

## S.I.K.E

### South Island Kayaking Expedition 1995/96

by Brian Roberts & P. Caffyn

Paddler; Brian Roberts

Trade: electrical engineer

From: Denver, Colorado (returned to Denver and was a member of the Rocky Mountain Sea Kayak Club)

Age: 29 years

Two years previous sea kayaking experience; came from a climbing/skiing background. He quit his job and wanted to travel; bought a Klepper; wanted to see things from a different viewpoint; read John Dowd's books; packed up the boat; went paddling in Fiji and 3 weeks paddling in Australia. He then got a job in New Zealand.

*Timetable:*

*Brian's goal was to paddle around the entire length of the South Island coastline in a clockwise direction. Since he couldn't convince friends to accompany him, it was a solo unsupported effort which was a daunting prospect but proved personally satisfying.*

*Brian commenced his trip from Picton on 22 October 1995. On the first leg down to Christchurch he went out through Tory Channel where he explored sea caves just south of channel. On the first leg his only problem was dumping surf just before Kaikoura. It didn't break anything but he injured a knee. While trying to break out, a big wave flipped the kayak over Brian while he was launching. Pegasus Bay crossing was his longest day; 20 to 30 knot north-easterlies, and 90 kms in 13 hours to Sumner.*

*Brian then took a two week break in Christchurch to do a recce of the West Coast and Fiordland with his cousin. Changes were made to the boat with few modifications to the back rest and rudder foot pedals. He started again with lots of north-easterlies and calm days and made good time down to Dunedin. Worst stage of trip was the coastal bluffs and gravel beaches down to Dunedin. Otago peninsula was enjoyable and he was told about a dairy behind the beach at St. Clair; wet suit swept off the kayak while landing. The breakout from St. Clair was one of his toughest breakouts; stopped dead by some of the waves.*

*The only night paddle was to avoid headwinds and he went round Nugget Point at 4.00 a.m. in the morning, lovely coastline to Porpoise Bay. He stopped at Bluff for food.*

*The following is a more detailed account of Brian's trip around Puysegur Point, which he wrote while waiting for the weather at the 12 Mile:*

Five days, waiting. I was glued to the AM and VHF radios listening to the weather forecasts praying for a change in the winds. 'Foveaux Strait is a bit unrelenting, eh?' I rhetorically asked myself. Up until now, I had some pretty good weather to help me along the East Coast. In fact, I would wish for unfavourable winds at times so I could rest. Maybe I wished a little too hard because it all came at once and in the

wrong spot: Bluff. Gale force nor'westers had been consistently churning up the seas leaving little hope for a kayaker to get into Fiordland.

So frustrating... I could feel that 'expedition edge' begin to wither inside me. After three days of sitting at a backpackers, I figured I'd just better grin and bear the wind. So I launched from the protected harbour at Bluff and clawed my way into it. After several hours and only 17 km, I decided it wasn't worth the struggle. I landed through the surf and set up the tent for another two days. At least I had a good book to read - the voyages of Captain James Cook. And I was happy to learn that he had some incredibly bad weather in this area as well (...misery loves company). The book was so absorbing that I was reluctant to leave when the winds subsided. But change was in the air, it was 3 degrees when I packed up the kayak to push myself through the strait.

I stopped in at Riverton to notify the local coastguards of my intentions and continued to Colac Bay for the night. At 5.00 a.m., I listened to the marine weather bulletin predicting south-easterlies in the morning (you beauty) and northerlies in the afternoon (bummer). I launched hoping to make a little more progress. The 4 m swell from the dissipated nor'westers was quite impressive to watch as it battered the rocky coastline with tremendous force. I had to move quickly and get myself into Te Waewae Bay before the winds changed direction. But, they never came. The sou'easters persisted the entire day giving me the opportunity to reach Sand Hill Point by evening. It turned out to be a beautiful day for paddling. But then I went ahead and ruined it by picking a terrible spot to come ashore - my worst error of judgement. After a white-knuckle ride through the confused surf, I climbed to the top of a steep rocky beach and surveyed the situation; 300 metres to the left or right were much calmer areas with better sleeping surfaces. Ug... I was too tired to carry everything one way or the other. My punishment for the night was to squirm around on rugby-sized rocks trying to get comfortable. At least there was a beautiful sunset and no rain.

