

Gigha to Oban by Sea Kayak: delivered by Cumbria Canoeists and written by Bob Frazer and participants – June 2023

Cumbria Canoeists, is a PaddleUK Development Team and have been very active for many years on the sea kayak front – supporting both clubs and paddlers in Cumbria.

Recently we have expanded our voluntary services to sea kayak development weeks and in June 2023, we lead two groups, totalling 17 participants, on a 7 day wild camping experience, with two experienced and qualified coach/leaders at the helm of each group.

Wild camping is a highlight to a number of our sea kayak trips, so after some disappointments last year - due to sea states and poor weather - we decided to offer a wild camping, sea kayak journey, which was a new venture for Cumbria Canoeists.

Many of the volunteer leaders are very familiar with the coastline south of Oban, so the Sea Kayak Trail - leg 1 Isle of Gigha to Oban - seemed an obvious route to follow and a safe corridor to use, if the weather broke, with exit points on the way. The decision was to follow leg 1 of the well documented “West Coast Trail”, covering about 100 miles of amazing Scottish Hebridean coastline.

Introduction – By Bob Frazer

As I sit and write this article the remnants of an Atlantic hurricane is hammering on the window. Strong winds and heavy downpours are battering the Cumbrian coast and all memories of a fantastic summer expedition are beginning to fade as the sea kayak season draws to a close.

As we gathered in the Calmac car park at Tayinloan, on the western side of the Kintyre peninsula, we had little idea that we were about to be treated to one the best trips we were likely to experience in our lifetimes.....

Cumbrian Canoeists prides itself on being open to all and this trip attracted the usual mix of paddlers of varying age, ability, ailments, and anxieties.

Aimed at those with ‘intermediate skills’, our trip had no shortage of outdoor experience with bike-packing across eastern Europe and ski-touring in Norway a sample of the adventures already completed by some. But being self-sufficient from a sea kayak for 7-days was new and this challenge was going to broaden all of our horizons over the coming week.

The Journey

The start couldn’t have been more perfect with an open crossing to Arminish Bay on the Isle of Gigha before turning left and starting a circumnavigation, exploring

the coast to find our camp spot for the night. This short hop gave us time to settle in to our heavily laden craft and learn the way they handled with a full load. It was also that special time on any over-nighter where we constantly ran through our mental checklist trying to convince ourselves that we had packed the tent / stove / malt loaf / whiskey etc...

Camp was set up expertly and the evening meal preparation was soon underway from a variety of freeze dried, canned, and fresh ingredients. For some in the group this was a fundamental change to how they had catered on past trips. The volume of our kayaks allowed for more food than many were used to travelling with and some took full advantage.

Around the camp fire that night we chatted over a dram or two and found out that there were some concerns about what was to come. In particular, the distance we had to cover and coping with the tidal gates on the way. Dorus Mor especially seemed to have been elevated to a demon-like status...but more of that later.

Over the next couple of days, the exceptionally fine weather allowed us to make excellent progress exploring some spectacularly beautiful scenery and beaches that look like they belong in the Caribbean. We steadily ate up the miles and had time to work on paddling techniques such as how to make headway against the tide, route planning, and group briefing. There was a huge amount of knowledge across the group and the settled conditions gave time to provide context while developing skills.

The first significant tidal race was encountered as we arrived at Eilean Mor in the Mac Cormick Islands. It was here that we tried our hand at catching our supper as well as having a play in some moving water. The moving water experience was too much for some and did little to dispel the upcoming terrors awaiting us. However, the fishing went a little better and Zoe and Cedric managed to catch a pollack between them; hardly a feast but we were surviving!

Three days in and as a group we were comfortably covering 20 miles and more on each leg. That dealt with the first of the group's main concerns only leaving the small matter of the tide race at Dorus Mor to overcome. The weather was still holding fair and, as we headed north towards "certain death", the mood in the group was changing. Some looked forward to the challenge of a major tide race with excitement, others with reluctance and uncertainty. As we approached the sea was calm and completely non-threatening but time passed and the flow increased giving small waves; nothing like the wind against tide descriptions in the guide book. We built up our collective courage and joined the flow for an exhilarating ride through Dorus Mor – we had a speed of 12 kph on the GPS with very little effort.

We were on the home straight now and there was significantly more distance behind us than in front. Our only major navigational frustration arose when trying to find a spot to camp on Seil. Those using paper maps struggled to find the area being highlighted by those using electronic tools and after much too-ing and fro-ing we found our campsite. It was only once we'd landed ashore that we discovered the spot we were looking for fell exactly on the edge of 2 OS sheets making it really difficult to find on paper.

Camping above an otter holt provided hours of entertainment and has to be special by any measure but was just one of many world-class wildlife encounters we had through the week. The usual porpoises and seals were ticked off early but finding 2 eagles resting on a rocky outcrop ready to pose for photos helped the afternoon pass quickly. However, the highlight for me was spotting a pine marten as we paddled through the 'Bridge over the Atlantic'.

It had been 6 days on the water now and the journey was coming to an end. We had been blessed with calm seas, minimal midgets, and no rain; all this was to change during the evening of our last camp. Rather than push to reach our final destination we decided to spend the last night on Kerrera. This would give us an easy 1-hour paddle in the morning to the beach at Ganavan, close to Oban and then plenty of time to complete the shuttle (a local Oban taxi service) sort kit, and then head off home.

