Coastbusters

The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers

July 2024

Belize Underground: Kayak Spelunking on the Cave Branch Henry River

Kerry Kirk Pflugh

What is kayak spelunking? Well, I guess the best way to answer that is to tell you what it means to me.

On the last full day of our Cross Currents Belizean trip last March, we were given the choice of numerous fun activities and trips from which to select. As a profoundly claustrophobic person, it is a wonder that given the choices, I chose kayak caving. I think the idea of paddling in caves and seeing an underground river eclipsed any fears I may have had.

I have experienced paddling in sea caves off of Manzanita Beach in Washington State and played in the caves and arches of the Apostle Islands on Lake Superior, and utterly loved the experience. So, I wasn't really concerned at all until I saw the entrance to the caves and thought, "what the heck am I doing?" But I am getting ahead of myself….

A Cave System

The trip took place on the Cave Branch Henry River. The Cave Branch Henry River is part of the Chiquibul Cave System. The cave network is below the surface in Chiquibul National Park, a 264,000-acre reserve in the Maya Mountain Massif region in Belize. Researchers have suggested that the Mayans believed the caves were the entrance to the underworld. Others suggest it was used by the Mayans as a passageway to carry goods more easily through the jungle.

Photo: Kerry Kirk Pflugh

Photo: Bridget White

Our paddle took us through 11 caves and seven miles of this underground river system. The majority of the trip was underground except for the brief moments when we would pass from one cave to another cave. There was also one unexpected but short portage over a mountainside.

Hot and Humid

The final day of our Belizean trip was much like all the preceding days - bright, sunny and intensely hot and humid. I actually was looking forward to being out of the sun for a bit as the heat was overbearing on that last day. The outfitters picked up Bridget White and I at the Warrie Head Airbnb shortly after breakfast. Bridget and I are long-time paddling pals and have shared many wonderful moments on the water together. I was thrilled to be sharing this new adventure with her.

Getting There

We were dropped off at a kind of rest area on the side of the highway where we were greeted by three guides in a beat-up pick-up truck with four well used sit on top kayaks tied to the top of the rig. There were no other paddlers in sight. When we asked where the rest of the group was, we were told we were the only participants for the trip.
We were then instructed to get into the back of the pickup truck. Bridget and I gave each other a

dubious glance but decided to climb aboard. There were no seats, cushions or any form of luxury to make sitting in the back of the open pickup truck comfortable. The guide, whose name was Pedro and his young assistant, Justin also jumped in the back of the truck. They handed us PFDs to sit on which helped buffer the bumps from the road as we were whisked away to our destination.

Moments later we pulled off the main road into a gated farmer's field. For the next 30 minutes, we drove on a dirt road passing row upon row of citrus trees, mostly of oranges. We also noticed that the farm was blessed by the presence of a Ceiba pentandra, or Kapok tree, like the one we saw the day before in Tikal in Guatemala.

Over the noise of the pickup truck, and the bumpy road, we managed to express our wonder at the beauty of the fields and the Tree of Life amongst the orange grove. Pedro explained that the citrus farms in Belize were under threat of extinction due to the effects of increased heat from a changing climate. He looked sadly over the fields as he spoke to us, and the beauty of the area took on an entirely new meaning for me as I wondered how the people would overcome this new challenge to their survival.

The truck then stopped abruptly. Pedro and Justin jumped out and instructed us to join them. As I jumped down, I looked for a river and caves but saw nothing but citrus fields bordered by jungle. Pedro pointed to a narrow break in the jungle which revealed a well-worn trail. He told us to follow the trail. After a very short walk, a small river that looked more like a creek emerged. The thick, lush jungle that had bordered the citrus farm had successfully hidden the river from our view.

Through *That*?

While I waited at the river with Bridget, Pedro, Justin and Abel, the driver removed the four sit on tops from the truck and carried them down the path. I was told to get into one of them and float to the opposite side and wait. Pedro said the opening to the caves was there. I floated over easily thanks to the assistance of a gentle current. In front of me, I saw some downed trees and on the other side of the trees, what looked like a three-foot opening in a jumble of boulders nestled against the mountainside. I immediately thought, "there is no way that is an entrance to a cave."

The entrance. Photo: Bridget White

When Pedro, Bridget and Justin floated over I asked, "Is that the entrance to the caves? Does it get any bigger or higher than this? Pedro assured me it was and that as soon as we entered, we would drop down a slight slope and the cave would open up above us.

He handed us helmets and headlamps and instructed us to turn the headlamp on before entering the cave. At this point, I was having major second thoughts and couldn't imagine that this small entrance, which didn't seem larger than a gopher hole, could actually expand and reveal a subterranean network of caves.

Pedro then jumped onto his kayak, made sure Bridget and I were safely settled into ours and then slipped into the small opening. And disappeared. I figured, "you've come this far, go for it girl!" And I immediately followed, praying that the ceiling of the cave wouldn't scrape my helmet.

Photo: Bridget White

Another World

Much to my delight, we found ourselves under an enormous cathedral-sized dome with walls that sparkled and glistened whenever the light from our headlamps touched them. At every turn of our heads, we were surrounded by glimmering limestone sculptures. It felt like we had entered another world - dark, damp, ancient, and with a beauty so unreal and shrouded in darkness, you wouldn't even know it was there without the headlamp light.

Despite my initial trepidation, the magnificence of this underworld replaced any fears I may have had. I found myself marveling at the enormity of the caves and the thousands of shimmering stalactites, stalagmites and unique limestone sculptures that surrounded us.

