

Swallowed by Fog

Crossing Bass Strait south to north in two double sea kayaks

By Claudia Schremmer

In late February 2006 Kevin Brennan, Adrian Clayton, Bruce Baldwin and Claudia Schremmer set out to follow the magic Eastern route across Bass Strait.

Standing in the brightest of sunshine at the Deal Island lighthouse, fog extended all around us as far as our eyes could see. Kevin and I were concerned. The forecast allowed for two more days of favourable wind patterns before a strong westerly front (35 knots+) was predicted to hit this body of water.

But let's start at the beginning. The vast majority of kayak crossings of the notorious Bass Strait between Tasmania and the Australian mainland are done north-to-south. However, we figured that there are three good reasons for going south-to-north, following the less-travelled path that four fellow

Club members paved two years before. Travelling south-to-north and starting from Little Musselroe Bay in Tasmania involves the crossing of Banks Strait on the first day. Banks Strait is renowned for its quickly changing weather and strong currents over a very shallow sea bed. However, Banks Strait is only 24km wide. Once reaching Clarke Island, the

next couple of days are always close to shore, allowing the paddlers to get used to the water and its temperament. Secondly, paddling northbound, the three longest hops (between the tip of Flinders Island, Deal Island, Hogan Island, and Wilsons Promontory in Victoria) involve the last part of the trip. By then, the boats are a lot lighter since a considerable share of the food supplies have already been consumed. Thirdly, Wilsons Prom is a high mountain range that is visible from far away. It is comforting to be able to see your destination sooner. Equally, at the end of the trip, it is nice to just hop in the cars and drive back home instead of having to figure out how to return to the mainland with the kayaks.

The trip took 11 days in total, nine days on the water plus two scheduled rest days off the water. Even though we never intended to, we believe that we can proudly claim the fastest ever crossing in the least number of hours on the water, with no forced lay days.

What distinguishes our trip from many other kayak crossings was our choice of two doubles. There are advantages and disadvantages to both singles and doubles. The biggest plus for singles is

probably the sense of achievement at the end of the trip; being able to say that you have done it by yourself. With doubles, it is a team effort and the team working together in one boat is tied together much tighter than a bunch of individuals. Also, a double kayak has approximately the same storage as a single, yet, you need to fit clothes and food in for two people. And finally, the paddling style, cadence, regularity of the stroke, rest pattern for eating, drinking, and stretching between team members in a double have to match. In spite all these drawbacks, we chose the doubles for their big advantages of speed and stability. I have had one shoulder reconstruction (left) and two shoulder dislocations (right), the second dislocation happened 16 months prior to our trip. In the double, Kevin did most of the bracing while I kept the forward stroke and so the forward momentum of our boat.

It was windy in Bass Strait. For the first five days on the water we were heading into strong northerly winds. The dash across Banks Strait on the first day saw us starting into a 10 knot north-easterly wind that allowed us to have the sails up at close haul. About



10km short of our destination, the wind changed to a more northerly direction and picked up to 20 knots, we were heading straight into it. Kevin, while still out on the water, optimistically said, “We are making headway at 0.1 km an hour!” After we arrived on Clarke Island Bruce admitted, “For a while, I thought we would have to go back to Tassie,” and Adrian agreed, “There is no way I can do this for 65km!”

It was rough in Bass Strait. Our boats were regularly washed over by waves. The rear paddlers, Kevin and Adrian, often had water coming up to their shoulders. The hand pumps we carried as a back-up system for our electric pumps proved extremely valuable in getting the water out that entered through our spray skirts.

The day we did the long crossing from Flinders to Deal (64km), Club members Andrew, Keith, and Harry enjoyed their second rest day on Deal on their crossing of the Strait in the opposite direction. They were surprised seeing us arriving in Murrays Pass since they didn't think we would go across in those rough conditions. I believe we got some credit points that day.

It was 'wild' in Bass Strait. Both towns, Whitemark and Killiekrankie, on Flinders sent out their local welcoming squadrons of dolphins to escort us into town when we were approaching. A very inquisitive octopus on Deal Island watched Kevin and I do the washing up after dinner. When we went swimming on Hogan, a curious shark checked us out (our only shark sighting, lucky us!). We had the tamest, most abundant wallabies on Flinders and Deal Islands. We slept amid thousands of noisy fairy penguins on Deal and Hogan Islands. One of the unsolved mysteries of this trip is the question, when do adult fairy penguins sleep? During the day they are out to sea trying to escape the great white sharks and seals. As soon as they come back home onto the island at dusk, their “teenage” young plead for food. The

*Left: Leaving Deal on a foggy day.
Above right: Claudia in Murrays Pass (Deal Island) at the end of a long paddle.*



young penguins continue crying for food without any break until dawn, when the adults head out to sea again.

