Coastbusters

The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers

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Vancouver Island: Wild, Wild Northwest

Joe Berkovitz

Sunset over the Brooks Peninsula. Photo: Steve Lessard

Bucket List

I didn't have a long list of places I wanted to paddle before I died. I did have a short list, though, and the coast of British Columbia had been on it for a while. In late 2023, three paddling friends and I took this idea off our bucket list and put it on our to-do list. And in August 2024, we found ourselves on Vancouver Island, ready to go kayak camping for a week.

For a long time my notions of BC had been a kind of vague dreamscape: deserted, wooded islands, steep mountain ranges, long swells breaking on endless beaches, quiet glades of towering evergreens. A vibrant paddling culture, rooted in indigenous ways. A place where hulls would work better than wheels as a way to get from one place to another. And, of course, abundant and roadless wilderness with nature in full control.

These notions all turned out to be true, but the reality exceeded the dream and was also quite different from it. Not only was reality more dramatic, but it surprised us in ways we could never have anticipated.

Sketch of a Dream

As we considered British Columbia, Vancouver Island quickly emerged as an obvious place to focus on, with easy air and ferry access on the eastern side and a wild, oceanic, sparsely populated western side. The BC Coast is enormous, and the portion occupied by the 283-mile-long island is a world unto itself. There were guidebooks and blog posts to read, and I knew some California paddlers who had done multiple trips there.

The north and northwest parts of Vancouver Island are the wildest and least populated portions. Within that area, the biggest conditions and the most committing coastlines lie north of the high Brooks Peninsula, a geographic feature so prominent that it creates its own dividing line in weather and sea conditions. Rounding the Brooks is a waiting game if weather systems don't cooperate. With time on the water limited to 7-10 days, our group opted to remain south of the Brooks, but far enough north to remain in mostly wilderness areas.

The tiny hamlet of Fair Harbour, BC, eight miles inland on a protected bay, became the launchpad for our trip. We would begin by heading out to the ocean and then north to the Brooks, returning in a southeasterly direction and exploring two island groups along the way. Optimizing for the typical northwesterly tailwind, we hired a one-way water taxi to take us all the way to the Brooks at the start of the trip. This made for a more varied one-way paddle back to our van, with an anticipated benefit from prevailing winds the whole way. We needed to assume we might have to hide out in a storm, even though August sees only five days of rain on average. So we structured the trip with a couple of two-night stays, which would allow us to have a day to explore each island group without breaking camp—and give us a more flexible schedule if we needed it.

Trip area outlined. Map courtesy of Maps Vancouver

A Surprise Guide

Originally this was planned as a self-guided trip, but obtaining boats and getting them to the launch proved to be a real problem. Our arrival point on the east side of Vancouver Island was Courtenay, a shuttle flight away from the hub airport of the city of Vancouver. Crossing over the central spine of mountains to the west coast requires a half day's drive over bone-jarring logging roads, which car rental companies do not let you undertake unless you want to pay for any damage (and said damage is quite possible). Furthermore, kayak rentals—along with many other kinds of commerce—are near-nonexistent in the northwest part of the island, meaning we would have to rent decent sea kayaks somewhere on the east coast and bring them over the mountains.

At a certain point we faced our logistical demons. We would need to work with a guiding company that already had the transportation and equipment we needed. We engaged Skils.ca, a first-rate outfit based in Ucluelet BC, to provide us with a local guide, high-quality sea kayaks, and transportation from Comox to Fair Harbour. This approach turned out to be not only inevitable, but highly desirable: our guide was the award-winning sea kayaker and filmmaker Justine Curgenven, whose presence on our trip lifted it to an altogether different level.

Pacific Overture

Early the next morning we were up, lugging all of our gear to the dock in preparation for pickup by our water taxi captain, Leo Jack. Born in Kyuquot, Leo runs Voyager Water Taxi and ferries people and kayaks from Fair Harbour to points on the outer coast. Water taxis are an essential transportation tool in this roadless place, where most points of interest are on the coast. Leo would get us out there quickly and we would use the remainder of the week to get ourselves back.

Organized for the ferry. Photo: Steve Lessard

Leo directed us to load his boat in a very disciplined fashion. From the first instant it was clear he knew his business very well indeed. This was only made clearer once we started zipping at high speed through island groups, threading narrow inlets whose depth seemed dubious. The entire time, Leo kept up a high-energy, colorful narrative describing what we were seeing, answering our questions about the area, and throwing shade on his main water-taxi competitor. He expressed polite doubt that we would paddle all the way back into Fair Harbour at the end of our trip, mentioning that another group of paddlers had just asked him to pick them up at the mouth of the bay to avoid the additional day of effort. Perhaps this was advertising of a sort!

At the end of the shuttle ride we were let off near the Brooks Peninsula, on a picturesque beach framed by the local specialty of dense evergreens and piles of washed-up logs. This beach was rapidly becoming even more picturesque, as the incoming tide was quickly erasing any remaining dry land below the log piles. Seeing our discomfort at the

Photo: Joe Berkovitz

disappearing beach, Leo explained that this would be the only possible drop-off point and took off for his next rendezvous. We saw that we would have to move everything up to the top of the beach and load the boats as fast as humanly possible, or our gear would be floating in no time. The task was accomplished with only minutes to spare and we headed to our first campsite.

BC Skies

In the winter, this section of coast is a wild and inhospitable place with constant storm systems barreling through. Huge North Pacific surf pounds the beaches mercilessly. This transitions sometime in early summer to a more stable regime in which offshore fair-weather winds blow mostly out of the northwest with air temperatures in the 55-65 F range, while occasional storm systems blow from the south, sometimes for a day or two. Then there are the variable diurnal winds driven by heating and cooling: near the slopes and estuaries of the mainland, katabatic winds can sink from high ground towards the coast in the morning and reverse direction to blow inshore in the afternoon.

As it happened, we experienced mostly very fine weather and quite warm ocean temperatures over 60 F. Staying cool in our drysuits was more of a problem than staying warm!

Fog was a constant and vivid companion to our trip in its many different varieties. Some of it was visible at a great distance, forced up over landforms like giant faraway fountains. Other times it was pervasive and everywhere you looked. Yet other times, we saw fog flowing through estuaries like a river, with sharp boundaries. It constantly changed and came and went with the weather.