It is an unusual feeling paddling in complete darkness. Objects and obstacles are revealed only at the last moment or when the spotlight from the headlamp happens upon them. I needed to maneuver my boat, while at the same time hang onto my camera, take pictures and admire this glistening subterranean gemstone gallery. Needless to say, despite our best efforts, both Bridget and I at one point or another found ourselves beached on a small sandbar or crashing into a stalagmite.
After paddling a bit, I noticed a pinpoint of light way off in the distance. At first, I thought it was a reflection of the headlamp light. Then the pinpoint started to grow larger. I thought I was seeing a hole in the ceiling of the cave that light was filtering through. But as we paddled on, the light got bigger and was now in front of me. As we got closer, I

could see it was an opening. Suddenly, there was an explosion of light and we were out of the cave and in the middle of a lush green jungle with birds singing and insects buzzing around us. The bright sun brought tears to my eyes as I had to quickly adjust from pitch darkness to daylight.

Now we were witnessing another kind of beauty. The jungle - so green and lush, bustling with life and the sounds of birds rustling in the treetops. We were at the bottom of a ravine that Pedro explained was a watering hole for the cougars, jaguars and other jungle creatures who lived there. Unfortunately, we saw no wildlife other than birds and insects on the trip.

After taking a short break and many pictures, we paddled into our second cave and the sparking minerals once again wowed us. This would be the pattern for the entire trip. A cave or two, then lush green jungle and bright warm sunlight.

No Words

It is hard to find words that fully describe the beauty of the caves – the various formations of the stalagmites and stalactites, perfectly round holes in the ceilings of the caves where bats rested, the glistening of the minerals embedded into the natural limestone sculpture is simply breathtaking.

At one point as we paddled, the current went from a gentle ripple sound to the sound of a roaring rapid, yet the current speed remained unchanged. I asked Pedro what I was hearing. He needed to shout over the roar explaining that we were paddling under a waterfall. Imagine, we were under a waterway, spilling down a mountainside somewhere in the jungle. We couldn't see it, or feel it, because we were not only beneath the waterfall, but we were under the geology that had created the waterfall. I was utterly gob smacked.

Pedro

About halfway through the paddle, Pedro pulled over for a break and spread out a beautiful and delicious picnic lunch for us. Feeling the warm sun as we ate, listening to the flow of the river and the birds flying overhead in the middle of a jungle was a magical experience. During lunch we each shared our life story. We learned that Pedro was not only our guide but is the general manager of a national park in Belize. He works with a group of volunteers trying to convince the government to save the park from closure and destruction. These volunteers not only maintain the park infrastructure but are working to develop ecotourism programs to demonstrate to the government the value of the park.

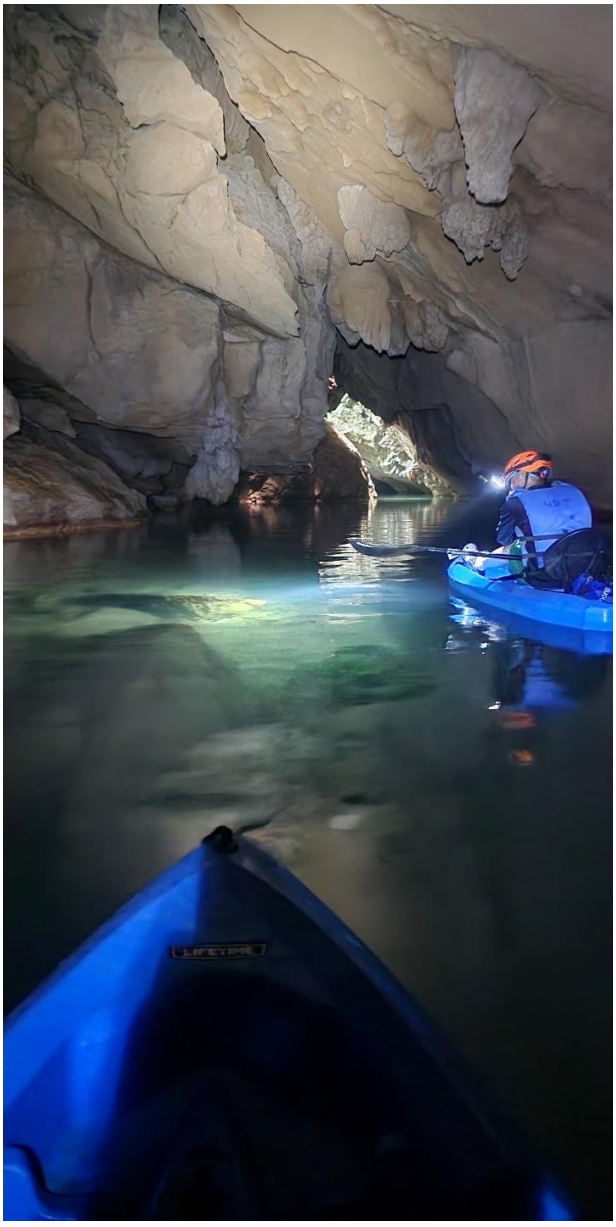

Photo: Kerry Kirk Pflugh

After lunch, we were told we had to do a short portage through the jungle to reach the next cave. Bridget and I were assigned the responsibility of carrying the paddles and seat backs of the four kayaks, while Justin and Pedro carried the four kayaks over the small mountain path. We climbed over rocks and fallen trees and through some slippery and muddy areas for about 10 minutes until we reached the river again, and got back into our kayaks and paddled through four more caves.

