

Thursday 1st July 2009
Big5 Kayak Challenge Team Update 4

A 'Warm' Alaskan Welcome

The Big 5 Kayak Challenge team have now entered Alaskan waters and reached the half way point of their journey along the inside passage. We met up with the team at Ketchikan, Alaska's first city and 'Salmon Capital of The World'. Since leaving Prince Rupert Saturday morning, the predicted storm force winds have not disappointed! Strong winds, and heavy seas have hampered progress and given us our first 'swimmer'. The experience of fourth team member Ollie Jay has been most welcome. A professional sea kayak coach and guide with Active4seasons, Ollie paddles big seas day in day out. Ollie does not only bring additional experience to the team, his wind up radio and bottle of whisky has also gone down well around the campfire! Richard Harpham commented, "It has been a difficult few days of paddling, the storms coincided with us being outside the shelter of the fjord like cliffs and channels and in rough open sea. It was challenging for all of us and we were glad we had spent time training in the North Sea with Ollie, refreshing drills and skills just a few weeks before this expedition".

After leaving Prince Rupert Saturday morning, the team stopped for lunch in the First Nations town of Port Simpson. Upon arrival, they were welcomed into the house of a local lady, given a slap-up meal and even a Sockeye salmon for their journey. Aisling commented "it was very humbling to have a complete stranger welcome us into their home and show such hospitality". The team left Port Simpson, bellies full, fresh salmon on board and paddled towards the US border of Alaska. The storm force 7 winds made for a challenging afternoon of paddling. That night they wild camped at the site of an old abandoned cabin, and met up with Bill, another kayaker. Bill is shortly to turn 50 and is planning to be in Alaska for a joint celebration as the state will also be 50 years old this year. Bill turned out to be an incredible character, he has walked, cycled and kayaked most of the long expedition routes around the world. In fact next year will see him reach an incredible 5,000 nights out, camping rough.

Next day, the team pressed on towards the Alaskan border accompanied by Bill, who was grateful for the support in such rough conditions. Bill paddles a 45 year old canvas and wood kayak, a complete contrast to the state of the art Wilderness Systems kayaks that the Big 5 Kayak Challenge are using. Things were going well despite swell and waves of almost 3m and the team headed down the final inlet before entering Alaskan Waters. Things then changed suddenly for the worse. Geoff Tilford was paddling alongside Bill and in an effort to avoid hitting Bills canvas boat, was caught broadside to a massive wave. He was pitched into the icy cold Alaskan Water. Geoff made two attempts at an Eskimo roll, but with a heavy kayak weighing nearly 70kgs and big waves he was forced to exit.

Richard and Ollie raced to his assistance to perform a deep water rescue. Geoff told me "Ollie's experience day in, day out of working in big seas was invaluable. We knew we needed to be quick as I was in danger of hypothermia in the cold water. The sea was too big to allow us to empty the boat across the other two so we were forced to part empty it. I then climbed in and pumped out the remaining water. We then paddled to the nearest shore about 2 miles away to dry off and get a hot drink." Crisis averted, we can now all have a laugh at the expense of our first 'swimmer'. Having finally made it into Alaska, the team were forced to pull up on a deserted island and wait for conditions to improve. Faced with a long open sea crossing in extremely rough conditions, this was certainly the sensible option. Conditions did not improve that day, and there was a sense of disappointment as the team had effectively lost a day due to the bad weather.

The following morning with conditions still pretty interesting the team set out to paddle the 68 miles to Ketchikan. Their 6am start was soon rewarded when the team spent half an hour paddling with a pod of killer whales near the Lord Islands. They then headed around Cape Fox and along the coast. With conditions now much improved, a more direct route was taken to try and make up some miles.

This new route saw the team headed for Mary Island, about 25 miles from Ketchikan. With the aid of the SPOT GPS tracker, myself and Martin soon spotted this new course. From the comfort of the hotel room, a quick google search revealed a gravel beach and flat lawn surrounding the lighthouse on Mary Island. 'Perfect for camping' we thought.

It seems the picture we found on the internet of Mary Island lighthouse was probably taken some years ago. The level and well kept lawn is now 3ft tall rough grass and weed. Fortunately, the lighthouse is no longer manned and the front door was off its hinges. The team all had a good nights sleep, warm and dry inside the lighthouse. The front door was temporarily fixed to prevent any curious bears popping in for a visit.

A 20 mile paddle on Tuesday and the team arrived in Ketchikan, officially at the half way stage and nearly 500 miles behind them. Local float plane operators Pacific Airways, were kind enough to let us store the kayaks on one of their pontoons. With no rest day planned, after a quick interview with the local paper, the team were back on the water the following morning. We will catch up with them in approximately four days time at Petersburg where another team member Rob Bates will join the expedition.

Wildlife spots since the last update include the pod of killer whales and two porpoises that swam right under Geoff's kayak, just inches below his paddle.

You can follow the teams progress via the live SPOT GPS tracker on http://www.spotadventures.com/user/profile?user_id=43684

To sponsor the team and find out more about this and our previous challenges, visit www.big5kayakchallenge.com

Until next time

All the best

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Expedition Manager

- Ends -

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