Mountains, Islands, Ledges and Ocean

This part of the world looks and feels very distinctive from a kayak. There were three layers of landforms most of the places we paddled: mountains inside, skirted by island groups, with a curtain of rock ledges furthest outside.

Visible everywhere, the high landscape of Vancouver Island provides a constant backdrop. In this area, V.I. feels like the mainland as the continent itself is far away. The coastal mountains here are in the 2,000-3,000 foot range, dropping abruptly to a coastal shelf or even straight into the ocean. The mountains are incised deeply by tidal bays and estuaries. At the beginning and end of our trip, we paddled next to these landforms and experienced this high scenery up close. Mid-trip we needed to refill our water supply, and fresh water was easiest to take from streams running off the mountains.

Throughout most of the area the toothy horizon of the Brooks Peninsula plays a starring role. The high jagged peaks are a feature one can orient to from Afar, while closer up the mountains are less visible and there's lower ground near the shore. Deeply indented tidal creeks form narrow coves where they meet the ocean, which make for some of the only places to take out a kayak in quieter conditions along this section of coast.

Offshore the coast is dotted with island groups that are separated from each other by a day's paddle or so. Our trip included two of these: the remote and mostly wild Bunsby Islands, and the Mission Group which is not far from the First Nations village of Kyuquot. The islands mostly lacked high ground and were not hard to explore on foot by hiking their coastlines or in some cases by foot trails. But without question, paddling is the best way to get around these tight-knit groups with their many channels, ledges and deeply penetrating inlets.

The coastal margin is often rocky, punctuated by stretches of long sand beaches. On the beaches, huge logs are piled above the high tide line, in some cases creating a considerable obstacle. Landing zones need to be chosen carefully, considering the 10-12 foot tidal range here. Behind the margin lies a dense forest of evergreens, sometimes with an understory. When there was no trail, bushwhacking through this forest ranged from challenging to impossible.

Beach at Rugged Point. Photo: Justine Curgenven

Campsite at Rugged Mountain Park. Photo: Steve Lessard

Careful Paddling

The many ledges and shoals that lie offshore exert a significant and subtle influence. Where present these shallow features break up the powerful Pacific swell, creating a "swell shadow" that makes for much calmer paddling than one might expect on a Pacific shoreline at this latitude. We found it important to remain aware of the location of these offshore shallows, and especially of the places where they were absent. Less protected stretches of water exposed us to bigger open-ocean conditions, but also to the potential for sudden breaking waves or "boomers" whenever a large and long incoming swell encountered a submerged ledge or rock. We only ran into these a few times, and they had the power to shock and surprise. Fortunately prompt evasive action carried the day.

We spent two nights on beaches and four nights on island campsites. The islands were by far my favorite, with a cozy edge-of-the-woods quality combined with amazing views and the opportunity to explore nearby on foot. Our campsites were mostly established places where other campers had stayed, with good all-tide water access and usually some modest trails nearby.

The First Nations of Vancouver Island

The west coast of Vancouver Island has long been settled by the tribes of the First Nations. They have been here for a long time, living off of salmon, shellfish, wild plants and (in the past) whales. There is little other human presence here other than summer visitors, and even those are few: we might have seen ten other people on the water in the week we spent there. In the area where we paddled, the locals consist of some 500 Kyuquot and Cheklesaht people. In turn they form part of the larger Nuu-chah-nulth Confederation which speaks a common language.

Today the Nuu-chah-nulth groups have clear title to most of their ancestral lands. Culturally and environmentally sensitive areas are closed to outsiders, or open by permission only (our guide helped facilitate access). Tourism businesses in this region are owned by local tribes. This is a new state of affairs that has only existed since the modern-day Maa-nulth Treaty took effect a decade ago. The reasons for this late change are surprising and illuminate some lesser-known aspects of BC history.

Treaty land marker. Photo: Joe Berkovitz

Land Rights and Resources

For over two centuries, British Columbia stood alone among Canadian provinces in its lack of formal recognition of aboriginal land rights, despite the British Crown's position that lands could only be taken from First Nations by signed treaties. The reasons for this were rooted in the historical domination of BC by the Hudson's Bay Company, a fur-trapping monopoly that the Crown allowed to function as a virtual government with few restrictions. The Company did not bother with treaties for the most part. They were interested in fur trading with the First Nations, period. Establishing who owned the land wasn't important to them; the company just used land as it saw fit. The execution of the 1850 Douglas Treaties (one of the few historical treaties in the province) captures this spirit perfectly: after some conversation, tribal leaders made an X on a blank sheet of paper to give their assent. The actual terms were copied from a different document some months later, without their participation.

Eventually the lack of clarity around land rights in BC forced a modern treaty process that has only borne fruit in recent decades. The Maa-nulth Treaty of 2011 which applied to the area of our trip is among the first in the province.

Although fur trapping isn't what it used to be, the legacy of the Hudson's Bay Company can still be seen today in the resource extraction economy of BC. Today, it is forest products. Clear-cut scars and logging trucks are everywhere, and it is on private logging roads that one must cross the mountains to reach the northwest coast. Only in remote parks such as the Brooks Peninsula are the mountains unscarred by cleared areas.

Nature Red in Tooth and Tentacle

The first thing to strike us on our initial day of paddling was the wealth of life in and around the intertidal zone. Every rock seemed to be home to huge, colorful starfish, anemones and gooseneck barnacles.

Sea anemone. Photo: Joe Berkovitz

Leather star. Photo: Dan Carr

Blood star. Photo: Joe Berkovitz

The wolf. Photo: Justine Curgenven

Sea Wolves

One morning we woke on our nameless campsite in the Mission Group to a view of this lupine neighbor prowling on neighboring Spring Island. The same wolf appeared the next morning at about the same time, perching on a rock and looking in our general direction while projecting an air of sophisticated boredom. “I’ve seen your type before. You will be leaving soon.” It was one of many Vancouver Coastal sea wolves in the area, a distinct subspecies that lives on a marine-based diet and can swim the long distances between islands. There is a recent documentary on Netflix called “Island of the Sea Wolves” which depicts the lives of these animals with quite a lot of amazing footage and a little bit of dramatic license.