Swarming Bats/Swallows

One cave offered us a magical experience. As we neared the end of the cave, with the light of the jungle in the near distance, there was a flurry of thousands of bats swirling overhead all around us. I had never seen so many bats at one time in one place. It was like they were doing some sort of an aerial dance. As we floated from the cave and into the sunshine, the bats seemed to transform themselves into diving swallows. And I couldn't help wonder, had I actually seen bats? Or were they thousands of swallows? Or, were they one and the same creature? It was beautiful and extraordinary.

Swarming Tourists

We then entered our last cave. It was probably the largest one and in this one we were not alone. A tourist group had entered the cave through another access point for some cave tubing. It was noisy inside this cave unlike the 10 previous ones we had traveled. Tourists' squeals and screams of delight echoed off the cavernous walls and a small water fall roared at an almost deafening volume as we paddled past.

When we exited the last cave, we paddled about a half mile to a staircase that led us to a park where Pedro's brother was waiting to take us back to Warrie Head. We thanked Pedro, Justin and Abel profusely for the memorable and unique paddling journey, then parted.

Unmatched!

Once safely back at our hotel, Bridget and I shared a beer and agreed that this adventure was likely never to be matched. I don't know if I will ever again get to see a subterranean river and cave system; the sparkling of ancient mineral deposits hidden in darkness, or witness the flight of thousands of bats as they soar above my head only to be transformed into swallows when they enter the sunlight. I do know that my life is vastly richer for having experienced such a magical moment in time.

Kerry

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Antarctica. Photo: James Manke

Fussy Ospreys

Ashley Brown

Juvenile Ospreys. Photo: Dr. TinMD

They are so loud and cranky - oh boy, do they fuss.

I am working in the boat barn, and outside there is a family of Osprey on a platform atop the tower of the electrical lines. The platform is an accommodation the power company has made for these “fish hawks” whose habitat is constantly encroached upon by development. Ospreys like to have a high view on a broad territory, typically a tree that has open dead space at the top. But the trees are constantly and consistently being removed, despite the restrictions prohibiting it. Everyone wants to live in Charleston, which means more deforestation and suburban sprawl.

I am working in the heat, with my cranky friends above. It’s early and I’m loading the trailer of kayaks for an upcoming tour. The Osprey family has three teenagers who are very demanding. They want all the fish their parents can bring back to the nest of sticks, high in the sky. They are learning to fly. They jump off the edge of the nest and manage to spread their wings enough to stop themselves from hitting the ground with a hard impact.

The parents flew down and perched high enough in a nearby tree to watch and yell and threaten anyone coming close to their cranky teenagers. The teenagers are whining and complaining and hop-flying to bushes and back down to the ground. More

fussing and squawking by the parents, more whining and moaning by the kids who are starting to take short flights.

Osprey vs Eagle

From my spot washing kayaks and hanging life jackets, I can see the Osprey family and their fishing grounds. Whether the water is rippled by the wind or glassy with no breeze, the Osprey is an excellent angler, always carrying the fish in the aerodynamic position of head forward in line with the body of the bird.

Aerodynamic. Photo: Frode Jacobsen

Eagles, apparently better thieves than anglers (and they are good anglers!), will occasionally torment the successful Osprey until it drops the fish, and the Eagle can steal it. It even happens mid-air, the eagle mugs the Osprey, the self-preserving Osprey drops the fish and the criminal eagle catches it mid-air and escapes. I suppose the Osprey has a better chance of catching another fish than fighting a bald eagle. One adult Osprey arcs out of the nest to hunt. The other stays closer to home and as the baby birds grow bigger bodies, the adults are more often out of the nest.

Fussy Group

I have to go take a group of people from Nebraska kayaking. Visiting kayakers want dry feet, even in the south, even in the summer, and they fuss and complain about stepping into the water to sit in a boat that is floating. To hold the boat steady while they get in, I sit on the bow deck and hold the perimeter lines while they wonder with pride at their sense of adventure and regret their shoe choices.

I look forward to stepping into the cool salt water, feeling it lower my body temperature by lowering the temperature of the blood flowing through my veins. I drop my hands into the water when I get a chance and feel the cool water pass over the thin skin on my wrists. This helps me deal with the steamy heat of a Charleston summer. It's like living in a sauna.

After a short lecture about how to paddle a kayak, safety talk, and launching the boats, we are off on our adventure. We paddle against a little bit of current, much to the dismay of the new paddlers. I explain that the return trip will be much easier. I tell them that they can catch a view of the dolphins if they open their eyes to take in the entire view, soften their focus from one spot and watch for a break in the surface of the water. It happens very quickly, so you have to wait for the opportunity to see these very large, very territorial creatures break the surface. I challenge them to spot Captain Hook. All the guides know the dolphin with the curved dorsal fin.

I spot a dolphin and point it out. The chorus responds with "where?" and "I can't see it!" and "where are you looking?" All this coupled with drifting boats and facing the wrong direction and bumping into each other. I wonder why I bother with the discussion about softening your gaze. There is so much new information for the visitors to experience; they can only absorb so much. Maybe I need a new job.

Got It!

During the paddle, I watch the Osprey fishing. I watch her silhouette change. She flies forward watching the water. She moves her gaze from facing forward to facing downward. She is just in front of me and I can see her arch her body. I slow the pace of the group. When she was flying forward she was

extended in every direction, hooked bill reaching forward, wings extended. When she stops to spot a fish, she tucks her head and faces the water. She flaps her wings up and down and maintains a single spot, like a helicopter. When she spots her prey, she bends her wings at the elbows and dives so hard into the water that she completely submerges. There is a struggle to lift her fish, splashing as she sinks her talons into her lunch and flaps her wings to pull lunch to the surface.

