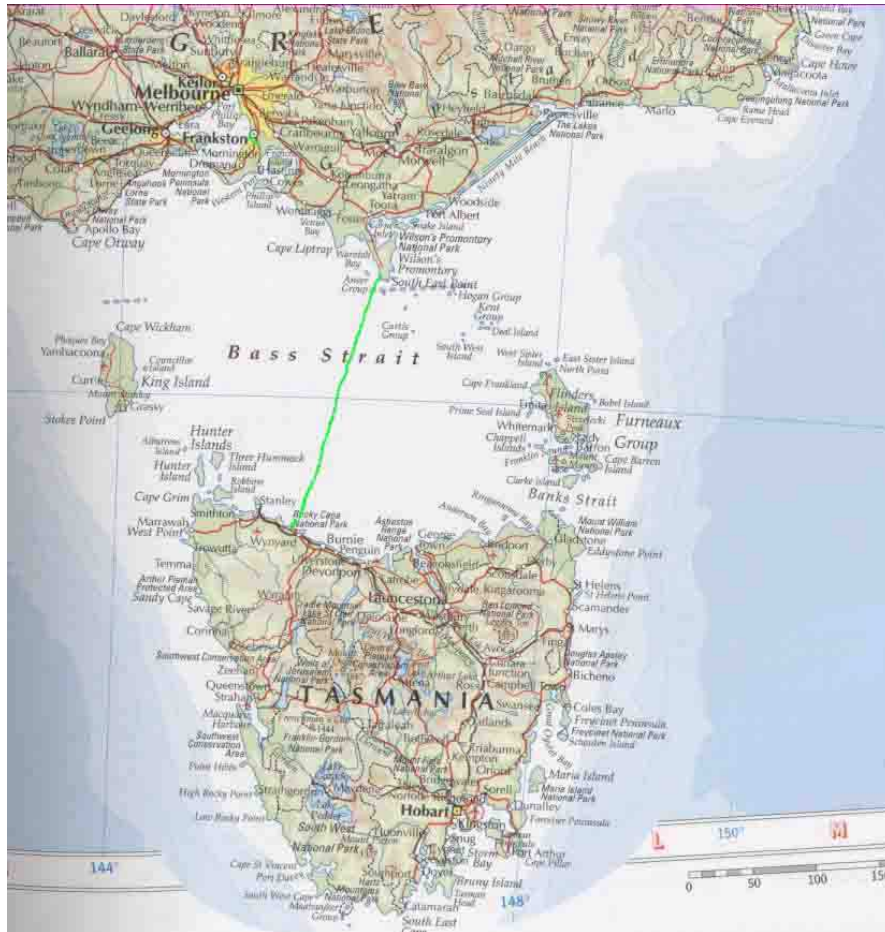


Bass Strait Direct

*The first direct, non-stop crossing by sea kayak...
220km/120 nautical miles in 35 hours*



Sea kayaks are incredible things. Their simplicity completely belies their amazing sea worthiness. No other sea-going vessel can be rolled through 360 degrees or pitch-poled end-over-end with no damage whatsoever. Some paddlers do this just for fun! A recreational kayaker can have a great paddle in weather that sends many yachts running for shelter. A well-built kayak is limited not by the modest dimensions of the craft, but by the imagination and skill of the person sitting in the cockpit.

To my eternal regret, I have a vivid imagination. After crossing the western side of Bass Strait in January 2003 I imagined that much more was possible. Although the 100km ocean crossing from King Island to Apollo Bay had felt pretty 'out there' and committing, I couldn't help but think this was just the beginning of an exploration into what is possible in a kayak. I had paddled 100km in a day and not a drop of water leaked into the hatches. If you have faith in your boat, why not keep paddling? Night paddling had never bothered me too much, in fact I quite like it. However, I do like my sleep! I asked around and did a bit of research to find out whether anyone had successfully slept in an unmodified kayak at sea before. There

was very little information available. After considerable thought, I felt that there were advantages to paddling right through the night rather than trying to sleep. For one, you wouldn't be kidding yourself that you'd get a decent bit of kip when it was pretty clear that this was unlikely. Also, by continuing to paddle you are likely to stay warmer with the body heat generated by paddling. You will also get off the water quicker. This is important because the longer you are out there on the water, the more exposed you are to changes in the weather, adverse currents, and the movement of your kayak on the ocean, which can be tiring after 24 hours or so.

Aside from seeing what my kayak could do, I was also keen to explore the boundaries of my own endurance. I didn't have to look too far to find a suitable crossing to aim for. Bass Strait had never, as far as my friends and I knew, been crossed in a direct line by kayak. Almost all previous crossings had used the islands of the eastern side of the strait, and just a couple of people had been successful on the western route via King Island. Although island hopping either side of Bass Strait is a more reasonable proposition, both these routes are nonetheless serious paddles in themselves. With no previously recorded direct crossings of the Strait, there was an opportunity to explore the unknown that I couldn't resist. There were so many questions: could it be done? (I thought so). How long would it take? What is the best route? How will tidal drift and ocean currents affect me? What is the best time of year? What sort of conditions will I need? Should I try to sleep during the night or paddle non-stop? How fit will I need to be? How will my body hold up? Who should I tell?

