

Classic Bass Crossing

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Nicole Bartels, Kevin Kelly and Richard Barnes



When is an expedition to the summit of Mt Everest complete? When the expeditioner reaches the summit? When this person is within 100m of the summit? Or when the party has made it safely back to Base Camp? Did Andrew Macauley make it in his kayak to NZ when he was in sight of land? These thoughts went through the minds of the Classic Bass team as we waited for windows of calm weather around Flinders Island. We had made it across the “big” crossings, from Wilsons Promontory to Flinders, via Hogan and Deal Island hops. These legs were respectively 55km, 45km and 65km, or 9.5hrs, 7.5hrs and 12.5hrs paddling time. Then there were only the shorter legs along coastlines of the Furneaux Group Islands and a final crossing of Banks Strait to negotiate.

We had waited a day on Hogan Island, as a storm with windspeeds recorded over 100kmh swept over us. It was hard even to walk up to Hogan Lighthouse, let alone be out in a kayak that day. Then we had waited 4 full days on Deal Island as winds over 20 knots kept us cosily off the water. There was plenty to see and do on Deal, including walking up to the highest lighthouse in the southern hemisphere, and sharing tea and scones with the current lighthouse caretakers, Jo and Justin and their seven year old son Murphy.



100kmh winds at Hogan Island lighthouse



Scones with Deal lighthouse caretakers

However five days waiting meant there were few spare days left if we were to make it to Tasmania in time to catch Spirit, the ferry to get us back the easy way across Bass Strait northward to Melbourne. Could we hitch a lift on the barge that services the little town of Whitemark on Flinders, or even fly out from one of the grass strips on Cape Barren or Long Islands, and still claim to have crossed Bass Strait?

Fortunately weather forecasting is more reliable now than ever in the past. On my first crossing in 2001, we tuned in on a crackly radio with a wire aerial strung between trees, to hear someone reading a forecast for the whole of Tasmania for the next day. Now forecasts come via BOM on the internet to mobile phones, with predictive maps for windspeed, swell and wind direction, in 2-hourly increments up to four or five days into the future. For our last week of paddling, they showed generally relatively strong winds, but with small windows of calm. And so it turned out.

Ultimately, we targeted two relatively calm weather windows to make the final crossings of Banks Strait, splitting the 35km distance from Clarke Island to the NE tip of Tassie into two with our final camping night midway on Swan Island. These were to be our two hardest paddles. Our one and only team capsized occurred on the leg from Clarke to Swan, just off Swan Island. Strong counter currents slowed our pace so the weather window became too short to reach Swan Island. Just off the lighthouse, the rising wind broke the top off big steep swells, and Kevin got caught by one of these breaking giants. However Kevin has a great party trick, a re-enter and roll. Whilst his kayak was upside down, he did an underwater somersault to get back into an inverted seating position in the cockpit, then proceeded to roll up. It would be impressive at Lane Cove, but doubly so in rough water.



Calm weather along Wilsons Promontory



Rough weather off Swan Island lighthouse

he very last paddle was a mere 7km direct from Swan Island to Little Musselroe Bay. The weather decided to have a final hurrah, and combined with strong adverse tide to thwart our expedition arrival. For the whole Bass Strait crossing, we covered just on 400km, in a total time in the kayaks of 76hours. That is an average of just under 5kmh. Not quite Matt, Dave, Brett or Stu's 12km lap speed at Lane Cove, but realistic for Mirage kayaks each weighing around 200kg fully loaded. Our final 7km took 3 hours, an average just over 2kmh. As we wryly noted, we could have walked the kayaks along Musselroe Beach faster than we were able to paddle.

The moral is that the journey is never over, until we step across the finish line. For us, that was a greeting from our invaluable landcrew Dee Taylor and Andy Singh, two of the original team from Rivers Canoe Club who had planned to be paddlers on this crossing. From a starting crew of ten or so hopefuls, just two, Nicole Bartels and Kevin Kelly, had made that finish line. Both are Hawkesbury Classic regulars, so perhaps that is a key step in training for a Bass odyssey.