Strike! Photo: Peter Brannon for National Geographic

Most birds have three talons in front and one in the back, but the Osprey can rotate the one talon so there are two in front and two in the back. There is also a row of tiny spikes that assist with the grip. This helps to hang on, and she rests for a few seconds like a duck on the water then flaps her wings again to get the fish airborne. This is when she has won. Well, almost. She gets in the same hover position and shakes and shifts the fish around to face forward, aligned with her body.

I cheer her along in my head, I know her kids are hungry and she must be tired.

The new kayakers enjoyed their trip around Folly Creek. They were captivated by the dolphins and proud of their efforts. Now where do they go for a food and beverage reward? I help them out of their boats, cooling my feet and wrists in the process.

I get back to the boat barn and I am dunking the PFD's, rinsing the salt off the boats, and listening to all the fussing. She has brought her fish home to her family and they are either celebrating with loud fanfare or mad that they are having sushi - again.

A Dynamic Fight

Paddling off Tilghman Island in the Chesapeake several years ago I witnessed an incredible fight between an eagle and an osprey. The eagle was standing on a sandy spit, ripping strips and pieces off a fish he had caught.

Suddenly, an osprey dive-bombed from the sky right at the eagle. Slightly perturbed, the eagle flapped his wings aggressively and the osprey veered off. But didn't quit – she took about five more dives, each of which was met by an increasingly angry response by the eagle. This culminated with the eagle rising up two feet off the ground to meet the incoming osprey. Flapping and hanging in the air, he had the fish gripped tightly in his left foot, while the other showed talons extended directly toward the incoming osprey. Whoa, sharp turn away!

But still no quit in that osprey. The next move was a sneak attack. Coming in at the eagle at ground level, staying low and skimming the water at full speed, apparently thinking a new angle might throw off the eagle. This time the eagle was really pissed. He repeated the hold-the-fish-in-one-claw-while- extending-the-opposite-talons maneuver, but this time it was an aggressive attack posture rather than a defensive one. Still holding the fish, he went *after* that osprey. Finally, after a total of 7 – 10 swooping, sneaking attempts, the osprey relented and went to try her luck elsewhere .

- *Rick Wiebush*

BAAM!

Ricardo Stewart and Rick Wiebush

Switching boats. All photos: Rick Stewart

Ricardo Stewart and I recently had the pleasure – and challenge - of spending two days working with 13 young people from BAAM (Building African American Minds) in Easton, MD, on the Eastern Shore. It was a pleasure because they were all good kids who liked having fun. It was a challenge because their idea of fun, as we learned on the first day, did not always include learning the mechanics and details of various strokes and maneuvers. In fact, it was tough keeping their attention.

Things changed drastically on day two however. Everyone got really engaged when we started doing assisted and self-rescues. Then the energy exploded when we had them switching boats without getting in the water. Now they had both the mental and physical challenges of figuring out how to make that happen and then executing. Everyone had a blast!

The following photo essay captures some of the highlights of the two days.

Since most of the kids had not been in sea kayaks previously, the first task was to get clear on nomenclature for boats, paddles, PFDs etc. The group was divided into three teams, each of which was given 5 – 6 sticky notes with parts of the boats (or paddle, etc.) written on them. They then had to match the written word with the corresponding boat part.

In spite of their lack of experience, they got all but two things exactly right. These were smart kids!

This photo captures some of the feel for attempting to do strokes instruction on the first day. Some kids lounging, others looking around, others trying to keep their boat from getting bumped, and others still not even in the photo because they decided that they didn't want to paddle from the last location 50 yards away to this new location.

It was like no one was listening or really cared about learning anything new. However, if we got one kid trying out a stroke, working at it and eventually doing well, the attention that kid got seemed to be an impetus for the others to try it too. In that way we got through sweeps, reverse, 360 spins, stern rudder, and bracing

Two cool things came out of this. One was having some kids get a taste for what the not-paying-attention feels like. On day two, we had three new kids join us. We asked three of the kids that had been with us on day one to instruct them. When I paddled up to one of the "instructors" and asked how it was going, he said (I'm not making this up): "they won't listen!"

The second thing occurred during the debrief when I asked people what they liked best about the two days. I expected to hear things like "the races" or "chasing the rubber duckies" or "rescues", but heard instead from different kids "sweep strokes", "that one where you go sideways" (draw), "360 spins" and "stern rudder". Go figure.

T-Rescue

Not something you see too often: A sit-on-top towing a rec boat

Questionable boat fit

The most fun for everybody: Switching Boats

As you can see from the photo, there was quite a range in the kids' ages (11 to 16) and sizes (the smallest was about 4'11" and maybe 100 lbs., while the largest was 6'0" and about 170). But there was little variation in the way they treated each other (respectful, caring) and how they treated the adults (respectful and, after the first day, trusting).

A big shout out and thanks to Rudi, Samier, Nehemiah, Joshua, TayQuan, Tay'Lyn, Khi'Lil, Gavin, Kingston, Zaiden and Tristan. Ditto to BAAM staff member Xavier and Board Chair Bill Ryan.