We had just settled down to have a last chat and share our experiences of the trip when the weather broke. We were treated to one of nature's finest displays when we were surrounded with black skies providing a backdrop for some impressive lightning and the accompanying thunder for a soundtrack.

This was a fitting end to a brilliant week of paddling. Fine weather, good company, outstanding wildlife and scenery will make this trip hard to beat. To provide some additional balance to my view here are some comments from others in the group:

Julian – "In summary it was the experience of Sea Kayaking that I had imagined in the bookshop, discovering little known islands rich in Celtic history and connecting names from a map by traversing the sea ways used for centuries."

Dan – "Well, I joked as we got off the water in Oban, that's sea kayak touring ruined for me; you can't top wall to wall sunshine for six days on the first section of the Scottish Sea Kayak Trail, so there is no point trying!"

Nicola - "I will remember this journey as one of life's perfect moments. A rare coming together of time, place and conditions to create total magic. How lucky we were Memories of drinkable sunsets, all the shades of tangerine to purple over the Paps of Jura, the goddesses of gentle solstice laying silky smooth sea passages before us whilst the gods of briny tempest were asleep."

Sally - My highlights were paddling up the 'river' to Cullipool, the pod of dolphins and the night on Belnahua. I've paddled that stretch when you could barely see Belnahua, never mind being able to get there and the flowers, birds and insect life on the island were magical as was watching the tidal flows in the evening light with great company.

Dave - What an experience! A rare chance to spend seven days totally self-sufficient in beautiful surroundings with fantastic weather and with such a nice group of people. Apart from some additional water, we needed nothing else other than what we carried between us. Of course, being part of a team was an essential part of the tour. People shared advice, food and drink. Above all was the feeling of safety and of support from the group, and companionship of course. For me it was a trip I will never forget, and ranks highly with some of the best things that I have ever done.

Highlights for me were the fantastic dolphin display we were so lucky to see, and the finding of such a beautiful bay for our second night after such a long paddle.

George - The Gigha to Oban trail wild camping trip organised by Cumbria Canoeists was a wonderful and life empowering experience for me. I have been around water most of my life but only took up Sea Kayaking in 2021, just a couple of months before my 70th Birthday. 'Cumbria Canoeists' and my local club 'Lakeland Canoe Club' have been wonderfully supportive and the friendship extended to everyone has been heart-warming. You are never too old to enjoy sea kayaking especially with the comradeship I am fortunate to experience.

My development through the guidance and support from CC and LCC enabled me to partake in this event that was potentially quite challenging.

If I had to pick memorable moments it was negotiating a number of tidal streams, and the pod of dolphins swimming towards me.

Waking up wild camping on the beach on Ghia thinking about the journey ahead was a wonderful moment. The packing of the kayak and the joy of moving on each day, whilst hard work, is a Journey travelled. Far more fulfilling than day paddles from a fixed location. We saw so many wonderful places and things, what a memorable trip and the weather was sublime.

Thank you to my paddling comrades, we all got on well and there was harmony and good humour throughout the trip thanks, in part, to the professionalism our leaders. **In deed a trip to be cherished.**

Sarah - Living out of my sea kayak for 7 nights:

Truly amazed (& somewhat alarmed – what had I forgotten?) to discover, on initially packing the boat, that I still had a few pockets of space – not the usual struggle to shoehorn everything in accompanied by last minute ditching of things

(luxuries) that wouldn't fit! That's a first for me – I must be getting better at this at last. The four things I'm most grateful I packed:

1. a pop up midge net hat (tho, to be fair, they weren't THAT bad)
2. my lightweight really warm wool jumper (the first few evenings were pretty chilly)
3. my swimming togs (especially when on Belnahua) and
4. a red wine box/bag!

The best thing on the trip – tricky one, there were lots of best bits but if made to choose: Was the stay on Belnahua: the steep blue-grey sea-ground slate plates beach; swimming in the tide-run Atlantic chill waters off the beach to then thaw in the green-yellow sun warmed island quarry pool; perched on my stool on a carpet of sea campion, evening sun on my back, beaker of red wine in hand, gazing out over the rolling tide in the Sound of Luing

Rhi - I find that living out of my kayak for a week allows me to switch off mentally from work and focus on the present more. Little things like keeping my kit clean and dry become a key part of my daily routine. I'm forced to move at a slower pace and appreciate the environment I'm in.

The highlight for me was bivying on the top of Belnahua with Alison. A magical place to watch the sun set and the moon rise.

Alison What a great week, superb weather scenery wildlife and company. The only think that reminded me I was in Scotland was the appearance of the evening midges. There are so many highlights and memories - the dolphins, the sunsets, the castle, the laughs, the ridge camp, the fresh water swim. Just a superbly relaxing break.

David - The highlight was the weather allowing us to land and camp on Belnahua. Such a stunning spot sitting amidst larger islands surrounded by fast tidal flow with a 360 view and beyond. Such an amazing panorama set into the industrial slate surroundings in such a relatively remote place you'd least expect such activity. There were of course many highlights including dolphins, goats, otters, sea eagles and more sea birds than I can identify.

<https://photos.app.goo.gl/KCwEyaUncJoDgU788>