

Kayaking Round Ireland June 2014

Diane Cooper (PhD) and John Bolton (NCEFT)

Diane Cooper is a Sports Science lecturer in Athlone Institute of Technology and John Bolton is the director of a Sports Science company called True Fitness based in Portarlinton Co. Laois which was established in 2009 by John and Diane. We have known each other for the past ten years and during this time we have competed in numerous adventure races together, we kayaked the length of the river Shannon for charity and in 2014 we kayaked around Ireland in a double sea kayak.

In March 2013 I approached Diane with the idea of kayaking around Ireland and without hesitation she said yes. As all our kayaking had been on rivers, we needed to speak to people who knew about sea kayaking and especially about what it would take to get around Ireland. We initially spoke to Brian Keogh (Total Experience) and then Jon Hynes (H2o Sea Kayaking), both of which proved to be invaluable sources of information. From the very start Jon became the third member of the team and his knowledge, experience and help became crucial to our success.

Once we fully understood the task ahead of us, we began preparations in September 2013. We ordered an Alute II from Valley kayaks, Adventure Technology paddles, Palm Salopetts and short cag and over a period of six months we purchased all the safety and other equipment that we required. As we specialise in sports nutrition and endurance training, we were able to compile a comprehensive training programme and establish all our nutritional requirements, from energy expenditure per day to the types of food we would require for paddling and recovery. We also carried out a number of physiological tests including a VO_2 max test to determine our fitness level, a dexta scans to analyse our body composition and a glucose tolerance tests to assess our metabolic health. All of these tests were repeated immediately after the trip and it was very interesting to see the results! This is very unique data that Diane is delighted to be able to incorporate into her adaptations to endurance training lectures!

The other decision that we made was to use this fantastic event to raise money for our local Hospices, Laois and Offaly. Diane's dad passed away from cancer a number of years ago so she was delighted to be able to do this for these great charities. Along with all the training that was required we also set a fundraising target of €10,000. We arranged a number of meetings with our support team to speak about the logistics of the trip and to arrange points where we would restock our supplies.

In the early stages most of our training was on local rivers and lakes with the occasional trip to Cork for safety training and self-rescue techniques with Jon Hynes. Our plan was to get on the sea one day per week from January 2014 but for the first six weeks of the year the country was battered with storm and hurricane force winds. Eventually the winds subsided and we finally got to train on the sea and so we made regular trips to the east coast for the next few months. During this time we also travelled to Cork, Galway, Mayo and Donegal for multi day paddling, to test out gear and to increase our fitness levels.

(Photo 1 Roonah Point) Training day heading for Clare Island (Photo by Margaret Bolton)

A lot of thought went into the food preparation as we had to consider the weight, size, nutritional value and taste. From experience we knew that all of these were critical and so we choose dehydrated food, porridge, nuts, seeds, dried fruits and homemade high energy bars.

After months of training and preparation the day finally arrived June 22nd 2014. After looking at the long term forecast we decided that our start point would be The Old Head Pier Kinsale, as this gave us good conditions to get through some big open water crossings and around some tricky headlands. We travelled to Cork on the 21st as this gave us an opportunity to be on the water early and make some good progress.

(Photo 2 leaving the Old Head Pier) (Photo by Margaret Bolton)

On the morning of June 22nd with family and friends to see us off, we made our final preparations. With the kayak packed and our goodbyes said, Jon popped a bottle of champagne and christened the Midland Monster for her maiden voyage. With the sun high in the sky and a gentle breeze on our face we set off with the cheers of our family and friends ringing in our ears. As we rounded the Old Head of Kinsale we were greeted with what would be the first of many open water crossings. As we made our way towards the seven heads we were greeted by a number of Sun Fish frantically waving a fin at us which was a pleasant surprise, but even greater was to come; off in the distance we could see humpback whales breaching and we had to pinch ourselves to see if we were really witnessing this scene.