BAAM

Now in its 20th year, Building African American Minds' (BAAM) mission is to empower at risk minority youth to instill a sense of belonging, success and potential. They offer afterschool programs, tutoring, a scholarship program and a summer camp. They are also starting a workforce development program and a speaker's forum. Nikole Hannah Jones, author of The 1619 Project, will be giving a talk at the BAAM Center in July.
Building African American Minds -

Photos of the Month

Neahkahnie Mountain, OR

Photo: Bill Vonnegut

Photos of the Month

Crab Traps, Chesapeake Bay

Photo: Rick Wiebush

Photos of the Month

Coastal Maine

Photo: Lisa Giguere

Planning a Circumnavigation Of Chincoteague Island

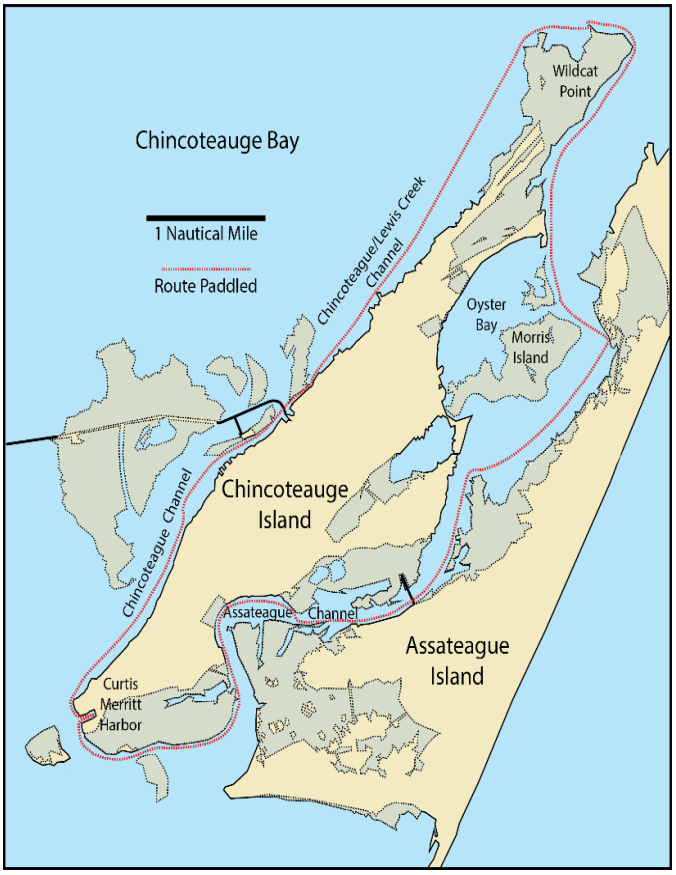
Richard Essex

Chincoteague Island, Virginia serves as an access point for the beaches and nature trails of the Assateague National Seashore but is best known for the annual pony swim and festival held by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Department each July. The island is also a great venue for sea kayakers seeking a challenging day paddle. A 17 nautical mile circumnavigation of Chincoteague can be completed in about 8 hours with stops for rest, lunch, and sightseeing. Without some planning and forethought, however, a pleasant day of paddling through a unique area of the Atlantic coast could easily become a brutal slog.

Planning Background

A group of us who regularly paddle in the region decided to do a Chincoteague circumnavigation this summer. A date was set for the third Saturday in June, weather permitting. I was asked to plan and lead the paddle as part of my ACA L3 instructor training. For this paddle, I had the distinct advantage of knowing that all the participants are experienced sea kayakers who have the appropriate skills, equipment, and conditioning for a day-long paddle in variable conditions. So, I could concentrate on the where, when, and how of paddling around Chincoteague.

I started my planning as I do for any paddle, by gathering information. First, I went online and downloaded NOAA Custom Navigation Charts of the area surrounding Chincoteague. I found a map showing public launches published by the Town Chincoteague and consulted some commercially produced charts for fisherman that show water depths around the island in greater detail. I also looked up the tide predictions for various locations around the island but, alas, didn't find any current



Chincoteague Island and surrounding area (modified from NOAA Custom Charts)

predictions for the area. Fortunately, one member of our group has a summer home on the island and was able to provide me with local knowledge about how the currents run around the island.

Chincoteague Geography

It is the geography of Chincoteague that makes a circumnavigation both interesting and challenging. The challenge and the crux of the planning is to get the tides right. The island is nestled between

Assateague Island and the mainland of the Delmarva peninsula. It is 7.5 miles long and 1.5 miles at its widest point. The southern end of the island faces a wide inlet to the Atlantic. The tidal currents get split by the southern end of the island, flowing up and down both the east and west sides.

The west side of the island is bounded by the Chincoteague and Lewis Creek Channels. The winding Assateague Channel runs along the east side. During maximum ebb or flood, currents in these channels can exceed 1 knot, particularly in the narrow portions of the Chincoteague Lewis Creek Channel. The shoreline along the southern and central portions of the island is almost completely developed while the entire norther end of the island, up to Wildcat Point, is a marsh comprising the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. With the exception of the afore-mentioned channels, Chincoteague is almost completely surrounded by salt marshes and shallow tidal flats.

A public launch, the Curtis Merritt Harbor of Refuge, is located at the southern tip of the island near where the incoming and outgoing currents split and follow the channels on either side of the island. This was the obvious launch spot because at the other locations we would run the risk of long paddles against the current either coming or going.

If it's timed right, launching from Curtis Merritt can limit paddling against the current to short stretches. We could circumnavigate counterclockwise or clockwise. With the former we'd have a short paddle against the current at the start of the day until we caught the current running up Assateague channel. If we were to go clockwise, we would *end the day* with a half-mile paddle against the current before slipping into harbor. Going counterclockwise seemed the obvious choice.

The Plan

High tide at the south end of the island was predicted to be at 8:46 AM on the day of the paddle and low tide would be at about 2:30 PM. The plan was to ride the incoming tide up the east side of the island and the ebbing tide back down the west side. High tide at Oyster Bay, a little over halfway up the east side of the island, would not be until about 10:00 and the tide would peak at Wildcat Point at the north end about 10:47. So we would have two full hours of riding the flood up the east side of the island. By paddling this direction, not only would we have the current working with us, but it would ensure that there would be plenty of water when we reached the marshes and broad stretches of shallow flats near the north end of Chincoteague.