The wolves were just one of the many inhabitants of this remote wilderness. Once away from the few tiny human settlements, the influence of our species dwindled to nothing. From the moment we crossed the mountains from the east side of Vancouver Island, we felt we were just interlopers among nature. This is a place that belongs purely to the plants and animals. On any given beach you will likely see tracks of wolf, bear and cougar, and none of humans.

Fishing

Subsistence fishing has always been essential here, and our guide Justine turned out to be an enthusiastic proponent. Justine is someone who likes to catch her food and, thankfully, to share it. She brought with her a handline on a reel, a selection of hooks and lures, and a billy club for subduing fish.

A dramatic Justine fishing episode took place after we encountered an otter raft off of Spring Island (see below). She had noticed salmon swimming under our boats, and it clearly excited her bloodthirsty appetite. Out came the handline and lures, and in short order Justine’s kayak contained a large, gorgeous, and very dead salmon along with quite a lot of blood everywhere. A delicious meal supplement!

Sea Otters

Sea otters are extremely cute. It’s undeniable. They could make a good case for taking the cuteness prize in the animal kingdom overall. Don’t mischaracterize them as mere marine mammal models primping for their photo ops, though. They have some unique and dexterous skills. Early in the trip I was awakened by a loud knocking sound at dawn. I could tell that the sound was coming from something in the water, but it was too dark to see what it was. A day later, Janet and Justine were walking on Cautious Point Island in the Bunsbys one morning and heard the same sound: a female otter and her offspring were hanging out in the cove where they were hiking, and the mother otter was lying on her back banging a rock to break open a shellfish to feed the baby! This tool-using behavior is unique among marine mammals, and it is not instinctive: otters learn how to do it from other otters, and it takes practice. I guess this is well enough known that the sea otter emoji on my phone shows it holding a rock, but I wasn’t aware of it until this trip.

Otters. Photo: Justine Curgenven

Later in the trip we went on an extended jaunt near Spring Island to Lookout Island where we had heard otters might be hanging out. In between the islands lies the Brown Channel, and it turned out to be full of a mix of kelp and a large raft of otters, which often go together. The otters were quite curious and came out to see us in force.

What a Way to End!

Our final night on the coast was spent camping at Rugged Point Provincial Marine Park. It is steep and rocky, and both the ocean-facing and estuary sides feature broad expanses of sand beach. After a long day of paddling in bigger conditions we were happy to land on the protected estuary side and avoid the surf. But the day was not over, and a hike over the spine of Rugged Point would take us to the ocean side, whose beaches were said to be legendary in their scope, sweep and wildness. Janet, Justine and I set off to explore.

The trail wound through thick BC rainforest and huge old-growth firs, finally dropping to the ocean. The ocean beaches stretched on for miles, rimmed by log piles and divided by occasional rocky spines. Justine and Janet headed on past me over some steep terrain while I took a more conservative trail; later we met up again further up the beach. The sun was sinking and the drama of the scenery was amplifying. It was going to be hard to leave.

Cute Yes, But …….

The otters look utterly at home in this environment, but in fact they were virtually extinct here by 1920s. Good old fur trading, again! Trading ships visited these coasts to make lots of money selling otter pelts in the US and China. The local nations had always done some otter hunting, but this was a whole other kind of pressure on the population.

Otters were reintroduced in the 1970s from Alaska by airplane, thanks to the efforts of US and Canadian biologists. Who could object to otters once more flaunting their cuteness off the shores of BC? Well, the local First Nations people could—but no one asked them.

Had they been asked, they would have had some strong opinions. Since the otters were brought back and their numbers have boomed, the animals have used their rock-wielding smarts to decimate the local shellfish population. And who needs the shellfish to eat? The Kyuquot people, who originally managed the otters' numbers by hunting them but can no longer do so legally. So the locals are not fans of the

On the way back over a mini-headland, I put my hand down to steady myself. I felt something like an electric current jolting through my hand and jerked my arm back in a reflex. After several frozen seconds went by, my brain said, "Wasps! Run!". I shouted something incoherent to the others and ran in the direction I was pointed, taking me some distance off trail, before I took stock and realized there were no wasps around me. But I had been correct: my right hand was rapidly swelling and felt like there were a fistful of needles inside it. I returned to the trail and began to contemplate what tomorrow's paddle might be like for me.

I took some Sudafed and the pain subsided to a tolerable level. Thanks to the antihistamine I slept like a drugged baby, but waking up and packing in the morning was not easy. Usually I'm among the first to be ready to launch, but everyone was ahead of me on this last morning and I was groggy and crabby. With near-constant morning headwinds coming down the estuary, I felt like each little wave of chop was a huge obstacle. Eventually Janet slipped me a caffeine pill and it worked wonders.

Only in the final 15 minutes of paddling did the wind drop as we pulled into Fair Harbour and got ready to unpack, haul the boats up, and text our friends, families and partners: we were back. The jarring return to civilization was upon us.

This was a trip of surpassing beauty and wonder. I recommend to every paddler: put this part of the world on your list. It is very much worth the effort and the time.

Trip route. Joe Berkovitz

In This Issue

Baja by Burro and Mule

Carl Parris

Intrigued

Since retirement I have travelled six times to the Baja Peninsula to go sea kayaking. I've enjoyed the Pacific swells crashing against the rocks in La Bufadora and the beauty of the flora and fauna of the Sea of Cortez on multi-day trips. While primarily focused on kayaking I was fascinated by some spectacular mountains visible from the water. From the Sea of Cortez these mountains lit up with the sunrise and glowed along the ridges at sunset.

As a person who is always curious about what is around the corner I wondered who lived in those mountains and how did they survive in such a challenging environment. I studied Cultural Geography in college which is the study of how culture shapes and is shaped by the physical environment and human activity and while I didn't pursue this as a career I have continued to explore these interests on the side. I have spent time with rural communities in Mexico, China, Guatemala and the Amazon.

Photo: Eder Arreola

I kept asking my guides if they knew of a way to travel into those mountains. With the help of Ginni Callahan and Sea Kayak Baja Mexico (SKBM) I was hooked up with 'Tete' Ricardo Arce Aguilar. He is a rancher who lives up in the Sierra de San Francisco and guides mule trips into remote deep canyons that drop down to streams and oases of palm trees at the bottom. Hidden in the cliff walls are caves with paintings from pre-Colombian inhabitants dating as far back as 10,000 BC. Next to nothing is known about the people who created them. Baja California has one of the largest and most diverse collections of rock paintings, drawings, portable rock art and ground figures than anywhere in the Western Hemisphere.

