

ONE EXCEEDINGLY HELPFUL COUSIN
AND
ONE EXCEEDINGLY HELPFUL SEA KAYAKER

For months we had cogitated and calculated our options: my Gmail says that one exchange of emails had 51 separate emails in it. At last the weather settled down and I drove down the M3 to pick up Portsmouth club member Dave Rawlinson and his boat on 23 July. On to the Wirral to pick up Dave's EXCEEDINGLY HELPFUL COUSIN, and across North Wales to Cemaes Bay on Anglesey.

Dave knew there was a campsite there, but it was hiding when we drove around looking for it. He jumped out of the car to ask a local bloke where it was. I could see the conversation in my rear view mirror: it went on and on; Dave went into the house – and reappeared; then he went down the side of the house – and quite some time later he reappeared. Exceedingly helpful cousin and I were baffled, but Dave had found an EXCEEDINGLY HELPFUL SEA KAYAKER.



Within minutes we were unloading our boats onto the back garden of this exceedingly helpful sea kayaker, and spreading out our sleeping kit on the concrete floor of his half built extension. And in a few minutes more, exceedingly helpful cousin was driving off in my car, soothingly saying “see you in a few days”. I hoped so!

Exceedingly helpful sea kayaker pointed out the faint but distinct smudge on the horizon: the Isle of Man. And after a good chat we packed the boats, put them on their wheels, ate, re-checked the forecast and lay down to rest.



Sunrise was at 05:18. High tide was at 05:00. Our alarm went off at 03:30. We wheeled our boats down the silent, dark streets just 150m to the beach, and were on the water at 04:40. Dave had emailed the coastguard with all our details some days before. He'd phoned them the day before, and repeated all the details. On the beach he phoned them, and repeated all the details again; and was asked to call in by VHF when we were afloat. He did try to, but there was no response. We paddled out 100m and he tried again and I tried: no response. We paddled out to the edge of the bay, and the response was that they couldn't hear, Dave was too faint. About a mile from shore there was no response, so we settled down to paddle on anyway.

We headed out on a course of due north and initially the sea was calm – sometimes glassy calm, sometimes a few ripples would appear, and we made steady progress, averaging 3.5 knots. We were being swept westwards, as expected, by the neap tide. Guillemots came by to check us out, as did fulmars. A couple of ships passed behind us, bound for Liverpool, and a couple more passed ahead, coming from there. The Isle of Man very, very slowly got larger and more of it appeared in view. Maybe we became a little complacent: 4, 5, 6 hours passed, we were going fine, everything was fine, we were eating and drinking occasionally (and stopping to relieve ourselves as required).

We knew that the wind would pick up overnight to F6 or so, NW, and it started gently, blowing a refreshing F2 or so, before dying away for a while. We noticed that the eastbound tide hadn't materialised and we were now south of the Calf of Man, whereas we had expected to be pushed

eastwards to skirt Dreswick Head on our way to shelter from the North-westerly and find a nice beach to land on. We stopped each hour to compare our progress on the GPS and the chart: we were barely keeping to schedule.



By the time we'd been afloat for some 11 hours it was becoming apparent that the wind had decided to blow and we were heading directly into a F3-4, which remained for the rest of the crossing. The only way ahead was to dig in and paddle hard, which we did. We considered heading eastwards to find Dreswick Head, but the cliffs near Port St Mary looked closer and more certain to give us shelter. So we headed off there, carefully checking transits to confirm we were actually making progress: we were.

Once sheltered by the cliffs, we decided that getting to shelter was next. The scenery there was attractive: cliffs, nesting sites, etc: but they'd be for another day. We landed on a gravelly beach outside Port St Mary at 19:00. We called the coastguard and sent a few brief messages to friends and family. Exhausted, we slowly pitched our tents on a little patch of grass and ate a quick meal – then crashed out. 47 statute miles in all.

We woke around 07:00 and set to getting ready for the day's paddling: there are only two ferries a day from Douglas to Liverpool. The wind had settled into an interesting offshore F3-4, and we stayed close to the coast as we made quick progress round to Douglas, getting there around 13:00. Again it was an attractive coast, to explore in detail another time.

Landing on a slipway in Douglas Harbour, local fishermen were impressed at our achievement. We soon had the wheels on the kayaks and headed off to the ferry terminal nearby. There the folk were helpful and pragmatic. We bought tickets (Singles?? asked the ticket clerk. And no, we don't do discounts for pensioners! We wheeled our boats onto the ferry, leaving them at the side of the car deck. Before long we were in dry kit, fed and resting. At Liverpool we were last off, wheeled the kayaks outside the ferry area and didn't have to wait long before Dave's exceedingly helpful cousin re-appeared with my Toyota (Hurray!). On to the Wirral for a shower, lots of good food and bed. The following day we drove home.

Pointers for next time:

- Even though it takes ages, really detailed navigational planning is essential: e.g. it was a comfort to be able to compare GPS readings with the hourly forecasts of our location.
- Good fitness is essential, along with the drink and food needed to sustain a good performance (e.g. 3+ knots all day). We'd paddled around the Isle of Wight a fortnight before in 12:50 hours on springs.
- Helpful people are really helpful, and exceedingly helpful people are truly wonderful.

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