Assateague marsh. Photo: Rick Wiebush

With a couple of rest stops we would round Wildcat Point on the north end around noon, right around slack. After a lunch break, it would be just about the time the current will start running south along the west side of the island. We could then ride the current all the way back to launch.

This plan seems pretty straight forward but as with most things, the devil is in the details. For this plan to work, I was assuming that the current around the island will continue to run in for an hour or so after high tide and continue to run out past low tide. Although this is frequently the case for channels draining large lagoons like Chincoteague Bay, this pattern can be disrupted by weather such a low-pressure system, heavy rains, or the effects of a strong steady wind pushing water into or out of the bay. Of course, the weather on the day of the paddle is also a critical factor. There were also issues with rest stops and bail out points. Places to land are few and far between around the island. Landing on Assateague is prohibited and on Chincoteague itself the shore is generally private, armored, or thick, uninviting marshes. I also needed to be cognizant of local hazards (e.g., oyster beds) and factor in any points of interest we might want to visit.

Like Clockwork

The day of the paddle was predicted to be hot (95 degrees) and sunny with a 10-knot breeze coming off the ocean from the southeast, building to 15 knots or more by the afternoon. The weather for the week prior to the paddle had been dry and relatively calm so I had no reason to suspect the any deviation from typical pattern of currents around the island.

As for where to stop for breaks, again local knowledge proved indispensable. We knew there was a sandy area on Assateague about two-thirds of the way up the channel. Although we can't land on the island, this is a spot where we could get out of our boats in the shallow water to take a break. Similarly, we knew that the shallows around Wildcat point were firm enough to get out of our boats for lunch without sinking up to our knees in mud. Regarding hazards, we needed to avoid the abundant oyster beds around the island and stay out of the path of the tour and pleasure boats that abound on summer Saturdays. We could avoid both hazards by following the channel but keeping to one side or other.

As it turned out, the fates were with us and the plan worked well. We made good time riding the tide up the Assateague Channel. We were even able to see some of the wild ponies that like to graze on the Assateague marshes in the morning. We rounded Wildcat Point around noon, as planned, and had covered about 10 nm in a bit over three hours. After a relaxing lunch we rode the current down the west side of the island. I was worried about the 15+ knot south wind making the last leg of the paddle a struggle. In fact, the headwind slowed us a little (the last 7 miles took about 2.5 hours), but the island provided some protection and the breeze actually provided relief from the afternoon heat. As a result, we were back at the launch by 3:15, right at the end of the ebb. And in plenty of time to get cleaned up and enjoy a seafood dinner on the Island.

Final Thoughts

The planning was a real challenge. Timing the tides can always be demanding, but Chincoteague is more so since the flood and ebb continue to flow up to an hour after high/low tide. I (and everyone else in the group) was quite pleased that the paddle went almost exactly according to plan, and we really maximized use of the flood and ebb. And, I might add, I passed the L3 exam!

Chincoteague pony. Photo: U.S. fish and Wildlife Service

Upcoming Events

Dates	Event	Location	Website
July 17 - 21	Great Lakes Symposium	Grand Marais, MI	greatlakesseakayaksymposium.net
July 25 -26 July 27 - 28	Ginni Callahan Surf Camps	Cape Charles, VA	crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Aug. 30-Sept.2	Oceans 24	Seabrook Is. SC	chrisrezac.wixsite.com/kayakoceans
Sept. 18 - 19	Intermediate and Advanced Surf Camps	Cape Charles, VA	crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Sept 20-22	Kiptopeke Symposium	Cape Charles, VA	crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Oct 11 - 13	Delmarva Paddlers Retreat	Lewes, DE	delmarvapaddlersretreat.org/
Oct. 24 - 26	Sea Kayak Georgia Symposium	Tybee Island, GA	seakayakgeorgia.com
Nov. 1 – 3	Autumn Gales Symposium	Stonington, CT	autumngales.com
Nov. 2 - 8	Explore The Georgia Barrier Islands	Savannah, GA	crosscurrentsseakayaking.com

Skills

What Do I Do With My Paddle? Key Elements of the T Rescue

Rick Wiebush

People often perform various aspects of the T-rescue that are outdated, inefficient, and/or potentially unsafe. This article highlights some of those practices, discusses associated problems, and posits what we believe to be the most effective strategies for getting someone back into his/her boat.

The goal of any T-rescue is to get the swimmer back into their boat as quickly and safely as possible. The need for speed emerges from the threats associated with "out-of-boat experiences" in some environments such as rough seas, cold water, or proximity to swell and rocks. The need for safe practices when doing T-rescues is self-evident: it makes no sense to "rescue" someone in a way that has inherent threats to the safety of the swimmer or the rescuer.

1. **Look before you leap!** Potential rescuers need to stop and assess the viability of conducting an assisted rescue in some environments. Caution is warranted in surf and around swell and rocks. These contexts often threaten to create a second victim (i.e., the rescuer) if a rescue is attempted. It may be more prudent to let the swimmer ride his/her boat into shore, drift into a safe zone, or have them push their boat out and swim away from the rocks.

2. **Flip the boat!** Unless injured, swimmers can help speed up the rescue by taking action. A prime example of this is to have the swimmer flip her boat upright while the rescuer is paddling toward them. This does two things: 1) it gives the rescuer a second read on the swimmer's condition (in addition to asking "are you ok?"); and 2) gets the boat in the position that it needs to be in to start the rescue. The old school approach had the rescuer reaching way down to grab the upside down bow in order to lift and flip the boat. But that creates instability and can be a major strain on the rescuer's body. It's a time-consuming, unnecessary, and unsafe practice.