Tete

Tete himself is descendent from the indigenous people and the Spanish conquistadors who first settled in these mountains along with early Jesuit and Dominican missionaries in the late 1600s. His family is part of a relatively small number of ranching families that have led an isolated and self-reliant way of life involving cattle, goats, dairy, cheese, leather goods and subsistence farming. They make their own saddles and are excellent

Photo: Carl Parris

leather craftsmen. It is a culture of hard work, family, and resilience in a beautiful but challenging environment.

Saddling Up

Tete and I were joined by Jorge Soto – who is a great kayak guide with SKBM, has experience with horses, is a wonderful cook and assisted me with translation. Tete travelled overnight to our meeting point with three mules for us to ride and four burros to carry our gear at a park office near the settlement of Rancho de Guadelupe. I transferred my gear from the familiar blue IKEA bags (that seem to be the universal bag for sea kayakers) into large leather bags handmade by Tete. These bags were tied to metal frames hung over the backs of the burros and synched down with straps with a lot of tugging and pushing, sometimes with a foot jammed into their sides. We piled more and more stuff onto them, but they didn't complain.

It took us about an hour to load up the burros. My mule was named Ciruela – Spanish for Plum. After saddling up I was given a few tips on riding: stand up in the stirrups and lean forward when going uphill and lean back with feet forward when going downhill. In a flash my mule was scrambling up a rocky incline and I was just trying hard to hold on. It was going to take a while for us to learn how to co-exist. The burros tool the lead with Tete behind them. Periodically he would need to ride up along their side to guide the burros back onto the trail. I kept falling behind so I was put in the middle with Jorge bringing up the rear.

An Unnerving Ride

We headed along a dirt road through some small settlements that were part of the ejido (communal lands) ranching community. We moved onto a trail that followed along the top of the rim of a canyon. As we started to head down I could not see the bottom for two hours. We gingerly worked our way down 2,600 feet along a trail with drop-offs and switch backs into the depths of the canyon. At times Ciruela's head was hanging out over the edge (!) as we rounded switchbacks with her hoofs still securely on the trail. I will admit that I was a quite nervous at first. If the mule were to stop suddenly I was afraid I would go "over the handle bars" and

Photo: Carl Parris

Circle indicates area of the Sierra De San Francisco

off the edge. I just kept whispering to myself "trust the mule". They are incredibly sure-footed stepping over pebbles and rocks of all sizes on unstable surfaces. They are the animals of choice for this environment.

We arrived at our first camp after four hours of riding. I could barely walk as I dismounted. Tete took off all the saddles from the mules and the pack frames from the burros. He put bells on them and let them go off into the canyons to forage for their own food during the night. We could hear their bells and occasional loud vocalizations in the dark mixed in with a chorus of frogs from the arroyo. The camp was a flat dirt corral with toilets, kitchen area and running water from a nearby river. The first two nights our camp was next to Rancho Santa Teresa. The rancher, Juan, joined us for dinner. He was not a man of many words.

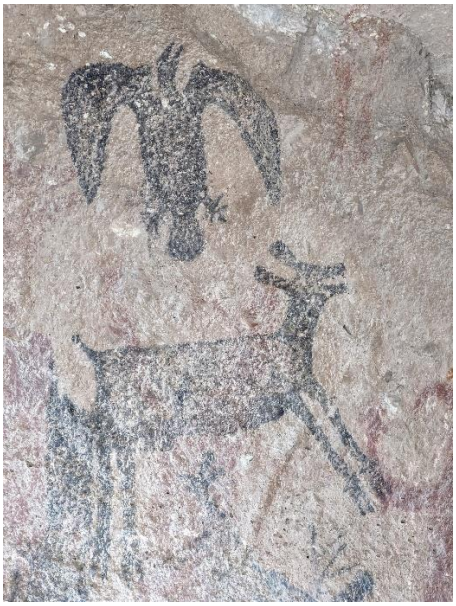
Juan's Ranch

We visited his ranch in the morning where he lived with his mother and aunt. He had about 100 goats, a pig, chickens and a dog. He had a permaculture style garden with oranges, limes, pomegranates, anise, onions, and other vegetables and herbs I could not identify. We watched him follow the goats around filling up a bucket with frothy milk which would then become goat cheese an important source of income. Tete explained that the goat cheese can be made in a day from milking the goat in the morning, mixing with salt and acid from goat intestines and by evening it can be eaten. There was a network of small reservoirs and irrigation pipes and solar panels to power a few lights, wifi and to charge a radio that's used by the ranchers for communication in the region.

Juan's goats. Photo: Carl Parris

Exploring Caves

Because there was a light drizzle in the morning we decided to not move camp and instead climbed up a steep path to our first cave. The paintings were in black and red including deer and humans hunting. One of the human figures had a spike-like shape coming out of its head. There is speculation that this indicates a shaman. However, so little is known about the people who inhabited this region and much is speculation. Over the next three days we explored five different cave structures. We scrambled up steep paths, rock hopped across the stream with pools and small water shoots and natural springs. At one point I was roped and lowered down the side of a rock wall to get to a cave tucked into the cliff. Some were quite elaborate and as much as 100 meters long. Images of thunderbirds, deer, big horn sheep, possibly shaman celebrations under the influence of psychedelics, battles with arrows piercing human figures and upside-down babies. One small cave had abstract carvings into a large boulder which was very different everything else that we saw, perhaps from a different era.



Rock paintings. Photo: Carl Parris

At night around a campfire we told stories, played a bit of music (Tete plays stand up base in a ranchero band with his father who plays the accordion). I pulled out my harmonica and played Greenland Whale Fisheries while Tete accompanied me air playing a bass guitar using a dried palm frond – you had to be there. We ate like kings including a lot of homemade goat cheese, pulled goat meat and homemade tortillas from Tete's wife.