I was on the doorstep of Fiordland. And the coastline in front of me to Puysegur Point is considered the crux of a circumnavigation because there are no landings in rough seas. Gates Harbour (near Puysegur Point) provides some shelter, but is quite exposed to the southerly swell. Anxiety welled up inside me as I listened to the weather report; sou'easters in the morning turning to 50 knot northerly by the end of the day. The radio broadcaster announced it twice so that there would be no confusion: FIFTY... FIVE... ZERO knots. With apprehension, I packed the kayak and punched through the subsided surf at 7.00 a.m. Hopefully, I could make it to Gates Harbour before the hurricane set in.

The winds pushed me along as I admired the bush mat covering the low lying hills. A spark was rekindled in my spirit as the unspoiled wilderness of Fiordland began to unfold. I had stared at so many grassy hills with white specked sheep on the east coast that I forgot bush does exist in New Zealand. (And don't forget the dreary Canterbury plains; 40' cliffs and shingle beaches as far as the eye can see - for days.) Now, the hills gave way to mountains, ever increasing in height. Ah...this is kayaking! The day moved on and the winds grew calm. I found myself at the Green Islets; a collection of volcanic rocks scattered around a protruding head. And since the swell was down to 1 metre, I weaved myself in and out of their maze-like structure. Caves led to other openings. Archways towered above me. Seals stared at me in confusion. I had bumped into another crown-jewel in New Zealand's coastline. The splendour continued as I worked myself west along the shoreline. Waterfalls tumbled off of high forested cliffs, glissading down to white sand beaches. The sun came out and lit up

the shallow waters in an array of deep blue hues. Wow... I didn't expect this during the 'crux'! But, I couldn't stay long. The weather could still turn bad. I pressed forward into Gates Harbour and startled some fisherman resting on their boat. I asked about the weather and the skipper was confident that it would remain calm for the rest of the day. "And even tomorrow." he added.

"I'll take today... if I can." I replied and he explained to me where I could find the Kisbee Lodge in Preservation Inlet. So I continued and paddled around Puysegur Point in calm winds, feeling rather fortunate. The caretaker at the Kisbee Lodge welcomed me with a hot shower and a first-rate feed of venison stew to finish off one of the best days of the trip.

*Brian took a rest day at Kisbee Lodge and good yarn with the caretaker named Peanut who took Brian out fishing for the day - blue cod technique. Northerlies starting to pick up. He went over to Cavern Head and soaked up some history; up to Cape Providence, and north-easterlies came in. The next two days he tried to make progress against north-easterlies. Eventually he had southerlies with a fast ride to Dusky. He camped in Wet Jacket Arm using the same campsite as Max & Paul. Christmas Eve was one of his best campsites when he caught a cod. Then a short day to Breaksea Sound with northerlies picking up. He tried to contact fishermen but all were out for Christmas. Made it by evening to Breaksea Island but the DoC hut was locked but he decided to stay though there was no room to camp; seals and rocks on beach. He ended up nailed in the hut doorway for four nights with gale force northerlies and was just about to break into the hut when the storm subsided. Brian left at noon on roughest sea conditions; very confused; boat popped out of water and made it to Doubtful Sound where he stopped at the hut by The Gut on Secretary Island. A stroke of good luck after a paddle up to Deep Cove where he managed to cadge a ride with a fishermen over to Te Anau for New Years Eve. Fell asleep at 10.30 a.m. Stocking up on food, Bill and Daphne took Brian back to Deep Cove. The next section, two days to Dees Cove, lots of nor'westers; days with repairs to kayak. He'd picked up a cold in Te Anau, which then made the next section through to Barn Bay the most frustrating, despite good weather, a day resting, a day paddling, but couldn't shake the cold. From Dees to Looking Glass Bay, to Poison Bay, straight past Milford to Martins Bay and on to Barn Bay. A rest day, northerlies and three days at Barn Bay where he shook off the cold in the comfort of the fisherman's cabin. Then good progress, taking seven days to Greymouth.*