It was the unknowns that made this trip attractive. I love the exploratory aspects. Obviously Bass Strait is well charted and there is no true 'exploring' left to be done in this part of the world, however for sea kayakers this was something new. No-one knew how long this trip would take or even if it could be done. It's a bit like a first ascent, which in climbing terms is always more attractive than repeating someone else's route.

I set off on the long drive from my Blue Mountains home in late November 2003. After an overnight camp at Canning River and a speeding fine courtesy of the Victorian Police, I arrived at Tidal River on Wilson's Prom looking forward to the big adventure. I paddled around to Oberon Bay a couple of kilometers south for a quiet night's sleep on the beach. The forecast was still good although not absolutely perfect: there would be light beam-on easterlies turning north-east later in the day. A perfect forecast would have been light northerlies the whole time, however the weather systems move quickly through Bass Strait and I reasoned that if you wait for perfect conditions down here you won't get much paddling done. The wind was forecast to gradually become more favourable later the next day. Everything felt right, so I was fired up and ready to go. The paddle was on! Early the next morning I struggled down the beach with my loaded kayak. The tide was dropping and it was a long carry to the water's edge. Wilson's Prom has stunning scenery and I savoured the last of the mainland that I would see for a while. I set off with a certain amount of trepidation. A seal colony in the Anser Group of islands provided some light entertainment. Hundreds of these magnificent creatures were occupying a large cave and every available rock. They were making a huge racket and their grunting and barking echoed and was magnified by the cave. It was actually quite intimidating and as I did not wish to disturb them I paddled on. Besides, I had paddled just a few kilometres and still had a long way to go!

As expected the wind was from my port beam most of the day, slowly swinging to the stern quarter as the day wore on. It was light initially but reached about 15 knots with plenty of whitecaps by about 11am. Curtis Island is a very steep and dramatic piece of rock that was visible in the distance. It provided a benchmark for my progress. It certainly was helpful to have something to measure my progress by, and a lot more interesting than looking at an unbroken horizon. By late afternoon the island had disappeared in the distance behind me and I felt very, very alone. There had been one trawler pass by during the day but they hadn't noticed this lone paddler on their patch of ocean, which was fine by me. I checked my progress after 12 hours paddling and I had done about 90km. This was good progress but I knew I would slow down as the effects of fatigue and sleep deprivation kicked in. I fuelled up regularly all day rather than have the usual three big meals. As the sun went down I stayed focused on paddling and I had no intention of stopping for sleep. As this trip was shortly after the new moon, I had just a thin sickle in the sky that would illuminate the night for a few hours before setting. With eyes well adjusted to the night this was enough light, however it was very dark when that moon went down! I had been hoping for a full moon for more light but in my mind the good forecast took precedence over the state of the moon. The stars were spectacular and it was exhilarating to be out in such a committing position on a beautiful night.

There was an exciting moment when I felt the need to pee late in the night. I deployed a drogue and sponsons in order to remain stable enough on what had become a fairly choppy sea and a very dark night. Everything is harder at night. With the wind in my face as I deployed the drogue off the bow, the sea seemed quite wild in the dark, it was totally different to having the wind & seas from behind. The lack of visual cues makes an enormous difference to how you perceive the weather and conditions around you! You have to rely on your other senses and this can take some getting used to, especially after all day and half a night on the water.

With no moon I was still reasonably happy to plod along, trying to maintain the pace and look after my body. There was a real low point between about 2am and 5am. I was feeling a lot like a bit of kip and started dropping off to sleep while still paddling. This is a lot like dropping off to sleep at the wheel of the car while still driving. I fought the urge as best I could but there comes a point where the heaviness of your eyelids is irresistible, and I nodded off and capsized. I woke up just as my head hit the water. A face full of Bass Strait made sure I was wide awake by the time I found myself upside down and staring at the cold black depths below. I rolled back up again and paddled hard for the next half hour or so to warm up, and then settled back into a steady rhythm.

Eventually the dawn broke and I found myself somewhat weary but still plugging on. An hour or so later I saw a jagged mountain range on the horizon in the far south. You beauty!!! Tassie really is out there after all!!! (You begin to doubt even obvious truths when you've been at sea for some time!) It took another couple of hours until I realized I was looking at a jagged bank of storm clouds off to the south. This was somewhat deflating even though I had known it was far too early to see the mainland. Around this time my mind started playing tricks on me. A few times I felt I was passing close to a bridge pylon, although I was still 80km from land. The wrap-around style of hat I was wearing cast shadows on the side of my face and I ducked quickly to one side several times to ensure I didn't hit these imaginary obstacles. Later, the bank of clouds off to the south seemed to be moving towards me as though painted on a huge mobile background movie set. Eventually the world

returned to normal and all the while I just kept plugging away, drawing inexorably closer to Tassie.