Mules, Part I

We rode mules. The burros (donkeys) carried our gear. Mules come from the mating of a horse and a donkey. They are sterile. Mules inherit desirable qualities from both burros and horses; from the horse they inherit strength and stamina, and their intelligence comes from the burro. Mules are generally patient, sure-footed, intelligent and have an even temper. My mule was easy to ride and very calm. I asked Tete about how mules are bred and if he preferred a male horse or a mare. His eyes lit up! He prefers a mare to mate with a male burro. Others prefer the opposite. It takes up to four years for a horse and a burro to be corralled together before they will mate.. After a mule is born it takes another three years before they are ready to be ridden and work. He bought Ciruela for 9,000 pesos – about $450-500. She will be able to work until the age of 25 or so and then go out to pasture until the late 30s.

La Sierra de San Francisco Photo: Carl Parris

A Frog-filled Oasis

On the third night we rode down the arroyo to a junction of two canyons and a large natural pool with huge palm trees towering above us – a spectacular oasis. The skies cleared up and the stars appeared. This idyllic scene was spoiled by one big problem – FROGS! As it got darker they got louder and never took a break. I have liked frogs all my life. I live by a swamp and love the sound of spring peepers and frogs of all types. I have spent time in the Amazon where the frogs at night are impressive but these frogs were too much. I used earplugs to no avail. I had to cover one ear with a pillow leaving the other exposed – not a restful night.

We retraced our route over the next two days. The scenery never ceased to amaze. Ciruela and I became a team as I got more comfortable riding. At the top of the canyon I took the lead for a while chasing after stray burros and giving them a slap with the small whip on the end of my reigns.

Mules, Part II

Except for the long ears, mules look very similar to horses, but their muscle composition is different. Mules have smoother muscles than horses. Think of a football player's muscle build compared to that of a ballerina. Both are very strong, but the mule has greater physical strength for its size, and more endurance. Burros and mules have been labeled "stubborn" for centuries, but it is really only an abundance of common sense and a strong desire for self-preservation that might make them inclined to resist. Both have a natural attraction to humans. When treated with patience, kindness and understanding, they learn to trust and obey. If they are treated with force and abuse, they are not likely to comply with your wishes. If only a mule could talk, most people would be surprised at how smart they really are!

(Above from: https://www.luckythreeranch.com)

I have been fortunate enough to go on some amazing adventures in various parts of the world. This trip was one of my very favorites. For those of you who go to Baja for sea kayaking I recommend adding a mule trip to your itinerary to really get an understanding of the people and place. If you have a partner who does not want to kayak but still wants to experience Baja this would be a great option. If you are not comfortable with riding mules this trip can be done as a hiking trip with the burros carrying your gear and it can also be done as a bit of both hiking and riding. They will customize the trip to the experience and athleticism of the participants. Tete is very proud of his culture and is an enthusiastic guide who loves to share his way of life.

This particular year the ranchers have been experiencing significant challenges from a long-term drought and the income from these mule trips really helps them out. It's a win/win. Tete and I have become friends and continue to communicate. I am hoping that someday I can return and take Tete up on an invite to spend time on his ranch.

Getting There and Things To Do

If you would like to book a trip you can contact Saddling South at https://www.saddlingsouth.com/. Ask for Tete to be your guide. Tell them I sent you. They will coordinate with SKBM to organize a trip.

I believe that hiking would be a good option if you are not comfortable riding a mule - which I could totally understand. The main trail down is pretty easy and not scary with big drop offs. Coming back up will be an effort but very doable as long as you take your time and drink a lot of water. The main campsite at the bottom is flat and has toilets. The second campsite is more primitive.

You could combine the canyon trip with whale watching in Magdalena Bay which is a famous breeding ground for gray whales. Here is a link to give you an idea of what that is like: https://www.magdalenabaywhales.com/ I would recommend flying into Loreto which is a beautiful small city on the coast of the Sea of Cortez and very safe. It is also the base for **Saddling South** and **SEA KAYAK BAJA MEXICO**. It is about a five-hour drive from Loreto to San Ignacio and another hour or so to the starting point for the canyon. There is a lot to see on the way as you drive along the Sea of Cortez coast and then cut across towards the Pacific Coast. We spent a night on the way there at a campground outside of San Ignacio near some fresh water. On the return we spent a night at a hunting lodge run by the Ejido de Las Tres Virgenes which was spectacular. We could have spent a few days there. https://escapadas.mexicodesconocido.com.mx/atractivos/complejo-de-volcanes-tres-virgenes-santa-rosalia-baja-california-sur/

Photo: Carl Parris

Southeast and Mid-Atlantic Sand Bottom Tide Races: Train Where You Paddle

Dale Williams

Matanzas Inlet, FL. Photo: Fran Lapolla

I would venture to say that a high percentage of the rough water sea kayaking that occurs in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic, occurs in river-mouth-sand-bottom-tide-races. They're just so much fun! They're more consistent and more forgiving than either shore break or current-only tide races. They also provide all the components necessary for training and assessment at the ACA's highest levels. This is where most of us living in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic learned to surf sea kayaks on the tops of waves, where we gained our rough water paddling skills without running into each other. It's where we learned to manage risk, incidents and groups. It's where we, and many other coaches from around the country trained and assessed for advanced awards, primarily, but not exclusively within the American Canoe Association (ACA).

Background

There was a time when most of the British Canoe Union (BCU) coaching and "star" awards were

Photo: Fran Lapolla

conducted in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic. But changes occurred that I would associate with the advent of the British Canoeing (BC) era. Higher level awards south of Connecticut were disallowed, with the explanation that these areas lacked "featured coastlines" for navigation training, or that the tide races lacked defined eddies. Some complained that the clapotic "zippers" and omni-directional surf break were too dangerous. As a result, UK-based training all but dried up for much of the east coast. That's a shame, since by any name, UK-based coaches have always had a lot to offer.

There's hope that this situation may someday change. These days, it depends on who you ask, but under their latest name, "Paddle UK", there remains an ambivalence about recognizing the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic venues as representative enough of UK home waters.

In truth, there are few places that even come close to simulating the UK paddling environment, and certainly none that compare to Anglesey, Pembrokeshire, Northern Ireland or Cornwall. Of the options available that offer sufficiently rough water in the U.S,, very specific parts of California and the Maine come closest, at least in appearance. And while the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic are the least similar, I believe the training I received here prepared me at least as well for paddling in the UK.

