite surprised that we had virtually no wind.

We departed Breaksea by 10.30 a.m., still no wind and a one metre westerly swell. Coal River was to be our lunch spot. A tail wind lifted as we neared Coal River and I was amazed at the way the wind was getting dragged into the deep bay at Coal River, 15-20 knots in the bay while offshore there was nothing. It was pretty much a westerly swell coming straight into the bay so it didn't make much difference where we landed on the 1 km long black sandy beach. It was quite shallow so we had a double break to get through but only broached once coming into the beach. We lifted the boat up the beach and then climbed up on to the high sand dunes for lunch amongst the Pingau grass. Behind the dunes lay the tidal estuary of Coal River and a big wide valley running back into the mountains at the end of the valley.

Paddling back out of the bay into a head wind wasn't too bad as we knew it would be better outside. Once around the point it returned to the one metre swell with no wind. We were able to keep closer to shore which made the trip more interesting paddling inside the various rocks that lie along this coast. The coastline is all pretty much the same, but none the less impressive, with the mountains rising straight up out of the sea to open tops and lower down, heavy bush sprinkled with red rata flowers. Certainly not much coastline like this around.

There wasn't the sea-breeze going into Dagg Sound that I expected and we stopped off Castoff Point for a rest and snack. The entrance to Dagg looks an unfriendly place and obviously a long way inland to any decent landing. Paddling on from Dagg Sound, the sea-breeze increased to the point that it was pushing us along well; the white caps were increasing in number and size. Stopping to eat and drink had to be done with a bit more caution. We entered the familiar ground of Doubtful Sound in good time. This is still one of the grandest Sounds with its wide entrance and steep mountains rising straight up thousands of feet. We took some video of the Hares Ears and swell to compare with 1992 and then caught a very fast 25 knot tail wind to the Shelter Islands, arriving at The Gut Hut on Secretary Island by 7.30 p.m.

Here we read a log book entry from Brian Roberts that he had spent six days stuck at Breaksea waiting for the weather to settle. To paddle from Puysegur to Doubtful without a break in the weather still seemed amazing and here we were with all this food left and even the last of our fresh tomatoes.

Day Seven: Still a fine day and a leisurely paddle down Doubtful Sound to Olphert Bay opposite Elizabeth Island. The 20+ knot following sea-breeze made it pretty easy paddling although we had to watch for gusts and the odd bit of spray was being lifted down by Elizabeth Island. I was a bit concerned that Fiordland Travel might not ferry our kayak from Deep Cove over Wilmot Pass to West Arm after reading some comments in the Gut Hut. As I found out that night, that was the case. The old Leyland bus we used in 1992 was now obsolete.

Day Eight: We packed the kayak in a light drizzle, the first rain since day one and paddled off into the mist and Deep Cove. At Deep Cove we met up with Daphne, on a Fiordland Wilderness guided kayaking trip, who kindly offered to give us a lift over the pass the next day. In the meantime we met up with David and Fiona who look

after the Deep Cove Hostel and they generously offered to put our kayak on the trailer when they went over to the power station that afternoon. By 2.00 p.m. we were at West Arm, Lake Manapouri among the sandflies. We were promptly in our kayak and gone within 20 minutes. The last two hours of our crossing to Manapouri township were the worst two hours of our whole trip as we battled a head wind. The last 30 minutes of gale and driving rain into Manapouri confirmed we had got out just in time.