(Photo 3) Camping first night on Galey Head. Photo by John Bolton

We finally reached our destination at Galley Head where we would camp for our first night and make preparations for the next day. As we reflected on the day we realised that at this early stage we had some tremendous highlights to savour. Two days later as we rounded Mizen Head we were greeted with even more memorable moments; just as we rounded the head a Basking Shark was feeding on the surface and he passed within two feet of the kayak. The sight of the shark gracefully swimming past us is one that will live with us forever. Mizen Head was very kind to us on this day as we also managed to paddle under the bridge and take some photos. We finally managed to tear ourselves away from this once in a lifetime experience and we headed for Dursey.

(Photo 4) Basking Shark at Mizen Head (Photo 5) Bridge at Mizen Head. Photo by John Bolton

About half way across we heard a boat coming up behind us and suddenly two fisher men appeared alongside us looking quite strangely at us. "Are you ok" asked the fisherman, "yes" we replied. "We saw the flashes of the paddles from the shore and we said to ourselves, that could not be paddlers, sure you would want to be mad to be out here" said the fishermen. We laughed and reassured them that we were fine, but thanked them for their concern. We said our goodbyes and headed on our way again.

(Photo 6) Approaching Dursey Sound. Photo by John Bolton

Another day that will live long in our memory was day six. We left Smerwick Harbour at 5.30am with the aim of reaching Kilbaha at the mouth of the river Shannon. A tall order to say the least and we knew we had to be across the Shannon before it started to empty. We pushed hard all day only taking two short breaks along the way. The winds increased during the day slowing our progress and

we knew we were under pressure for time. As we reached Kerry head we knew we were late and in for the toughest paddle of our lives. We expected to cross the Shannon in three hours but as it began to ebb, the winds increased further and our progress came to a crawl. Five hours later after paddling as hard as we could, we finally reached Kilbaha. We had travelled a total of seventeen hours that day, and completely shattered we crawled out of the kayak barely able to stand up or open our hands. We were greeted by some family and friends (thanks Lily and David!) who bundled us into the car and brought us back to their house for our first night sleep in a bed in a week.

(Photo 7 leaving kilbaha) (Photo by Margaret Bolton) (Photo 8 Smerwick Harbour) Photo by John Bolton

Over the next few days we made our way up the West coast until we finally reached Bunowen Bay; as we pulled in we knew the weather was changing and we might not get out the next day. After studying the forecast we headed out the next morning into force five winds and two metre swells. As we made our way out through the reefs we struggled to make progress into a strong wind; after about an hour disaster struck, the cable on the rudder snapped and the rudder became jammed on the right side. I tried in vain to lift the rudder but no matter what I did it would not release. Now as we paddled we were been driven out to sea and finally we were left broad side to two metre swells and in serious trouble. I pulled the spray deck and disconnected the other cable for the rudder and this allowed us to turn the kayak and head for shore. Now as we headed back to shore all we could see was white water breaking against the reefs and no way through. The wind and waves drove us rapidly towards the reefs and we knew we had to find a way through. As we tried to turn away from reefs a gap appeared and to our great relief we finally got through and we made it back to Bunowen to lick our wounds.

We lost about five days because of the weather (but were well looked after by the Coughlan family!) and the long term forecast looked bad for another week. We knew if we sat and waited for the weather to break we were in danger of running out of time and not being able to finish, so we made a decision to head to the East coast. Rather than sitting for seven days we put in at Cushendun and headed down the East coast for the next week.

All through our journey we had experienced tremendous hospitality from everyone we met and no more so than when we arrived in Whitehead near Belfast Lough. After a late arrival we pulled up on the slipway and noticed a severe lack of grass to pitch our tent. The rain came down and the temperatures dropped and it looked like we were in for a cold night on hard ground. At this time a woman passed and we asked her if there was any place to camp and she told us that unfortunately there was nowhere close by. She asked us what we were doing and when we told her she invited us back to her house where she put us up for the night and gave us lots to eat and drink, hot showers and even lit a fire so we could dry our clothes! What started out as night full of potential for misery turned out to be one of the most memorable nights of our trip.