It was glassy in Bass Strait. On our rest day on Deal Island, we woke up to no winds with fog moving through the hills. The fog was slowly moving down to sea level, leaving the hills in bright sunlight and the water completely covered. Going in the opposite direction, Andrew, Keith, and Harry had chosen this day for the long leg to Flinders. We were wondering how they would do out on the water and how the visibility might be out there. After lunch, Tony, the caretaker, gave Kevin and I a free ride on the six-wheeler bike up to the lighthouse. Like us, Tony wanted to go up to the highest point of the island to check the visibility. Standing in the brightest of sunshine at the lighthouse, the fog extended all around us as far as we could see. The forecast allowed for two more days of favourable wind patterns before a

westerly front (35 knots+) was expected to hit this body of water. That westerly was expected to last for a couple of days and even after it had abated, the seas would still be chopped up. On the other hand, we had two more days to go to reach Wilsons Prom, and from there the high hills of the Prom might shelter us from the westerly. If we didn't want to get stuck on our trip, we had to keep going. The weather forecast didn't give us a choice, we had to go. But what about the fog? Sea sickness in the fog was our major concern.

The alarm went off at 5am the next morning. With our breakfast of muesli and milk powder with water, we took two tablets against sea sickness that made us feel drowsy, and our throats sore. By 7am we were on the water; visibility was less than 50 metres. We discussed how to find each other if we lost sight of the other boat. Two handheld VHF radios and exact positioning

Anyway, this westerly wind chopped up the waters in Bass Strait to the extent that the Deal Island caretakers Linda and Tony, who were meant to finish their term that day, remained on Deal for another four days as no boats would go across to pick them up. Consequently, any one day delay on our trip would have resulted in at least four more days "out there", if not more.

Postscript 3: A note on the trip logistics. Adrian and Bruce had taken their car with both kayaks on the roof and almost all our gear onto the Spirit of Tasmania from Sydney into

Devonport, from where they were heading to Little Musselroe Bay. Kevin and I travelled with a basically empty car, empty roof racks, and spare straps into Port Welshpool from where we caught the taxi to Welshpool, the bus into Melbourne, the airport shuttle to the airport, and the plane across the Strait to Launceston where Adrian was waiting for us, after having unloaded Bruce, the boats, and all the gear in Musselroe. When we started the paddling, we had Kevin's car in Port Welshpool and Adrian's car in Musselroe. As it turned out, we met a guy on Flinders Island who

offered to do the shuffle of Adrian's car for us, which we happily accepted. Thus, when we arrived in Port Welshpool at the end of our trip, both cars were waiting for us.

Postscript 4: All four paddlers on this trip have extensive sea kayaking experience. We put over one year of preparation into it, including the production of purpose-built kayaks, equipment and knowledge research. We built up our strength and endurance with a lot of kayaking and cross training (running, swimming, and weight lifting). This trip should not be undertaken with any less preparation.

	Locations	Dist (km)	Total (km)	Day (km)	Time on water	Speed km/h
Day 1	Little Musselroe Bay		0			
	Rebecca Bay (Clarke Island)	24	24			
	Spike Cove (Clarke Island)	7	31	31	4:30	6:89
Day 2	Spike Cove (Clarke Island)		31			
	Horseshoe Bay (Preservation Island)	10	41			
	Lascars Bay (Cape Barren Island)	4	45	14	2:30	5:60
Day 3	Lascars Bay (Cape Barren Island)		45			
	Boat Harbour - Cape Barren town	20	65			
	Trousers Point Beach (Flinders Island)	20	85			
	Whitemark (Flinders Island)	12	97	52	7:15	7:17
Day 4	Rest day in Whitemark					
Day 5	Whitemark (Flinders Island)		97			
	Long Point (Flinders Island)	5	102			
	Settlement Point (Flinders Island)	13	115			
	Port Davies/Emita (Flinders Island)	4	119	22	3:30	6:29
Day 6	Port Davies/Emita (Flinders Island)		119			
	Roydon Island	15	134			
	Cape Franklin (Flinders Island)	5	139			
	Killicrankie (Flinders Island)	11	150	31	4:00	7:75
Day 7	Killicrankie (Flinders Island)		150			
	Craggy Island	21	171			
	Wright Rock	17	188			
	East Cove (Deal Island)	26	214	64	8:00	8:00
Day 8	Rest day on Deal Island					
Day 9	East Cove (Deal Island)		214			
	Hogan Island	42	256	42	5:00	8:40
Day 10	Hogan Island		256			
	Bare Back Cove (Wilsons Prom)	49	305	49	6:10	7.96
Day 11	Bare Back Cover (Wilsons Prom)		305			
	Three Mile Beach (Wilsons Prom)	21	326			
	Port Welshpool	22	348	43	4:30	9:56
Totals			348		45:25	7:66