Different Challenges

Our playgrounds are no less challenging, but do require different strategies for managing a unique environment. Though it may be harder to teach and assess navigation with less featured coastlines (mostly it takes more time), we still do learn to navigate here. And though our tide races often lack defined eddylines for teaching peel-outs, ferry-glides and eddy turns, they do sometimes, and there are almost always substitutes like bridge embankments or engineered shorelines where we can practice these skills.

The ACA is an American award, not an attempted imitation of the Paddle UK scheme, which like ours, is constantly evolving. The choice of venue options for the new L-5 Skills Assessment can be traced back to 2020, in an ACA working group whose objective was to develop an L-5 Skills Assessment that could be run using venues from Alaska to Florida, where every region has its own distinct challenges.

The Southeast and Mid-Atlantic sand-base-tide-races certainly have theirs. As a combination of bar break and overfall-tide race, they display wave shapes common to both. They often cover relatively large areas that relocate as water depth changes and current modifies the sandy bottom. Instead of instructors teaching from the safety of an eddy, while students perform in a "feature", members are often emersed in the same environment, at the same time. Rather than attempting to instruct in a loud

Photo: Fran Lapolla

Photo: Fran Lapolla

and dynamic environment, coaches are more often required to manage a learning experience for later reconstruction and analysis. Exposure to wind and waves, combined with strong along-shore and tidal currents, require a level of constant water-reading and group-management skills no less challenging than other environments. The sometimes-unpredictable changes in wave direction caused by break, over shallow bars, require quick reactions and a high degree of spatial and positional awareness. Fortunately, these are all skills that can be taught, learned and assessed. Most are directly transferrable to other venues.

I've paddled in many amazing places around the world - in caves, fjords and rock gardens, along great cliff walls and, on rare occasions, probably much too close to ice bergs. I've enjoyed them all as part of what sea kayaking is all about. But I live on Tybee Island, where I can be in a world class, sand-bottom-tide-race in about 15 minutes. It's not always everything a tide race could be, but because it's where I paddle most, the best paddling days of my life were right here in that race.

Our maximum enjoyment and highest skill attainment will likely be in the places where we train the most.

Photo: Fran Lapolla

Photos of the Month

Bay of Islands, New Zealand

Photo: John Kirk-Anderson

Photos of the Month

Cornwall Night Dolphins

Photo: Rupert Kirkwood

Photos of the Month

La Bufadora, Baja

Photo: Bill Vonnegut

Well Being: Baby Boomers and Serious Paddling

Rick Wiebush and Laurie Collins

Note: This article is adapted from Rick and Laurie's chapter in the forthcoming book ***Outdoor Leisure: Experiencing and Overcoming Exclusion and Inequity*** *(N. Carr & M. Baker, eds.). Pseudonyms are used throughout.*

Baby boomers recognize that they are aging but refuse to get old. Many challenge the stereotypes of aging through involvement in outdoor adventure pursuits like sea kayaking. This article uses data from interviews to describe the experiences of a group of 55- to 75 -year-olds who: 1) typically did not start kayaking until their 50's; 2) got hooked on the sport; 3) decided to get serious about it and engaged in skill training over several years and 4) became very competent paddlers, including in surf, rough water, and strong current.

This story focuses on the nexus of age and serious involvement in sea kayaking. Using the paddlers' own words, we illustrate both their awareness of aging and the ways in which their activities address three foundations of well-being for older people: social well-being, physical health, and psychological well-being.

Peter

It's startling. Peter, 73 years old and a grandfather to three, is riding a surging three-foot swell toward a narrow opening between two rock walls that tower above the water. Using a stern rudder to steer his 17-foot long sea kayak, he gets rocketed through the slot, maneuvering with grace and style. But the wave, outrunning him, has exploded against the wall on the far side of the slot and is rebounding as a staggering wall of white spray and foam. A momentary lapse in concentration, and the resurgent wave knocks him upside down. Those watching – his paddling partners, men and women, most of whom are in their 60's, - hold their breath. Peter stays upside down in his boat for about 10 seconds, collecting his thoughts, if not his breath. He then extends his paddle to the surface, snaps his hips, and rolls up. Yes! His peers' hands and paddles extend skyward in multiple, triumphant V's for a major success. Timing the next set of waves, he emerges from the slot all smiles and hollers "Next!"

Disrupting Stereotypes

There is a set of stereotypical assumptions – mostly negative - about the characteristics of older people. These include the assumptions that people in their sixties and older are: 1) looking forward to – if not already in – retirement; 2) deteriorating physically and mentally; 3) disengaging from productive pursuits and social involvement; and 5) reluctant to participate in all but the mildest physical activities. There is some foundation for the health-related stereotypes: about one in four older people have heart disease, almost half have hypertension, half have arthritis, one-fifth have diabetes, a third have impaired hearing, and two-thirds have unhealthy weight. Yes, but …….

Photo: Rick Wiebush

But, the baby boomer generation has already challenged aging stereotypes in that their life expectancy is almost a decade longer than that of their parents. Many continue to work past the retirement age of 65. They tend to view themselves as being 10 -15 years younger than their chronological age. While they admit to aging, they reject the notion of "getting old". Those attitudes are reflected in the actions of the people who are the focus of this story - a group of baby boomers who bust the "old people" stereotypes via their dedicated and demanding pursuit of the sport of sea kayaking.

The baby boomers interviewed for this article have made a major commitment of time, money and energy to become serious sea kayakers. They paddle regularly, some throughout the winter; they are comfortable in surf and rougher water; many have been involved in week-long (or longer) expeditions; and they frequently travel to challenge themselves in places like the Pacific Northwest, Baja, Croatia, and other international destinations.

The experience of one group of boomer women on an international trip is illustrative. One day, after launching in calm conditions, they were circumnavigating a cliffy island when the winds picked up, eventually reaching 20+ knots. The seas swelled to three to four feet. But after rounding a corner and facing the open ocean, the waves reached four to five feet and the rebound off the cliffs created even steeper, confused seas. The group immediately spread themselves out to maintain good separation, paddled hard, and made it through a two-mile maelstrom without incident. Their guide was both stunned and impressed with the way the women handled the conditions. He later remarked that while he initially thought of them as "senior women," he quickly started referring to them as "Bad Ass Women."

You Do What?

