

The San Juan Islands Kayak Traverse

By Dale Cooper, Seattle Washington

Winter in Seattle leaves a lot of time to ponder spring and summer activities, and especially time to plan challenging paddling routes in one of the most beautiful island archipelago's in the continental U.S., the San Juan Islands of Washington State. But not all of my paddling companions plan that far ahead. I frequently hear, "Paddling in July, talk to me in June". Well, some of us are planners, and some of us are not. So when I floated the idea to my paddle companions of paddling from Anacortes Washington to Sidney Harbor on Vancouver Island Canada the following July, I got lots of reactions, most like a deer in the head lights. "Can you do that...? I mean, I didn't know that you could do that..." Well, you can, but it takes advance paddle skills, a passport, current planning, and a lot of luck from the weather Gods, to paddle what at first appears to be a straight forward three day, 37 nautical mile paddle route.

The planned route follows that of the Washington State Ferry system. As a kayaker though, you first have to rap your mind around two notorious Pacific Northwest water crossings, the Rosario and Haro Strait's, as well as the other San Juan challenges such as Upright Channel, San Juan Channel, and especially the rounding of Limestone Point on the north end of San Juan Island in Spieden Channel. You have to look no further than Sea Kayaker's, "Deep Trouble" by Broze and Gronseth to understand what can potentially go wrong with these crossings. My goal is do this paddle, and not play a starring role in volume two. After all it's February and I have months to find someone to join me, but then again, the idea of a solo paddle has its own appeal.

After months of planning, I found one other person who shares my sense of adventure, mostly. My friend Melissa Richards is an accomplished paddler for only having paddled for four years. With a good boat design, fair brace skills, and the ability to paddle for hours at time without a break, she is just what a "closet" solo paddler needs as a partner. Unfortunately Melissa's friend Ellen had also been reading about the potential dangers of the Haro Strait crossing and convinced Melissa to reconsider the final paddle destination. The night before our departure a phone call from Melissa informed me that I would have a paddle companion for only two of the three planned paddle days. Melissa would not cross the Haro Strait after all, and would turn back with another paddle group at the north end of San Juan Island at our Posey Island camp site.

It would be easy to change my plans and return with the other group via the Friday Harbor ferry to Anacortes, but that was not the long planned goal of this adventure. To give up so easily after doing so many months of planning was, well, not really an option if the conditions would allow for a safe solo crossing of the Haro Strait. That was a big weather "if", but it was really the personal challenge of this paddle that I was looking, and had planned for, and companionship for some of the route was welcomed. So, the paddle trip was on, and weather permitting, to Sidney Harbor for one of us.

The early July weather in the San Juan Island's can be unpredictable. Most locals say the first day of summer in Seattle falls on the 5th of July, sometimes even later. Rain, wind, or even clear and perfect sky's are a possibility this time of the year. On this first mornings paddle though, a stiff wind from the south against the ebb current from the north waited for us in the Rosario Strait, a bad combination of paddle conditions. Chop and white caps at 8:00 AM were visible mid channel as Melissa and I evaluated our first crossing of the day. With the exceptionally rough conditions we briefly considered a ferry ride to Friday Harbor to start the trip, but as the ebb current changed to slack and then to flood, the waters flattened and the white caps abated to acceptable levels. We decided to stay with the original plan and agreed to attempt the Rosario Strait crossing. So began our San Juan Islands traverse.

Our paddle plan was to start at Washington Park, a great launch location about a ½ mile west of the Washington State ferry landing at Anacortes. Washington Park also provides an easy portage for the

return from Sidney via the State ferry, provided you have a good folding wheel kit for your boat. Our first destination, James Island, is just 3.2 nautical miles or one hour of paddling across Rosario Strait, though it still looked to be some pretty rough water even after the current change. And rough it was. Melissa and I did not know it at the time, but it would turn out to be the roughest water of the trip. The two of us surfed the quartering swells with quick brace maneuvers, safely arriving at the east side of James Island. It was a fun and challenging ride and added to the adventure value of the paddle. The conditions were within our skill level, but pushed us both to the upper end of our ability. We were soaked in our paddle jackets from the surf, the spray and perspiration, and we both agreed that this should be the most challenging water of the trip as neither of us needed a bigger challenge on such an exposed stretch of open water. Safety is always rule number one, and we had made several back up plans for just such a weather event along the planned route.

James Island is a small Island .7 miles east of Decatur Island, with landings on both the east and west side. It is a great destination in itself with a group camp site and several smaller camp areas. But this was only a rest stop for this days paddle. In the channel on the west side of the island the wind was still a steady 15-20 knots with small white caps blowing from the tops of the chop. Lucky for us the next leg of the trip was through the protected passage of Thatcher Pass between Decatur and Blakely Islands. The rest of the day was relatively uneventful compared to our Rosario crossing as the weather continued to improve. We paddled Thatcher Pass to Spencer Spit on Lopez Island, and then into Upright Channel with a short rest stop at Odlin County Park. Then on to Turn Island after crossing the San Juan Channel, our camp destination for the first night. Fourteen nautical miles completed, 23 more to go.

