

# Eat, Sleep, Paddle

Rapid Development Expedition - Around Wales 2011 with Coastal Spirit

For weeks all I had been waiting for was a month of Eat, Sleep, Paddle, and now the salts been washed off, legs shaved, all the sand removed (well nearly), and the kit has been squeezed back into cupboards, or the shed. After all the clearing up... what are my recollections and what may be useful information to share. Hopefully the following gives you a taste of what paddling around Wales involves, provides some useful information and who knows...may be some inspiration...

Article: Diane Lee

On April 25th around 4.30pm, with the water rising and the wind picking up we unloaded our boats for the last time and carried them up the muddy slip way. We'd done it! We had paddled all the way around Wales - over 900km. 24 days earlier we'd slithered down the same muddy slipway at Connor's Quay, on the Dee to start our journey. We'd enjoyed the amazing April sunshine and had 21 days of amazing paddling, 3 days on beach near Porthcawl (wind bound), mostly dry nights, and sunny days. It wasn't like that at the beginning of April and it was the weather which had determined the start point for our circumnavigation.

The whole journey however, had started just over a year before, when Roger Chandler of Coastal Spirit planned this Rapid Development Expedition (RDX). The idea being to speed up the learning process and develop experience, knowledge and skills, gain qualifications whilst undertaking an expedition; providing application, variable context, and consolidation. Our development would occur whilst paddling around Wales. Yes - this is possible - it involves an inland stretch, by canal and rivers. The journey was first completed by Ray Goodwin and Rob Egelstaff in 1992 by canoe and then in sea kayak by Justine Curgenven and Fiona Whitehead 10 years ago.

*Thanks to both for their input and advice and Ray's encouraging comments and Justine (and Barry's), company for a day.*

The success of any trip starts with the preparation and planning, and ours started at the end of July -meeting and paddling together for the first time, practising some rescues and starting to get to know one another, developing personal action plans and discussions around motivations. This was the first of 3 training weekends. The next in November involved frozen canals, portage practice, checking out the Dee and the best route to the canal. The below zero temperatures did have some positives - freezing the muddy banks! Our final training weekend was back on Anglesey at the end of February and with the weather against us again we needed to paddle some distance together - the only real option being the Menai Straits, from Newborough. The day ended at Penmon Point with some dumping surf and was



followed the next morning with a surfing session at Treaddurr Bay - obviously a skill we needed to improve and would need for the RDX! In between the weekends, we tried to get out paddling as much as possible, building up time on the water. The RDX with Coastal Spirit also involved telephone mentoring from Sonja (Roger's partner), - providing great encouragement, practical advice and supportive chasing! Along with the training weekends, this support 'package' was a great facilitator and a key element in the success of the trip. As April drew closer the emphasis moved to kit, maps, lists and food preparation, and would it all fit in my boat!?

On April 1st, the whole team - Roger, Sue, Paul and myself, along with Sonja and Ozzy Dog, the support team - assembled late in the evening. After good food, the last meal at a table for a few nights and bubbly, (I thought this was usually saved for the end of a trip - though I'm not complaining!), based on a wet and pretty windy forecast - our preferred start of Penmon Point was changed to a start in the Dee. After general catching up (we'd have plenty of time for that on the canals), discussions of how much kit we all had, how we and it would all fit in the van... including many boxes of Look What We Found meals, we settled down for our final night under a roof. I went to bed listening to the wind and rain against the window, thinking about my preparation - had I done enough, how much I'd already learnt in the build up, and the excitement, apprehension and anticipation... would we get round? What would happen along the way?

Up early and loaded by 7.30am. We drove along the A55, the sea looking less than inviting, and the van being buffeted in the wind. Starting at Connor's Quay had the benefit of our repeating a journey we'd already explored in November on the second training weekend. At least it was warmer... and that meant another decision - what to wear? Drysuit? Hmmmn, seemed a little excessive, but it had been really wet and miserable when we left earlier that morning. Decisions, decisions! Thankfully clothing choices are limited on expedition. Our start time had been carefully calculated to make the most of the flow. The current only flows up for 2 hours. Magically the flow turned just as we were ready, and it seemed the weather was making a change for the better too. We covered the first 12 km in an hour and 10 minutes (speed that wouldn't be repeated until we were back with some flow), and we soon found ourselves climbing out of the Dee into a playground



in Chester, trolleys and our first portage to start the canals.

Canals Starting in the Shropshire Union canal, 240km of narrow waterway lay ahead of us, including 82 locks. I had a list of all the locks and bridges on our route, and the distances between them all. Not only did this prove to be motivational, but also enabled us to make quick decisions about when to continue portaging, and when to get back in and paddle (1km or over), anything less and it was just as fast to walk, pushing or pulling the kayaks using trolleys. For single locks we used straps and carried the boats between us. Getting in and out provided the most risk of damage to the boats, or injury to us - not to mention the chance of falling in. Having a support vehicle meant we were able to paddle the canals with only day and emergency kit in our boats, significantly reducing these risks.