For people who are not involved, it can be difficult to get their heads around 60+ -year-olds doing the kinds of things that the paddlers in this story routinely do. One person noted that when she tells friends and family that she is a sea kayaker:

most picture me gliding slowly around a placid lake, wearing shorts and flip flops while hoisting a pair of oversized binoculars for birdwatching. Being a very low key, outwardly calm and bookish college professor, I'm not perceived as a bad-ass, adventure sports kind of gal. I mean, people at work will be amazed at my age, not now that my hair is going gray, but because they don't imagine in our world we go out and do these things, and since we're all doing the same thing, we don't think it's a big deal. And then you go back and hang around with other 60-year-olds that you work with, with their aches and pains, and they're not doing anything, and they read a book and sit around all the time, and you realize that it (what we do) is a big deal and it is really important. (Selina, 65)

Well-Being

The extent and nature of baby boomers' involvement in serious sea kayaking – and the identified challenges and rewards – reveal that they are addressing what researchers have determined to be three foundations of well-being among older people: ***social well-being (e.g., feeling of belonging, relevance) physical health (e.g., strength, flexibility, good nutrition)and psychological health (e.g., lifelong learning, positive outlook, sense of well-being) .***

Skills and Pride

Based on feedback from participants, a variety of factors influence their commitment to sea kayaking. One of those is the acquisition and exercising of their skills. Many of the participants started serious training because they had enjoyed sea kayaking previously but wanted to expand their skill set to be able to take on new challenges. Achieving those goals and continuing to exercise their skills has become a source of pride.

I take just as much pride in the fact that when I am out in [rough] conditions that I would not have gone out in ten years ago, I now don't even notice. My potential horizons have grown exponentially…. I like being known as that serious kayak guy … and being respected for being a responsible and capable trip mate. If we hit a rough patch, [and there are] certain people I want to have nearby, I want to be one of those people (Ron, 62).

Social Well-Being

It is clear that for many of these baby boomers, the social aspect of paddling is also important. This includes the conversations while paddling, and the après-paddling food and drinks, but also the on-the-water support and reinforcement people get from the group. People feel like they are part of a close-knit community and have a shared culture. Comments from several of the paddlers reflect this;

Photo: Rick Wiebush

I value the community of active, adventurous paddlers that I have met and with whom I spend time. We don't all perceive the world in the same way, but we all support one another and know that when we are on the water, we will take care of one another… It's funny, I can mentally dismiss my anxiety because of my "tribe" of competent paddlers. (Patty, 62)

To me, there is nothing better than hanging out with like-minded, like-skilled kayaking buddies. Knowing you are with people who have a certain skill set allows you to push yourself a little harder and try things you may not have otherwise tried. (Doreen,60)

Physical Health

Physical fitness is a universal theme with these older paddlers. Paddling often (i.e., typically twice per week), paddling in rougher conditions, and/or doing long-distance trips builds endurance, strength and aerobic capacity. These baby boomers do not feel old, and do not want to. It feels good to be in shape. However, they are aware of the aging process and want to do what they can to hold it at bay.

Age 60 was looming, and I was determined to lead an active life and spend time with others of like mind. I needed big goals to motivate me to get healthier and work out. [I was] definitely motivated by wanting to be committed to active, adventurous and healthy life focused on the outdoors. That motivation remains today, and I am now spending more time on physical conditioning than skill classes. A b*unch of bad-ass 60-year-old women make me try to keep up (Ron, 62).*

Despite the sense of "bad-assness" that resonates for many of these baby boomers, they acknowledge that at times they have struggled with some aspects of serious paddling and are not totally free from fear or a lack of confidence. One participant captured this challenge with respect to surfing:

I'm still working on overcoming, or, at the very least, accepting a significant obstacle: in adulthood I've become cautious and fearful of being

Photo: Rick Wiebush

underwater. Breaking surf, particularly waves of four feet and above, increases my risk of capsizing. So, I'm hesitant to challenge myself in bigger conditions. Another related obstacle is developing a roll that I can trust in actual conditions. I've yet to even try rolling after a capsize because I lack confidence. Not having a combat roll coupled with my fear of being underwater has held me back in many situations (Paula, 63).

"Paula's" last comment is a predominant theme in discussions with these "serious leisure" baby boomers. As much as they may hate to admit it, they recognize they are aging and express concerns about physical health and the potential for injury associated with the kind of paddling they do. Although not necessarily a result of paddling, it seems like somebody is having one or more body parts surgically replaced and/or treated in physical therapy every few months.

At my age (76), age is always in the picture. I might want to try something, but I reflect on what happens if I crash and burn? Am I willing to put up with the pain, the recovery, the other consequences of a failure, even a minor one? At this point in my life, a minor setback could cost me a year which means there is a good likelihood that I will not be back on the water (Carl, 76).

The issue of getting older enters my thoughts as I lose good friends or have another injury sending me to physical therapy. A couple of times, as I was lying under my boat on the beach as the waves made it almost impossible to extract myself, I thought: "I am so grateful that nothing is broken." (Patty, 62).

On the other hand:

….. getting older (having just turned 73) and wondering how much longer I'll be able to paddle concerns me a little. I'll just have to do my best to remain fit and see what happens. I think that paying attention to one's overall health and physical conditioning have a far greater impact on our ability to participate in kayaking than age itself. I routinely do yoga, stretching, and moderate strength exercises to maintain a basic level of fitness (Manny, 73).

Photo: Rick Stewart

Psychological Well-Being

One paddler commented that serious paddling helps her feel "healthy, happy, complete" and contrasted that with the experience of other older people who aren't engaged in meaningful activities:

I need something beyond just wake up, go to work, come home, take care of the family, go and get up. Yeah. I need more than that, and when I see people who build their whole life with that, and then the kids leave, or a husband leaves, or something happens, and now they're sitting there going, "What do I do? What I do with my life?

The baby boomers highlighted in this article made a major commitment to learning sea kayaking skills and in so doing faced all kinds of physical and psychological challenges. They stretched themselves at an age when many others would assume that they should be starting to take things easy and "just enjoy life". But their path is exactly what has led to "enjoying life". It is clear that their commitment to serious paddling has helped them to age successfully and enjoy a strong sense of well-being. Comments made by two of the participants affirm this:

I enjoy the feeling [that I am] truly living when doing something challenging among the elements, being on the water, or being in beautiful places with people I like. Having completed UnCon and other courses allows me to be in all sorts of conditions, be invigorated, and feel an aliveness, or grounding in the elements, or earth's spirit (Patty, 62).