*After re-supplying at Haast Beach with food, he punched a hole in the stern by dragging the kayak over some logs but didn't realize stern was holed until Moeraki. His sleeping bag was drenched, some food lost and his perspective had begun to change with less frustration and anger when things went wrong. He patched the hole in the stern with duct tape to north of Bruce Bay, then on to Okarito which was a highlight. He stayed in backpackers; a shower, conversation with people and the people who run the kayaking shop gave him a loaf of bread. From Okarito it was two days to the Taramakau River mouth. Got in through some of the breakers but a huge wave which swept him in for 20 to 30m and had a kick at the end which dumped Brian. He tried rolling but was separated from his boat and had to swim after the boat for two to three minutes, it always 2 to 3 m in front. He finally caught up with the kayak, dragged the boat around the end of the bar and into the river mouth. A local chap, John Edwards, was BBQing there, offered Brian some tea and rang Paul Caffyn.*

*On January 20, I found Brian packing at the Taramakau River mouth and helped him launch. The sea had eased a little over night and Brian made a clean run out through the northern channel, easily missing a big line of breakers toppling on the bar. Three hours later I picked him up at Blaketown Lagoon, the fishermen's harbour in the Grey River.*

*A cold front, big seas, then strong north-easterly winds nailed Brian for five days at the 12 Mile, but he launched at 7.00 a.m. from the 12 Mile on 26 January and had a superb run with tailwinds and calm seas to Farewell Spit. The following is from a brief note Brian sent me at the conclusion of his trip:*

Day 76: Lunch at Seal Island; entered Constant Bay at Charleston for a stretch, then camped at Carters Beach.

Day 77: Calm all day; camped inside Little Wanganui River mouth (south end of Karamea)

Day 78: Northerly breezes 10 to 15 knots. Made it to the Heaphy River and entered at high tide through low surf; slept in the DOC hut.

Day 79: Westerly breezes; talked to research scientists on a boat moored near Otukoroiti Point: "This is the calmest we've seen it in three years...." Camped a couple of bays north-east of Whanganui Inlet.

Day 80: Paddled through the Archway Islands and Pillar Point; westerly winds gusting to 30 knots pushed me down to Farewell Spit in no time. Ran over a shark along the way. Camped on the easternmost islet of the spit.

Day 81: Light winds in the morning; cut across Golden Bay to Separation Point. Lunch at the Awaroa Bay cafe. Camped near Pitt Head in Abel Tasman National Park.

Day 82: Paddling by 5.00 a.m., on a course east for French Pass. The forecast was for northerly winds in the afternoon so I was hoping to get to Pepin Island or further. The winds never got above 15 knots, so I made it to Cape Soucis, camping on a very exposed beach southwest of the cape. Not a good place to land but I was quickly running out of energy; my body was shutting down.

Day 83 & 84: I lay comatose for 24 hours, mustering enough energy to cook a meal every now and then. After the second day, my strength had returned.

Day 85: Nor'westers had blown for the past two days so it was a challenge to break out of the surf. Breezes at my back all morning to push me through French Pass. The current was with me. What a ride! I averaged eight to ten knots from the pass to Clay Point. A one way ticket. I rounded Cape Jackson in the evening and came ashore in Ship Cove after dark.

Day 86: I woke in the morning to see 'No Camping' signs everywhere...oops. Climbed into the boat quickly and battled headwinds all day to make it to Picton in the afternoon. A quiet ending, but many congratulations from Dave, Sara and the team at Marlborough Sounds Adventure Company who stored my boat and gear as I headed off for a good feed.

### ***Trip Summary:***

Distance: 1,554 miles Total time: 86 days Paddling days: 55 Rest/weather 31  
Paddling day average: 28.3 miles per day

Fiordland Summary:

Distance: 340 miles Total time: 26 days Paddling days: 13 Rest/weather: 13

***Equipment List:***

Kayak - fibreglass Southern Aurora by Quality Kayaks. It was 3 years old, purchased second hand. The sliding foot rests connecting to the rudder were replaced with stationary foot rests and toe control for the rudder cables. The back rest was replaced with closed-cell foam padding and padding for the knees was added. The seat was well padded with 1/2" foam.