Towards mid-afternoon Table Cape came into view, and a bulk carrier passed by – firm evidence there were people out there to the south!! I put total faith in my compass and hours later Boat Harbour, nestled close to Rocky Cape National Park, came into view. Needless to say the final kilometers in to shore were painfully slow. I finally pulled in to the beach, unsure of exactly where to land as I wanted a quiet, uninterrupted nights sleep that night. In the end I went straight to the surf club as I could see some boat sheds that looked like a good place to doss for the night. As I pulled up to the beach I got out of my kayak in waist deep water, which was good because with the water supporting me I didn't fall over straight away! One of the locals rushed down to help me, or so I thought. "Sorry mate, we don't take boat people here!", he remarked dryly. After enquiring where I had come from he offered me a bed for the night at his dairy farm a few kilometers away. Boat Harbour is a small place and it didn't take long for the word about my trip to spread. Someone called the media and later that evening a newspaper photographer turned up. The ABC also got hold of me at the farmhouse. Tassie hospitality was fantastic as always, and I didn't have to try too hard to get a lift to Devonport for the ferry home the next day. Everything had fallen in to place and the trip I had planned and dreamed about for over a year had finally been pulled off.

I would like to thank Roger and Julie at Blue Earth Canoe and Camping in Drummoyne for their assistance and support.

© Andrew McAuley 2005. All rights reserved.

Postscript

I did a lot of research into long distance paddling for this trip, which included collecting information on all the long-distance (over 100km) ocean paddles that I could find. There are only a few published accounts. It was useful to read the trip reports and calculate the average speeds that others had managed over these sorts of distances. I also read up on sleep deprivation and what to expect, and how to cope with it. There is quite a bit of information available on this subject as it relates to endurance races of various sorts. The other obvious bits of information to collect included the best routes across to Tassie and the best landings once I got there. The shortest route is from Wilsons Promontory in Victoria to Stanley on Tasmania's north-west coast. If leaving from Tidal River this is 211km. I considered paddling from Tassie north to the mainland as an alternative, however I rejected this idea for a number of reasons. Firstly, the fact that I was based on the mainland made it easier to leave from there. Secondly, I would need a south to south-westerly wind to paddle in this direction. While winds from the south-west occur frequently, this is a colder wind and the cold could be a problem during the night-time period of this paddle. If I left from the mainland I would be looking for northerlies or north-easters, which would be warmer and therefore make the night paddling easier. Finally another consideration was the fact that leaving from the Prom leaves you with more options if the wind changes; there are several possible landings along the north coast of Tassie that all lie a similar distance from the Prom, if a direct route is taken to them. They are from west to east (assuming a departure from Tidal River):

Stanley	211km
Circular Head	211km
Rocky Cape	213km
Boat Harbour	220km
Burnie	227km
Devonport	238km
Low Head	229km
West Sandy Point	227km
Waterhouse Point	230km
Cape Portland	235km

I decided against the eastern options due to their proximity to Banks Strait and the strong currents there. There was also a possibility of strong currents in the Stanley area (North Cape and waters to the west in particular) and I assumed there would be some tidal drift offshore as I approached this area, so I decided to stay clear. I settled on Rocky Cape as the target as it was almost as close as Stanley however was likely to have less tidal influence. Eventually I moved this target further east to Boat Harbour, because Rocky Cape is fairly remote and I was less likely to be able to arrange transport from there than from a small town such as Boat Harbour. So Boat Harbour it was. I did extensive research to try and determine what sort of currents to expect on my route. There is not much available on this subject, but Flinders University in Adelaide had some useful information to share. There appears not to be a lot of tidal influence if your route is well away from the islands, although as mentioned research in this area is limited and conclusive data is hard to find.

I discussed the trip with some likely partners and got a mixed response. Aside from very few people being interested in the hardship involved, there were other problems unique to this trip. It seemed that the security one usually draws from paddling with others could be a liability on a trip of this nature. If the fatigue levels of two or three

paddlers did not coincide, the ultimate pace would be slower than paddling alone. Keeping track of other paddlers during the long hard night paddling would be very difficult as well. On the balance I was comfortable with the idea of going alone, although I enjoy the company of others on my more 'normal' trips!

As would be expected, I did a lot of training in the lead-up to this paddle to ensure that I had adequate fitness. I competed in the Hawkesbury Classic and did a lot racing during the week and on weekends, along with long day paddles of around 60km on the ocean whenever I had the chance. I rejected any thought of taking a sail or kite on the trip. After all, this would have made it a sailing trip and not a paddle!

Ocean crossings have always fascinated me. Although some folk claim they are monotonous due to a lack of coastal scenery, it often surprising what you can see out there. Sometimes, a long hard crossing can be a rather meditative experience. There is certainly a mental aspect to it all that is interesting in itself. Completing a long, hard crossing safely and in good style is enormously satisfying as well, and so it was with this trip – even more so since no-one had passed this way before. It was something of an exploration for Australian sea kayaking, and I felt very fortunate to have been a part of it.

Ian Dunn and Peter Provis from the VSKC helped enormously with logistics and transport. Thanks guys!!

© Andrew McAuley 2005.