3. **Get to the bow and get there quickly!** If one goal is speed, we can facilitate that by going directly to the swimmer's bow. That's after making sure the swimmer isn't panicking, and then paddling with a purpose to get there. We want to get the person back in their boat, not chat with them over coffee while we mosey over. Get there!

4. **The swimmer goes to the rescuer's boat** – not to their own stern. The swimmer going to his/her stern is counterproductive: it makes communication harder, makes maneuvering the swimmer's boat more difficult, and serves no useful purpose.

   Instead, the swimmer walks along their boat – holding on to the deck lines – to get to the rescuer's boat. And they *never* let go of one boat or the other. In flat water, letting go of a boat may seem inconsequential. But to the extent that the way we practice informs our

behavior in "real" situations, letting go of a boat spells big trouble.

When the swimmer comes to the rescuer's boat, they take the shortest route. It doesn't matter if they end up in front of or behind the rescuer's cockpit. Don't make the swimmer "walk" all the way around her boat to get to one location or another on the rescuer's boat. It just wastes time and tires out the swimmer.

5. **Free your hands!** The single biggest problem for people executing a T-rescue is what to do with the paddle. People frequently: 1) put the paddle down in the water; or 2) lay it on their deck; or 3) hold it in one hand while trying with the other to pull the boat up on their deck. None of those strategies work very well in flat water, let alone rougher water. Sliding the paddle under the bungees may work ok IF it is under at least two bungees. If it's under just one bungee in bouncy water, it can slash around like a knife, endangering the swimmer.

   Try this instead: tuck the paddle shaft under the bottom edge of your PFD (or under your tow belt bag) and use the back of your arms and elbows to trap it in place. This frees both hands to maneuver the swimmer's boat.

Paddle secured under the towbag. Photo: Mike Thomas

6. **No need to wring out the boat!** If the rescuer pulls the swimmer's boat up until the front hatch is even with the rescuer's chest, that is far enough. Turn the boat over, edge away, wait two seconds, turn it right side up, and slide it back into the water. You don't need to wait five minutes for those pesky last 17 drops to drain. Flip, edge away, two seconds; done!

7. **Bow to stern or bow to bow makes no difference!** In wind or waves, you may end up struggling mightily and waste time if you try to force a bow to stern position. If the fastest way to arrange the boats is bow to bow, do it. It makes no difference in the rescuer's ability to stabilize the boat or in the swimmer's ability to get back in. Try it!

8. **Don't corkscrew into the cockpit** when doing a heel hook re-entry. Done correctly, the corkscrew is a quick, fluid move. It works great for the 35 year-old who weighs 125 lbs. A 55 year-old who weighs 200 or more? Not so much. The drawback to the corkscrew is that once in the cockpit, the swimmer turns *away* from the rescuer's boat. And their rolling weight tips their boat *away* from the rescuer. That puts a lot of torque on the rescuer and can result in the swimmer ending up back in the drink. I've seen this happen way too often.

   Instead, once the swimmer has heel-hooked into the cockpit and is facing down, they should stop their roll and turn *toward* the rescuer's boat. This produces less torque on the rescuer and her boat also supplies support for the swimmer while they turn.

   Try these strategies the next time you practice rescues – they work!

Book Review

Kayak the Kwanza:

Source to Sea Along Angola's Longest River

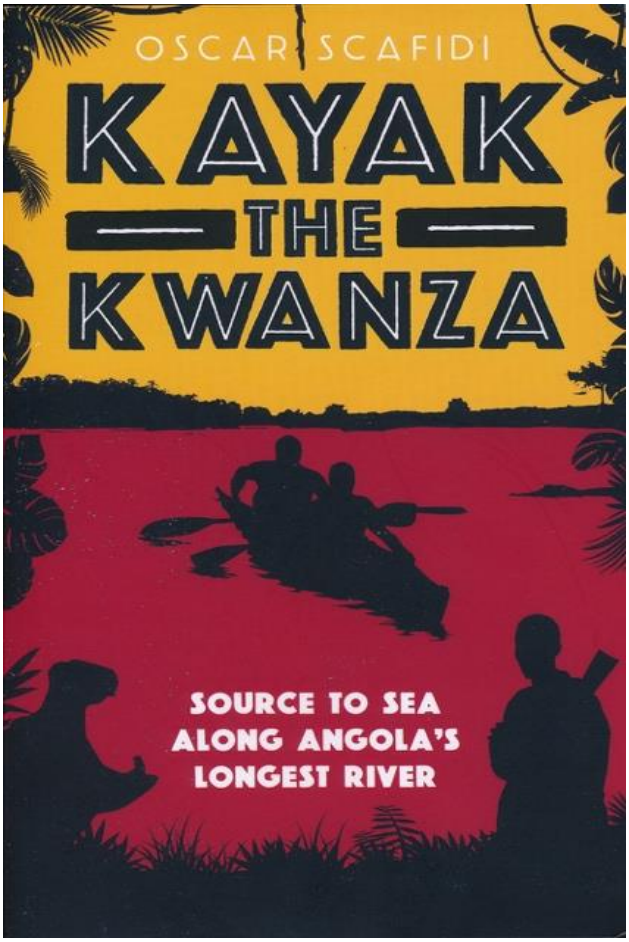
By Oscar Scafidi

Paul Caffyn

In June 2016, two youngish English chaps, working in Angola, set off to complete a first source-to-sea descent of the Kwanza River, the longest river in Angola. As their 1,300-kilometre expedition would involve over 300 kms of portaging, the kayak of choice was a folding double, *Klepper Aerius II,* of early 60s vintage.

