

The UK Sea Kayak Circumnavigation

By John Willacy

So...you want to paddle a kayak around the UK? And why not?

After all, what could possibly go wrong?

Well let's not look too deeply at the changeable British Weather, the long stretches of exposed coastline or speedy tidal flows. Don't worry about the busy shipping lanes, the hauling of heavy boats or dodging Jet-skis, and pretty much

everything else that goes with poncing about on a big ocean in a little plastic boat.

On the upside, the Circumnavigator will form lifelong memories along the way as they experience impressive coastline, are visited by spectacular wildlife and meet interesting people. They will feel a sense of achievement as the miles fall away and maps are crossed.

But let's be realistic; it is not all going to be a bed of roses. Of course there will be enjoyable days with sunshine and calm seas, but to be honest there will be a fair few crappy days too. Long, tedious days, cold and miserable days – these will form a nice packaging wrapped around a few rather tense moments that are part of the mix – like it or not.

If I've not put you off yet, then in no particular order, we'll go on:



Vagaries of the weather

Like it or not, it is the weather that will make or break your trip before any other factor. The weather will decide if you leave the beach or not in the morning.

Ok, so you trained hard over the winter, you are fit, your skills are nicely honed and you are raring to go - but after a point it all counts for naught. If the weather is beyond your limits (and for many days it will be beyond everybody's limits) then that is it; like it or not you ain't going anywhere – unless you take the bus. Now you may enjoy the 'delights' of some dead end location, as you wait longingly for your 'weather window' to reopen.

Don't be surprised if you average one (or more) lost days per week due to the weather.

Deadlines and the Luxury of Time

So how long will it all take? The quickest stands at a few days under seventy and the longest at over fifteen years! Most people aim to complete in the one season though, with the one hundred day mark being a common benchmark.

If you are in the lucky position of having no time limit then you can pick all the calm and sunny days, and have an idyllic time along the way. But life is rarely like that, most people have to return for family or work commitments sooner or later.

So a goal is a necessary tool to motivate and measure progress. Having that 100 day goal say, will be a useful way to ensure you do crawl out of that warm (if slightly damp) sleeping bag in the early morning, as you head out for another 20 miles of fun-filled pain and sogginess.

But take care with deadlines; they can be a double edged sword.

There will be days when the conditions are frankly borderline. Here a clear head and good decision making is called for before leaving the beach. An over-bearing deadline can now cloud those decisions, perhaps causing a case of 'press-onitis'.

Late (or a few miles short) is better than never after all.



Dog Walking Time

In the early days of my trip in 2012 I fell behind schedule due to a factor that I had not anticipated – Dog Walking Time. No, I didn't take a pooch with me for company, but each morning, irrespective of the early hour or remote location, I would meet someone on the way to the water. Inevitably we would chat, it was pleasant to have a little company, and I was surprised how much interest people would show to a bloke dragging a canoe down the beach in the early morn.

However this would take ½ an hour each morning, that is ½ an hour out of the tide. By the end of the week I was ½ a day behind, just from talking to dog walkers – and so I started to allow ½ an hour each morning for Dog Walking Time.

I was impressed with how many friendly and helpful people I met; just get out of bed early to allow for it!

Paddling People – solo or group

So, go alone or paddle with others? For most this is not a difficult decision, you know if you are realistically a solo paddler or not.

But who should make your group? Good friends and buddies seem the obvious choice, but consider that you are going to be in close proximity for some time, making frequent decisions in often testing conditions – the best of relationships will be put to the test. Differing agendas and outlooks may cause strain within any group. Perhaps it's better to never talk again to a paddling acquaintance rather than risk a lifelong friendship?

Of course a solo paddler finds it difficult to fall out with paddling partners, but at the same time there is no one to help haul the boats up the beach or to keep an eye on the kit during food shopping forays. Solo paddling also means you can't bounce ideas off anyone, nor is there anyone to lift spirits when they are low, or to rein you in when over confidence threatens. And sometimes you really just want to share those special moments with someone.

Trolleys

If you are paddling solo then you need one. And make sure it is a tough little blighter; it will get some serious stick. A group may consider going without, but a trolley will save you a lot of hassle and possibly a bad back!

Put a little work (and cash) into choosing the best trolley you can find and then go and use it for real before hand – with a full boat load over rough terrain.

A decent trolley is worth its weight in gold; you will be surprised just how far away the water can sneak away over night.

Maps V Charts

The choice of Maps versus Charts is old as the hills, well nearly. Some prefer the good old OS Map whilst others feel they can't be classed as a real salty old sea dog unless their piece of paper has Admiralty (or Imray) printed across it. It would be nice to have the choice, but you need a big kayak (and big arms) to take both.

I figured the most important part of my day was the landing. And as a sea paddler I don't need a harbour or deep water to land; I'm easy to please, just give me a beach of some sort. And that is where the OS Map comes in, there is much more info relating to the beach and the nearby topography on the map than the chart.

That's not to say that charts weren't useful, at times they were the better option. Charts were good for crossing the shipping



lanes at the mouths of major rivers such as the Tees, Tyne and Humber. They also had their moments for dodging the guys with guns as I sneaked around the numerous ranges or for following the buoyage through the confusing channels of such places as the Thames Estuary.