I had joined Nicole and Kevin only a few months before the trip. One reason was to help make sure their dreams were realised. Another was to use this crossing as a trial for a prototype Tasman sea kayak. This prototype started life as former LCRK member Ken Holmes' Classic-completing Mirage 730.



Prototype One

With a lot of guidance from Tom Simmat, I constructed a pod over the front cockpit large enough to potentially be sleeping quarters. It certainly solved all issues of lack of space for equipment, but did bring its own set of steering problems in strong winds. In the time we waited on Deal Island, I constructed a fin out of our emergency fibreglass repair kit to try to help control my prototype kayak's wayward wanderings.

Equipment

Space is at a premium in a single Mirage. We set off from Port Welshpool with 15 days food supply, and about 20 litres of water each. Add in tent, sleeping bag, stove, clothes and spares, and the last of the equipment usually ends up sharing the final corners of the cockpit with the paddler. Food and equipment sums to around 75kg, and made the 580s float just below the deck join line. Both Kevin and Nicole still found room for luxuries such as sleeping mat and pillows. Oddly, Kevin pulled out a grater on Deal, along with real potatoes, and set about making us hash browns. Kevin's occupation is chef, so he also couldn't be parted from his creamer, a huge device which is pressurised by CO2 cannisters and turns longlife cream into whipped coffee mousse. Kevin is not a camper, and borrowed a tent and camp chair from John Duffy. He commented on being woken by sore elbows when his arms slipped off his narrow camp mat and rested alongside on the hard ground.



Chef Kevin and his grater

Inner Sister Island

One of the goals of this trip was to try to camp on Inner Sister Island, off the north tip of Flinders. It promises safe landings with beaches on both sides. This would be something new and a little unique,

as this island is not part of a regular crossing being slightly north of the most direct route. We set out from Deal with our bearings set for Inner Sister. Along the way were the landmarks Wright Rock and Craggy Island. Wright Rock is only 20km from Deal, but is small and only visible from about 10km. At about that distance one's sense of smell confirms its proximity, as the large seal colony there is very smelly. We'd aimed to paddle in amongst the seals. However tide had other ideas, and after battling counterflow, our closest pass to the seals was 3km before we turned away. Next waypoint Craggy, where the ebbing tide looked like it would sweep us past its northern rugged shore, on course for Inner Sister. After a few more hours paddling, we were closing on Craggy. The tide turned, and suddenly was flowing strongly SW, against our course and into the rising westerly breeze. I promptly got seasick and threw up. Nicole got nervous running downwind in the big swells that developed. Kevin chimed in with a preference to head for whichever was closer of Inner Sister, or the traditional Flinders landing at Killiecrankie. Consulting our GPS, Inner Sister was 22.3km northeast, whilst Killiecrankie was 22.2km east. Destiny diverted, Inner Sister remains an elusive goal for some future Bass journey.



Flying porpoise show

The Wrap

Bass Strait remains a paddlers' Mecca, combining so many of the features which create an epic journey. At 400km and 16 days, the time and distance are of grand proportions. Paddling is at times out of sight of land, so there is a real reliance on self to achieve the day's destination. The campsites are pretty wild and special. Some, like Whitemark, are relatively suburban, with access to showers, a hotel, general store, cafes and a bakery. The wildlife is always interesting, and interested. Seals are abundant, and always inquisitive. So too are the gannets and large Pacific gulls, whilst albatross fly by imperiously. Penguins are so human in their characteristics, especially when their regular path from sea to burrow is blocked by one of our tents. We were particularly lucky this trip to have a pod of killer whales glide toward and around us. The sea can be wild, but with patience there is always a window through which to paddle safely. Scenery always amazes and alone is adequate temptation, in particular the red lichen-covered granite boulders and sculptures round Cape Barren, Clarke and Flinders Islands.



Campsites at Thunder & Lightning Bay and Rebecca Bay