

The San Juan Islands by Kayak

A Summer Adventure

By

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Flanked by the Strait of Georgia to the north and the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the southwest the San Juans in the northwest corner of Washington state comprise an archipelago of around 200 islands which once were the tops of mountains until the Pleistocene sea inundated them. Bellingham, Washington lies to the east, Victoria, a charming village on the southern tip of British Columbia's Vancouver Island, is a few miles west; Seattle is only 60 miles away.

In the Spring, my friend Alf Gunn proposed an ambitious venture: launch from either Lummi Island or Friday Harbor and spend six days touring the islands in fiberglass ocean going kayaks. Soon our sea kayak flotilla had grown to half a dozen: Alf and his seventeen-year-old son John (both from the Seattle area), Norm Wight from San Diego, Stewart Daley, Paul Downey (an investment banker who bears a passing resemblance to Earnest Hemingway when he lets his beard sprout) and your faithful correspondent. With the exception of young John, all of us were "fiftysomething."



Bill, Stew, Paul, Alf, Norm, John (L-R)

Alf, an experienced outdoorsman who lives in Gig Harbor, Washington, had led several successful land expeditions, including ascents of 14,410 foot Mount Rainier, but was a novice at sea kayaking. Both Stew and I had paddled sea kayaks with varying degrees of success up and down the California coast and in San Francisco Bay for years. Norm Wight had two short outings in San Diego's Mission Bay under his belt. John Gunn was no better off, with one lesson and a couple of outings in Puget Sound.

As saturated with tourists as the summer islands were reputed to be, guidebooks and discussions with locals convinced us that a few wild nooks and

crannies still existed for those adventurous and resourceful enough to search for them. Published literature about the San Juans also promised strong currents and volatile rips ebbing and flooding through the constricted waterways: a test of our strength, endurance and navigational expertise. Consequently, all of us harbored some level of concern about being equal to the challenges.

On a Saturday in August against a scarlet and lavender sunrise silhouetting the volcanic profile of Mount Baker, the Anacortes ferry cast off and churned west through narrow channels carrying us past the forested shores of Decateur Island Blakely Island, and Lopez Island to Friday Harbor on San Juan Island. There, after some polite wrangling with the owner of an upscale marina about access to the water, we loaded our kayaks with food and provisions for seven days.



Anacortes Ferry

Soon we were paddling north through a light chop in the San Juan Channel—the adventure had begun. On the far side of the channel, we rafted up to consult the chart. Pointing to Sidney Island, which is only three miles west of San Juan Island, yet is across the border in Canada, Paul remarked with mock indignation: "Any geographer can see that those islands belong in the United States ... always have. Look at how that border loops too far south. What a sloppy way to draw a boundary. Untidy. Let's launch a night amphibious assault on Sidney Island with two waves of kayaks—first the singles, followed by the doubles. We can capture a good-sized chunk of territory, plant the Stars and Stripes, then let them sort it out in the United Nations. It'll be the first phase of a campaign to reclaim the southern part of Vancouver Island. Fifty four forty or fight!"

Our craft—two single kayaks and two double kayaks rented from the University of Western Washington—were dramatic refinements in design and materials over the Inuit boats of ancient times. These modern fiberglass ocean kayaks were about eighteen feet long, two feet wide, weighed around 60 pounds, and were rigged with

steering rudders, elastic decklines and hatches fore and aft for storing gear. Deck-mounted compasses facilitated open water navigation. Elastic "spray skirts" kept seawater out of the cockpit, and double-bladed paddles drove the craft forward through remarkably rough conditions,

For the next six days, we followed a seventy-mile course clockwise through the San Juans, camping at a different island every night, savoring the Mediterranean weather: seventies during the day and fifties at night. Although the seawater was so cold it could take your breath away, the ambient air temperature and our high level of aerobic activity allowed us to paddle in shorts and tee shirts.

Alf (we dubbed him "The Commodore") convened a huddle each afternoon to plot tactics against the next day's currents and tides. A current table helped us predict when slack tides would facilitate traverses across open water thus avoiding dangerous rips and robust currents. Only once did we deliberately challenge a rip current: where Lopez Island and Canoe Island create a narrows, the flood tide surged north generating irresistible standing waves. One after the other we shoved off from Flat Point and rode the swift water for several hundred yards hooting and hollering with the exhilaration of it all.