***Outside of kayak:***

Paddle - light weight fibreglass, thin blade, split, Zypher by Nimbus, 235 cm. Spare paddle-old, indestructible, plastic blade and aluminium shaft (very heavy), 240 cm.

Hand pump - plastic Helmet

Sea anchor by Boulter of Earth (Canada) - attached to bow. Drink bottle, plastic map case

***On the paddler:***

Wetsuit - 3mm, Farmer John style

Neoprene booties

Polypro top

Paddle jacket

PFD - pockets containing: 8 mini hand flares (red), compass, mirror, whistle, knife

***In the cockpit:***

Sleeping pad - closed-cell foam.

Placed under feet for cushion.

Water bag - plastic, 2.5 gallon. Pushed past foot pegs.

Bailer - plastic milk container cut in half

Pogies

Sponge

1 hand-held flare - red

1 hand-held smoke flare - orange Night glow sticks Paddle float

Leg rest - dry bag holding: baliclava, fleece jacket, AM/FM radio (Sony Sport, weatherresistant) and emergency food (in case I am forced to sit in the boat overnight).

A tray in the cockpit held the following: lunch for the day - scroggin, biscuits and an orange VHF hand-held radio - ICOM IC-M10A, in a waterproof radio bag. Six AA alkaline batteries. Registered with NZ Ministry of Commerce. Camera - Olympus Superzoom 80 mm wide, weather resistant, automatic, 28-80mm zoom.

Placed in small dry bag: Odds & ends bag - Sun screen, lip balm, sun glasses, light rope, bug repellent, headlamp

(Everything in the cockpit was attached to the boat by string in case the cockpit got flooded - Which did happen and everything stayed with the boat except the pogies and the sponge, which were not strung up.)

***In the back hatch:***

Sleeping bag - synthetic, 3 seasons by North Face, in dry bag (lent) - 2 person tent by Moss. The extra room was appreciated when all of the gear could be placed inside in sandfly country. Tent poles

Stove - Peak 1 by Coleman, burns white gas. Pot with lid

Maps - 9 maps covering the South Island, scale 1:250,000 - in dry bag. Reading book - in dry bag. Hiking shoes Plastic tarp

Food - in dry bags:

Breakfast: muesli, coffee or peppermint tea

Dinner: pasta n' sauce packets, rice, potatoes, carrots, onions, garlic, crackers, fish

***In the front hatch:***

Clothes - polypro long Johns, fleece pants, shorts, cotton shirt, polypro gloves + hat, spare paddling hat, parka, plastic rain pants, sandals

Fuel Bottle for refilling stove

Water filter - MSR Waterworks

Repair kit - duct tape, multi-tool gadget, epoxy, neoprene glue, needle + thread, etc.

First Aid kit

Bivy sac

Coffee mug - big!

Fanny pack - journal, pins, money, checks, passport, etc.

Personal bag – toothbrush + paste, TP, fishing tackle, candles, batteries, etc.

Radio Coverage

The VHF radio proved useful, primarily for weather reports. Most of the East coast is covered by repeater stations which are used by Maritime Radio authorities to broadcast weather information and warnings three times a day. There is a gap in the Catlins, however coverage is good in Foveaux Strait West of Te Waewae Bay, the coverage ceases until Greymouth so I relied on fishermen to transmit my position and intentions via Single Side Band radios to local safety coordinators. Repeaters do exist in Fiordland, however, I was told that I would have to venture a few miles off the coast to access them. The VHF radio was only useful for boat to boat contact, which I would use in case I became stranded.

NZ National radio transmits marine weather bulletins at 3am and 5am each morning which I was able to receive on my AM radio. Even in Fiordland, although it was difficult at times, I was able to receive the bulletins. When the weather was bad (lots of cloud cover), the signal faded in and out. But, after listening to both reports I was able to piece together the situation.

Sandflies were a constant annoyance in Fiordland. In order to function properly outside the tent, I would cover myself from head to foot in clothing. Polypro long

Johns covered the body, arms and legs, light polypro gloves covered the hands, socks on the feet and mosquito netting over the head. After burning a hole in the tent while cooking inside (to avoid the sandflies), I cooked and ate outside. I used bug repellent sparingly, since the stuff I had was 95% Deet (bad for the skin).