In some places I used charts, but for most part I annotated maps with any chart info I thought I would need. It was endless family fun for the dark winter nights prior to setting out.

The Body

Don't rush the early days, it is a long trip. Even with some decent training behind you, your body is unlikely to be ready for repeated long paddling days.

So take it easy to start with, bring the mileage up steadily and try to keep the stress levels down with easy days and conditions if you can. Get plenty of rest and look after your hands. Tape any blisters and consider shortening your days initially to minimise damage, any holes will be painful and difficult to heal.

But once things have settled in you'll be surprised just what the body can take.

Sleep

Get as much as you possibly can.

Crossings or Coast

Some will view island crossings as cutting the corners, missing out on interesting stretches of coastline. But an alternative view would see the rewards of completing a crossing under your own steam, to places that may not be on your usual paddling list.

But beware; again the weather is a major factor. Read the forecast for what it says, not what you want it to be. If you decide on the risk of a crossing you can't sit and whinge because lumpy seas mean you are stranded. Time to sit and wait, or better still have a Plan B in place and be prepared to use it - early.

Sometimes you just have to take what you can get rather than what you want.



Flares? Who needs 'em?

It's very early o'clock, the beach is long flat and sandy. There is no one to be seen as the sand stretches for 3 miles in either direction, the map shows the nearest road is 4 miles away.

Even so you head into the dunes for a little solitude, trowel in hand, to get the day off to a gentle start.

One last look around, and then as you fumble with clothing...

"Good Morning! Pleasant day isn't it?..." (plus a slightly bored and 'it's too early' sort of Woof).

"What the...?!" It's not even 5 o'clock yet, and the map shows it must have taken you two hours just to walk to this point – for heaven's sake!

After a while this was such a regular occurrence it became a daily comedy moment, as I wondered just where the Phantom Dog Walker could possibly appear from next.

I also figured I could dump my flares and PLB in order to save weight. After all, they were obviously unnecessary; if I ever needed help I only had to drop my trousers and somebody would appear next to me as if by magic.

Hard Paddling

Some people seem to think that they are not really on exped unless they make things uncomfortable for themselves. But what's the point? You won't go any further each day just because you chop your toothbrush in half and sleep in the rain. You'll only make life difficult for yourself.

Obviously weight is at a premium; after all it's down to you to shift the lot, day after day. So you may need to trim a few of life's luxuries out of your kit list, but try to make sure you make yourself as comfortable as realistically possible – on and off the water.

It's a long way and you'll get the best performance if you are comfortable and rested each day, not because you saved 300g with a short sleeping mat.

Chewy Bars and Chip Shops

Well, for a while at least, you are likely to be away from the sensible word of reason that is part of home life. And with the large daily dose of exercise you are enjoying/taking/suffering you can perhaps indulge yourself a little in the food that you want to eat. On my trip I found myself checking the calorie count on the food labels, but this time I was looking for the food that had the most.



After a time I didn't care what I ate, I just needed those calories – if it wasn't bolted down I would be tempted to snaffle it. Small dogs turned tail when they saw the look in my eye...



Just be careful on your return to 'The World' though, you have to go back to the more traditional calorie counting perspective – and quickly!

Gadgets – K.I.S.S.

In the modern world electronic gadgets have become a major part of many lives. But do you really *need* to take a box full of gadgets with you? You'll need to take all the batteries and chargers too of course; it all takes space and more importantly adds weight.

If you are a bloke you probably have dreamt of designing some sort of charging arrangement based on solar power and burning mongoose pooh or suchlike, all wired in to your prize kayak like the National Grid.

I wouldn't bother to be honest. Take a look at your Smartphone; the batteries I took weighed just over 20g each, I could take 20 of them for the weight of the solar panel and gubbins. If each one lasted three days then that was sixty days worth of phone use; more reliable than solar power in a UK

summer too! Obviously any items that run on AA batteries make life easier too.

You never need to change the battery on map or compass. Keep things simple.

Admin At Home

You will soon settle into the pleasing and simple life that is the daily routine of an exped: Sleep, Eat, Plan and Paddle. You can easily fill 24 hours of each day just doing this.

But while you become focussed, and rather self centred on your little trip, life goes on for those left behind at home. They still have all the fun of modern daily life to contend with, so it's worth remembering this as you phone home at midnight because your map case has sprung a leak or such like.

The world does not stop just because you've gone for a bit of a paddle.

Settling Back In

Things will be different on your return and may take a little getting used to. After seventy plus days of sogginess I looked forward to dry clothes, but once I had them I found they felt strange. In the early days I found being back in a bed uncomfortable too, to the point of considering pitching the tent in the garden! The warmth of the house was also unusual for a while.

Your body will probably ache for a long time, possibly months. But then you can rest it while you look through thousands of photographs.

And will you be able to remember all those joyous little pin numbers and passwords that you have not used for months?

But most importantly are the friendships and relationships. It may be a little too melodramatic to say the Circumnavigation is a life changing experience, but it will have some intense moments amongst the highs and lows. Others won't have experienced those with you. There will be moments of pressure that can expose vulnerable sides to relationships, whether that is with your paddling partners or for others who may not seem directly involved. Be prepared on your return for things to be just a little different for a while.

Enjoy it - it is the trip of a lifetime. But at the end of the day, don't forget, it is only just canoeing after all.

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