[Paddling] absolutely has a strong effect on my state of mind. Feeling strong and skilled keeps me feeling rooted in this world as I age. It gives me a little rock to cling to throughout the process. I know that this will change as age really sets in - but for now having this skill set, and the challenges I seek out with my skills, keeps me feeling fluid and mentally lighter. All the paddling I do evokes a range of emotions in me; happiness, peace, and, yes, sometimes frustration …… But playing in rough water is absolutely transcendent for me. I want to seek that feeling as long as I am capable (Becky, 62).

Photo: Rick Stewart

Fragile Ancient Mariners

Ginni Callahan

Isla Coronados, Sea of Cortes. Photo: Ginni Callahan

Note: This article originally appeared in the November 2021 issue and is well worth re-reading.

We need creatures that challenge our imagination. Sea horses and dragons and blue-footed boobies; unicorns and Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster; giant squid and puffer fish and paper nautiluses.

When science and whimsy meet, some sacred harmony is struck, just haunting enough to plant a doubt about what's real, or pique a curiosity about what's possible. Notes of humility and excitement find voice between the solid brass of biology and the flighty strings of cryptozoology (the study of creatures that may or may not exist).

One May, celebrating the end of the Baja tour season, the whole company had a picnic with our families on a crescent white sand beach on Coronados Island outside Loreto, Mexico. It was the kids of course, who found the unicorn of sea creatures in a shallow depression in the sand, still alive in its shell, but losing water to the falling tide.

As whimsical as a paper nautilus may sound, Argonauta cornuta definitely exists. They brought it to me in a bowl of water, and it suctioned itself to my finger. This was the first live paper nautilus that most of the other guides had ever seen in our combined 85 years of combing these beaches and snorkeling these waters. In my 20 years here, I've seen a few dozen empty shells, but only 2 live specimens.

Live paper nautilus Photo: Ginni Callahan

Such a close encounter of the wild kind as we had at the company picnic on Coronados Island leaves me feeling a little special and deeply grateful to have had that experience. Learning more about the argonaut / paper nautilus has impressed me all over again just how ancient are some life forms (I really can't wrap my head around 500 million years!), how recently we've come to the party, and how varied are the experiences of life.

A live paper nautilus, or argonaut, is so rare to see that the field guidebook we used for years in Baja only had a picture of the empty shell. It's a single-chambered white to opaque crescent with black markings. Because it does seem fantastic that a kind of octopus swims around wearing a fragile curved hat, I've had clients insist I was completely making them up.

Paper nautilus shell. Photo: Ginni Callahan

I wasn't making this up. A few mass extinctions ago, the earth belonged to the ancestors of the paper nautilus–cephalopods, a group of agile, adaptable, expressive mollusks. It was a time before mammals, before dinosaurs, and even before land plants. Five hundred million years later, and much reduced in species variety, the cephalopod clan is still represented by octopi, squid, cuttlefish, chambered nautiluses, and paper nautiluses. They all have suctioned appendages and remarkable adaptations for predation, locomotion, disguise, and communication. These intelligent invertebrates also exhibit complex learning behavior. After all these years, there is still much to learn about them.

Coronados

Upcoming Events

Dates	Event	Location	Sponsor	Website/Contact
July 16-20	Great Lakes Symposium	Grand Marais MI	Power of Water	Greatlakesseakayaksymposium.net
July 31 – Aug 1	Ashley Brown's Surf Camp	Cape Charles, VA	Cross Currents	Crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Aug 15 - 17	Ladies of the Lake	Munising, MI	Downwind Sports	Downwindsports.com
Sept 17 - 18	Intermediate + Adv. Surf Camps	Cape Charles, VA	Cross Currents	Crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Sept 19-21	Kiptopeke Symposium	Cape Charles VA	Cross Currents	Crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Oct. 4 - 6	Bay of Fundy Symposium	Argyle, Nova Scotia	Chris Lockyear	Bofsks.com
Oct. 10 -12	Delmarva Paddlers Retreat	Lewes DE	Qajaq USA	Delmarvapaddlersretreat.org
Oct 30 -Nov 1	Ocean Gathering	Tybee Is., GA	Sea Kayak Georgia	Seakayakgeorgia.com

Contributors

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Ginni Callahan **– Ginni Callahan is both a legend and an institution in the world of sea kayaking. She runs Sea Kayak Baja Mexico, based in Loreto, offering both tours and training. Ginni is an ACA L5 Instructor, a British Canoeing Advanced Sea Leader, a BC 4* Surf Instructor and a BC Assessor of Sea Leaders.**

Laurie Collins **– is an L4 Coastal Kayak instructor who loves introducing others to the physical and mental challenges inherent to the sport. She is also an avid cyclist and chair of the Teacher Education Department at Howard County Community College in Maryland.**

Carl Parris **– is a BC Sea Leader and Level 1 Coach. His home base is the Mid-Hudson River Valley where he started the Mid-Hudson Valley Sea Kayak and Canoe Club. Carl has paddled extensively in the U. and the world in places such as Long Island Sound, the coast of Maine, Lake Superior, Baja, New Zealand and Iceland. He likes playing in rocks, tide races, and enjoys tripping and lazy paddles in pretty places.**

Rick Wiebush **- runs *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking* and is the editor of *Coastbusters*. He is an ACA L3 IT (retired) and British Canoeing 4* Sea Leader. Rick lives in Baltimore.**

Dale Williams **– owns and operates Sea Kayak USA and is the U.S. importer of NDK/SKUK sea kayaks. He is an ACA L-5 Instructor Trainer Educator (ITE) and former BCU Coach 5T Sea. Dale serves on the ACA Coastal Kayak Committee which develops course curriculum and helps set standards for sea kayaking certifications.**

Coastbusters **welcomes submissions of trip reports, incident descriptions and analyses, skills and "how-to" articles, boat and gear reviews, book and video reviews, and photographs. We are interested in receiving submissions from all paddlers.**

Articles should be limited to about 1,500 – 2,000 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at rwiebush@gmail.com.