Turn Island is a great kayak camp location, just 1.2 nautical miles southeast of Friday Harbor on San Juan Island. The island has perhaps a dozen camp sites, but with the easy access to Turn Island from Friday Harbor, it draws all kinds of boaters in the summer months. Compared to Melissa and I, our adjacent camp companions that first night had very different recreation goals. Just before sunset, five of our male neighbors jumped into their eight foot Livingston for the short ride to their larger power boat moored offshore. They never made it. With four inches of freeboard and copious quantities of alcohol involved, they swamped the small boat just fifty yards from shore. I was surprised that they made that far. The 42 degree water was certainly an unexpected and sobering event, as none of them were wearing a life jacket. I managed to grab my PFD and launch my single Neckey Looksha IV before the situation in the water became serious. With my verbal encouragement, and a little verbal abuse, the five of them found their PFD's, abandoned the boat, and made it to the shore and their waiting wives. I was left towing a swamped power boat back to the beach while Melissa gathered the floating and drifting equipment. Later that night Melissa and I could over hear one of the wives saying, "You stupid #@%\$'s, what the hell were you guys thinking?" I am sure that the guy's would rather have faced the Coast Guard at that moment than the humiliation delivered from their wives. Swamping a boat in the waters of the Pacific Northwest is more serious than their injured egos were ready to admit. A little further offshore or another ten minutes in the water, and the outcome would have not been assured as alcohol and hypothermia are a really bad combination. Melissa and I scored a nice bottle of wine out of the deal from the wives later that evening. They considered it a fair trade for "Saving the lives of their incredibly stupid husbands". I could not argue the point.

The next morning we waved goodbye to our camp neighbors as we circumnavigated Turn Island before paddling to Friday Harbor to meet up with our new paddle companions. They had caught the early morning ferry from Anacortes. I immediately realized as we joined up for introductions on the water that it was no longer my paddle trip that they were joining, but that it was I that was joining their paddle trip. Our paddle goals were common, but very different as I was now a group of one in the company of others. Today, Posey Island was our destination, but after that we would likely be going our separate ways.

The paddle from Friday Harbor to Posey Island through San Juan Channel was straight forward, other than the timing to round Limestone Point at the mouth of Spieden Channel. For this rounding, timing

was very important. The point is notorious for standing waves and rip currents if not traversed close to the slack current period. On this day the water was flat 45 minutes before the slack and the conditions were as good as we could have hoped for as we rounded the point.

Even more surprising was that as we arrived at Posey Island we discovered that we were the only campers in one of the most popular boat-in camp areas in the San Juan Islands, on a three day holiday weekend. I had learned a secret a few weeks earlier from Shaun, one of the caretakers of Cypress Island. Shaun had mentioned that the Wednesday weather forecast determined the weekend turnout. A fair weather forecast on Wednesday for the following Saturday and Sunday leads to a large turn out of paddle groups for the weekend, regardless of the actual weekend weather conditions, and visa versa. Well, we were on the upside of the forecast curve for this weekend as the weather had steadily improved all week from what was predicted the previous Wednesday. We had a great potluck dinner that evening and an outstanding sunset, with the marine weather forecast predicting more of the same good weather for the following morning.

Of the six of us that paddled to Posey Island, I was the only one committed to the San Juan Islands traverse, if the weather would allow. 8:15 AM was the scheduled launch time to make the Haro Strait crossing just before the predicted slack current. I was up early, boat loaded, and ready to go by 7:30. The wind was down, but predicted to come up late in the morning to 15 - 20 knots. I made the decision to go, but as early as possible so as to be across the most exposed part of the strait by 10:00 AM. After breakfast and coffee, and an invite to rejoin the group later that morning if the conditions were not favorable for a crossing, I launched my Looksha and started the most mentally challenging crossing of the trip. It was a beautiful Sunday morning, clear and calm, though after a few dozen paddle strokes a look over my shoulder confirmed what my mind already knew, I was now paddling solo from that moment on.

I was early for the predicted slack current, but as I rounded Battleship Island I found the water flat, the wind calm, and not a single ship, boat or kayak in sight in the shipping lane ahead. It was the best that I could have hoped for in weather and water conditions, and the only thing to prevent me from crossing Haro Strait on this morning would be my own fears. As I passed the south end of Battleship Island, I never missed a paddle stroke. I could see Sidney Island far off to the southwest, and the east end of Mandarte Island, my crossing destination, on the horizon in front of me just 5 nautical miles from my Posey Island camp site.