We headed across Belfast Lough at 6.00am the next morning and we paddled hard for the next week making it down to Magheramore Co. Wicklow before the weather changed on the west coast. As we headed back to the west we knew we were in for a hard week back to Cushendun with the biggest open water crossing yet to come and the fastest tidal streams we had encountered to date.

As we paddled up the west coast our spirits were high as we knew if we paddled hard over the next week we could close out the top of the country. Our average paddling was 50k from the first day and at this stage we were hitting over 60k per day. We exceeded this on a number of occasions like the day we travelled from Achill around by Erris head and across Broadhaven bay, a total of 70k. This meant that our paddle time was 12-15 hours per day, every day!

Photo 9 Broadhaven) Photo by John Bolton

Our next big challenge was Donegal bay and we decided to cross from Lenadoon point to Malin Beg a distance of 50k. We set off early when the sea was calm and the wind on our back and as would become a normal pattern over the next few weeks conditions did not change until we were about an hour into the journey. From here on the winds increased and the swells grew. Half way across you are a long way from home and no way back so we paddled on with winds increasing and swells continuing to grow. The hours passed with lots of bracing and watching the deck disappear in the swells; eventually we reached Malin beg where we pulled up on the beach and we lay there wondering how the hell we had stayed upright.

Photo 10 Sunset on Inishowen Head. Photo by John Bolton

We continued northwards over the next few days rounding Malin Head in difficult conditions and onwards towards Inishowen lighthouse. We paddled into a very strong headwind working hard to reach the lighthouse before the tide turned. We encountered numerous tidal races which we use to full advantage and this trebled our speed and helped us to reach our destination. Over the next two days we made our way around Fair Head, Torr Head and back to Cushendun. As we drove south towards Magheramore we were finally on the last leg of the journey.

The winds stayed strong as we paddled south no more so as we crossed Wexford harbour where flashes of our Donegal crossing came flooding back and we got no relief until we rounded Carensore Point. The closer we got to the finish the stronger the winds seemed to be. As we crossed to Helvic Head the winds beat us back and we had to make our way up along the shore; barely able to turn the paddles over we inched our way towards Helvic Head where we spent the night. The next day we crossed Youghal and around Knockadoon only to be greeted by force six winds and over two metre swells. It seemed like the weather was not going to give up this circumnavigation easily and so we battled on.

Despite swollen forearms and tired bodies, on August 2nd we closed in on the Old Head Pier Kinsale; once again we were greeted with the cheers of family and friends. Rounding the pier and seeing the slipway again and the cheers of everyone who came to see us, the feelings are hard to describe. All the work, planning, endless training sessions and tough days had been worth it, we finally closed the loop.

Photo 11 Finishing at the Old Head Pier (Photo by Margaret Bolton)

We have relived this trip over in our minds and although all our gear was very important to us, a few things stand out in our memory such as, Aloe Vera for our hands, our Dictaphone for recording the day's events, our tent and most important of all a pack of digestive chocolate biscuits; after battling wind and seas for on average 12 – 15 hours every day nothing could beat changing into fresh

clothes, having dinner and wash it all down with a mug of tea and a few chocolate digestive biscuits and then tuck yourself away in your sleeping bag sheltered in your tent.

A lot of people helped us and made this trip possible, but special thanks goes to my wife Margaret, Diane's husband Niall, Jon Hynes, Gillian Coughlan and everyone who helped us along the way. We want to say a huge thank you to everyone who followed our journey on Facebook and sponsored us. We were thrilled to be able to present a cheque for €10,000 to the Laois and Offaly Hospices. True Fitness funded this trip so that every euro raised went straight to the charities. Thank you to everyone!