By lunchtime the sun was out, and as we left the outskirts of Chester, I was very pleased with my decision not to wear my drysuit. Having left behind the wind and rain our first day was very warm and sunny with spring lambs, and flower littered woodlands. 35km later (5km of that portaging!), Sonja had found a pub happy for us to use their garden, so day 1 was completed with a welcome pint! Not bad for a first day. By the end of day 2 we had completed half the locks, (hooray!), including a long uphill portage past a flight of 15 locks (and we had also broken

or punctured and repaired 3 trolleys). Still good food and a comfortable field revived and prepared us for the next day. By 10.30am on day 3 we were at Norbury Junction, and had made good time, so enjoyed a treat - second breakfast (though experience now tells me eating a full breakfast and then paddling for hours isn't the best idea!). Just when it looked like finding somewhere to camp may be difficult, and spirits were dropping, we found the perfect canal side venue with toilets and hot water - thanks to Countrywide Cruisers for letting us stay! Another early start on Day 4 and a change of canal - into the Stafford and Worcester and we started the count down of the last 65 bridges! Locks tend to come in phases but these 26 were well spread which meant loads of getting in and out each, adding valuable time. With this and headwinds we still maintained an average 4km per hour. Our efforts were rewarded with a great campsite with showers! Day 5 and the end of lock portaging (hurrah)! The final canal lock and time for a little treat, well the tea shop was just about to open - it would be rude not too! Scrambled egg on toast for me - I was learning! After a little break - reading papers, drinking tea in the sun - we launched into the River Severn, with some flow, and also some wind, which was against us! The Severn at this stage is 'canalised' - it still has locks - huge, automated locks. They're manned and it all seems pretty formal - they ask for your license (membership number). Once inside - The Gates of Mordor, come to mind! We paddled on keeping in contact by mobile with Sonja who was checking out potential camp spots and other tea shops. Another great campsite - well, field.





Our early starts meant we had some time to enjoy our surroundings, and given we were on a popular footpath, we waited to put tents up, instead using the time to refuel, (eat more), read, write blogs etc. and to start thinking about kit and food for our first 7 days on the sea. We'd be stopping at Sainsburys in Gloucester which happens to be canalside! We started to look at the tides, calculating the distance left, and how best to position ourselves to make the most the tide in the Severn Estuary.

Day 6 started early, with the incentive of a shopping break, and visit to the Sainsburys' Cafe! So time to pickup more supplies for some, treats for others, and a white linen shirt for me (those who know me would wonder if I'd already got water in my brain!). Well the weather was turning out so much better than anticipated and I was going to need something other than a thermal, but long sleeved and that was the best option available! Salad seemed to be the most popular choice at the cafe, before we paddled on to a campsite within easy distance of Sharpness Dock – the end of the inland section of our expedition. A total of 52km for the day, positioned us at another campsite with showers, loads of room for sorting kit, and a pub! Perfect! Thanks again to Sonja (and Ozzy Dog!).

The canals had not been bad, and they had enabled a slow build up, in a reasonably static environment, and whilst we had some time paddling into headwinds, the impact would have been greater on the coast. We'd made good progress, and were already fitter and stronger. The canals are ideal for improving forward paddling – long uninterrupted straights. 'Wasn't it boring?' I hear you ask... I enjoyed the canals, with the variety of views and surroundings; countryside, quiet backwaters, tourist spots, forgotten post industrial passageways, passing through busy towns and cities, villages and deep hidden cuttings, or passing under noisy motorways. Nature slowly reclaiming once busy working environments to provide sanctuary for small mammals, birds and insects, creating 'wild' areas to be investigated by inquisitive children. Whilst we were knocking out the miles, the surrounding pace seemed calm and tranquil, and the people we met friendly and curious to know what we were up to. 'How far you going?', 'All the way around Wales!' we'd reply! "

As well as absorbing the surroundings, and chatting to the rest of the team, I played games – thought about my technique; am I doing the same on the right and left, can I increase my speed,

change cadence, stroke length, make sure I'm using my edge to steer? All things that would prove useful back on the sea. When it hurt I used imagery and mind games to help; if my shoulders were a machine what would they be made from? Who would I paddle like – and copy their style. Pretend friends were paddling alongside... Maybe I was already losing my sanity – just as well we'd nearly finished the canals!

With boats heavily laden, packed with full kit and food for the next 7 days we waved goodbye to Sonja and Ozzy and the support van and started Day 7. By 10.30am we were at Sharpness Dock, lazing in the sun, wondering what the next phase of our journey would bring. We waited and at 11.30 as agreed (we'd radioed ahead), we paddled to the lock expectantly... only then to be told it wasn't opening! Disappointed we paddled off looking for an alternative; we had made really good progress to date and didn't want to lose a day. We needed to get into the Severn Estuary, and needed to do that quickly to make the most of the tide....

*Find out how and when we got into the estuary and about the rest of our journey around the coastline and coming home in the next issue.*