Their previous paddling expedience was limited. Alfy Weston, owner of the Klepper, had in 2014 paddled 220 kms of the lower river to the sea, while Oscar (the author) got some training on the Thames River and took a white-water safety course. As well as trying to gain an entry in the Guinness Book of Records, cyber coverage plus a film of their expedition would hopefully raise over $10,000 for the Halo Trust - a non-government British charity and American non-profit organization which removes debris left behind by wars. In the case of Angola, this related to millions of landmines planted during the 22 year-long civil war.

Six months of planning and preparation involved quite a bit more than for a month-long river trip in the USA or Canada; permits were necessary from three Angolan government ministries as well as notifications to provincial authorities. While Oscar collected kit and camera gear, Alfy mapped their intended route, using notes from his earlier paddle, speaking to local sources and satellite imagery. Halo Trust would help with food resupplies. The daily targets were set at 50 kms per day for paddling and 20 kms for portaging. To aid with portaging, a three-wheeled sand was included to carry their 105 kgs (230 lbs.) of kayak and kit.



The preface includes a two-page excerpt from the *Arrested at Capanda* chapter when the chaps are rudely awoken and handcuffed, which is a rather good cunning plan to engross potential readers to buy the book and read on. The narrative text is well written, good descriptive writing of the on-the-water dramas such as evading rather territorial hippos, the torments of portaging long distances

with feet that are grossly infected and serious pain kept at bay with codeine, finding overnight campsites that are free of marauding hippos and dealing with the local bureaucratic army despots along the way.

Descriptions of the heart-breaking damage to the environment are well told; with variations on how the locals attempt to make a frugal living by using a garden hose to breathe while loading bags of riverbed sediment which can be screened on shore for diamonds, to massive earthmoving operations run by the Chinese. Massive fires and former forests totally devoid of trees.

The history of Angola is well told, both from the days of regional tribal control, the so sad export of slaves to North America, to the pompous, cloying control of the wretched Portuguese government with insights into the exploitation of Angola's rich mineral resources, to the bailing out of the Portuguese settlers after the April 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, which then led to the 22 year-long civil year between the Russian/Cuban/Chinese support for the MPLA and the South African supported UNITA.

One of the biggest dramas was being caught against the barricade-like poles of a fish trap; the kayak capsized, wooden frames snapped and quite a bit of kit floated off down river. A potential end of expedition disaster. But a local was able to fix the damage with, 'a few extra bits of wood, cut metal and a few rivets.'

Then approaching the last river dam, with an anticipated food resupply, and only 220 kms to paddle, the chaps were rudely awakened and arrested by the military. Despite providing the requisite paperwork, what follows is a nightmare of being incarcerated but unable to find any support from the Angolan government for finishing their expedition. Via a cellphone not found during searches, embassies are contacted and on the point of both being deported, a single phone call leads to their release.

The *Covert Expedition* chapter describes their desire to reach their 'finish line' at the Kwanza River mouth, dodging a police check on river poachers and carrying their *Klepper* over a sand spit into the Atlantic Ocean. A missing paddling/portage section from above the dam to where they launched on the covert bit means they do not qualify for the Guinness Book of Records but so what!

Although this was only a 32-day paddle, it is the difficulties the chaps faced. Not just with rapids, rhinos, bugs, blisters and crocodiles, but dealing with Angolans on the river banks, be they security forces, illegal diamond miners, farmers or fishermen.

Appendix 1 is a nine-page fascinating brief history of Angola, while the next two are lists of equipment and medical supplies carried.

Downsides of this book are the sole, pathetic half page map while the cheap quality of the paper has led to very poor reproduction of the grayscale photos. A 'dear reader' page notes that funding for printing came from a reader subscription and that a 'beautifully bound subscribers' edition is produced along with an e-book (see unbound.com).

The rear cover notes that a film of the journey did well with film festivals (no mention of NZ) and their expedition raised $25,000 for the Halo Trust.

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Paul Caffyn **- lives on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island. In addition to being the first person to circumnavigate Australia in a sea kayak, he has circumnavigated the British Isles, New Zealand, New Caledonia and Japan and has done major expeditions in Alaska (the whole coast) and Greenland. Paul also served for 27 years as the editor of the newsletter of the Kiwi Association of Sea Kayakers. Check out his website at http://paulcaffyn.co.nz/**

Richard Essex **- started sea kayaking on lake Michigan and the rivers near Chicago about 20 years ago. However, it is only after moving to Maryland a few years ago that he started to seriously pursue the sport. Since then he is out on the water most weekends developing his skills as an open water sea kayaker. Richard recently became an ACA L3 Instructor.**

Kerry Kirk Pflugh **- is the Executive Director of the New Jersey School of Conservation and an adventure kayaker. She has traveled across the country, Canada and Mexico enjoying multiday kayaking trips. She is a past president of the Jersey Shore Sea Kayak Association, and a former ACA Open Water Level 4 Kayak Instructor. Her favorite paddling adventure is the one yet to be taken**

Ricardo Stewart **- is a Maryland resident who is participating in the UnCon II program, working toward the ACA L3 Skills Assessment, and becoming an ACA L2 Instructor. He paddles primarily in the Chesapeake Bay region, with occasional excursions to Florida, Georgia, and Rhode Island. He is also an amateur photographer.**

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

Coastbusters **welcomes submissions of trip reports, incident descriptions and analyses, skills and "how-to" articles, boat and gear reviews, book and video reviews, and sea kayaking-related photographs. We are interested in receiving submissions from all paddlers. It just so happens that some of this month's contributors are instructors. That is not a requirement. Articles should be limited to about 1,000 – 1,500 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at rwiebush@gmail.com.**