As I paddled out of Spieden Channel I enjoyed a 5.2 knot speed made good with the current assist, but if something is too good to be true, it probable is. The Haro Strait slack was still more than an hour a way. I had decided to start my crossing early against waiting for slack current, and the predicted winds forecast for later that morning. As I entered the Haro Strait ship channel I could hear a river of water ahead long before I could see the whirlpools and tide rips that soon appeared on the horizon. The two knot current assist from the Spieden Channel was running into the 1.5 knot Haro Strait ebb current at a 90 degree angle creating a huge current line hundreds of yards wide.

I had paddled the well known Deception Pass currents on Whidbey Island many times in the past, and the current predictions for the Haro Strait this morning were far less than the 5.5 knot "whirlpool and washing machine" currents that I had experienced in the Deception Pass bottle neck. But this time, I was a solo kayaker, more than 1½ miles from the nearest shore, and that made a difference. Soon the standing waves and whirlpools were clearly visible directly ahead. My body stiffened more from anxiety than from anything else, and then before I could relax, I was in the deep green mixing bowl of Haro Straits. I could see the other side of the current line just two hundred yards ahead, but my GPS said I was now making less than .9 knots, not the 5.2 I had enjoyed just a few minutes before. Fortunately I am a strong paddler, and with a series of braces and sweeping paddles strokes I was through the worst of the standing waves and whirlpools in less than 10 minutes, though it seemed like an hour. But now the first hint of the forecasted morning wind was starting to show itself on the cold wet spray that coved my face, and I was just approaching mid channel of my crossing.

Solo kayak paddling has the ability focus your efforts and intensify your concentration, and my world would consist of the next 20 yards of water to paddle for the next hour. Slowly Mandarte Island appeared to get closer. Because I started my crossing earlier than planned, and after leaving the influence of the current assist out of the Spieden Channel, I now had a 1½ knot head current much of the way across the rest of the Haro Strait. Fortunately, the wind that did come up was a quartering wind out of the southeast and to the stern of my Necky Looksha, and provided a bit of a surfing opportunity. One hour and 25 minutes after leaving Posey Island I reached the east end of Mandarte Island, and the calmer protected waters in the lee of the island. I had not stopped paddling since leaving Posey Island, and was ready for a water and rest break. It was obvious that Mandarte Island is a bird sanctuary from the number of nesting gulls on the shore and the observation shacks on the north side of the island. As I slowed to a stop in the bull kelp at the west side of the island I looked at the next leg of the crossing, and the rough green water waiting for me ahead in the Miners Channel. Even though I had been in my boat for almost two hours after my break, I still had another 45 minutes or more of hard paddling to go. I could see the light marker in Miners Channel, and the near beach of Sidney Island was just a nautical mile to the southwest. After my short break, I was off again to the west end of the Sidney Island spit.

The current in Miners Channel was much stronger than I had expected, and now against the wind. After rounding the west end of Mandarte Island and leaving its protected waters I immediately took three cold waves over my left shoulder, and was riding the following seas. I rarely use my rudder unless weather cocking is a problem, but on this morning I had the rudder down in my lightly loaded boat. As the third and largest swell lifted my kayak I begin to broach as my rudder was out of the water as I raced down the face of the largest of the waves. A left low brace and a few strong paddle strokes and I was back into comparatively flat water and approaching the Sidney Island spit.

The flat sand beach was a great sight after more than 2 1/2 hours of rough open water paddling. As I landed, the beach was quiet and a great halo surrounded the morning sun. It was just 10:30 AM. Only a family of weekend vacationers even knew I was there and offered to take a picture of me and my boat as the warm morning sun created a fog on the beach. They assumed that I was a local paddler out for some morning exercise.

After a short break on shore and another 15 minutes of paddling I rounded the Sidney Spit and could see the Washington State ferry landing and the Sidney Harbor entrance just two nautical miles away. 45 minutes later I was pulling my boat onto the customs dock, and phoning in my report of my entrance to Canada via the dedicated phone line at the customs station.

After setting up my wheel kit and pulling my boat around to the local pub for a beer and burger, I set off through the town of Sidney and to the ferry landing about a half mile south for the return ferry ride to Anacortes. I had enough time for a nap while I waited for the 6:00 PM ferry, and to reflect on my trip and what it meant to me. O.K., so it was not a solo crossing of the Pacific or a circumnavigation of Greenland, but I felt that I had achieve a personal long planned paddle goal with my safe traverse of the San Juan Islands and a solo crossing of Haro Strait to Vancouver Island Canada.

All of us should have adventures that we want to experience in our lives. Places that we want to visit, goals that we personally want or need to achieve, or something that not everyone else has done. For me, I realized a simple achievement that quiet Sunday morning in July when I picked up a phone and said... "Yes, this is Dale Cooper, I am US citizen and I would like to report that I have entered Canada via Sidney Harbor by kayak from Anacortes Washington as a solo paddler". "Yes, that's right... You heard correctly..."