We made camp in a grove of madrone trees on Jones Island the afternoon of our first day. Soon afterwards, Bill Hoppe, a Washington State Park Ranger, strolled over and asked, "You guys realize this is not a designated campsite?" It was not necessary to remind him that more than two hundred recreationists arriving in boats had overrun the island, occupying every approved campsite. After assuring Ranger Hoppe that we would respect the primitive nature of the site, and erase all signs of our short habitation, he confided a closely guarded policy; the Washington State Parks and Recreation Department instructs its rangers to accommodate kayakers whenever possible, due to their relative light touch on the land. When we expressed a keen interest in killer whales, Ranger Hoppe described three "pods" of resident Orcas (led by the oldest females) which inhabit the frigid waters around the San Juan Islands. These are "resident" whales as opposed to the "transients" who sometimes invade the archipelago in search of warm-blooded prey: seals and sea lions instead of the salmon and other types of fish preferred by the "residents." Hoppe had seen whales play as earnestly as golden retriever puppies with buoyant kelp balls which they fetch deep down then release to watch them rocket to the surface. Often the whales wrap themselves in kelp, seeming to enjoy the sensuous feel of it on their skin.



Jones Island Campground

"K," and "L" pods comprise ninety-six whales, each of which is known to local researchers by name and physical description. A lot of sightings had occurred in Haro Strait along the west coast of San Juan Island. Hoppe cautioned that the whales' movements are random and unpredictable; if we encountered a pod, we should consider ourselves lucky. Even some longtime residents of the islands had never seen whales up close and personal.

On the second day, we were moving north through President Channel, halfway up the west coast of Orcas Island when—just in time for a midmorning break—we spied a settlement called West Beach. While we strolled up the sand toward a general store surrounded by rustic cabins, I joked about the epidemic of espresso bars in the metropolitan areas of Washington and the incongruity of our finding "civilization" on a kayak expedition—not that it wasn't welcomed. I recounted Gary Larson's cartoon showing two rough-looking range hands sitting around a campfire; one turns to the other with a coffee pot in his hand and asks, "Latte, Jed?" Sure enough, as Stew Daley stepped up to the counter, the proprietor asked, "any of you guys want a caffe latte?"

Kayak travel is quiet and unobtrusive, giving you many opportunities to observe the abundant wildlife of the San Juans. We saw at least a dozen bald eagles majestically surveying their domain from the lofty tops of storm-blasted Douglas firs. Although the San Juan population seemed large, the Upper Skagit River Valley in Washington State is home to the second largest bald eagle wintering ground outside Alaska for these endangered raptors. As we cruised the shoreline of Canoe Island, having just admired the powerful trajectory of a big eagle, Paul Downey was moved to exclaim, "Endangered my ass! I've never seen so many bald eagles outside a zoo. If I see another one, I'm gonna throw up!" Herds of deer grazed some islands (especially Jones Island). We encountered exasperatingly mischievous raccoons, graceful blue

herons, egrets, ospreys, mallard ducks, cormorants, and curious harbor seals, each enjoying its own habitat. But most exciting and spectacular of all were the Orcas.

It was noon of the third day. We had just left a lagoon on Matia Island and were setting a course for Doe Bay on the east shore of Orca Island. They first appeared as a phalanx of black dorsal fins knifing obliquely through the aquamarine water four hundred yards away. Spurring our kayaks forward with quick paddle strokes, we closed swiftly with the pod of killer whales until someone said, "Uh oh, they've changed course. They're coming this way! "

In a few minutes they were on us: a dozen glistening ebony and cream orcas swimming past at six knots, surfacing every fifteen yards, exhaling with a hollow "whoosh," then gracefully arching beneath the water, only to resurface further on. A female orca swam by in perfect synchronicity with a calf tucked tightly into the "echelon position" behind her pectoral fin. Looking up from his single kayak, Alf's son John was startled to see a huge male cruising straight at him. Sporting a six-foot dorsal fin, and pushing a bow wave, the animal must have been twenty-five feet long. As we held our breath, he sounded fifteen feet from John, with hardly a ripple.

We paddled furiously to keep pace with the pod for several hundred yards, admiring the symmetry of their movements, exhilarated by their presence and our extraordinary good fortune. Then they were gone, leaving us literally shaking with a sense of grace and power and intelligence.



Dylan, meet John Gunn

Researchers at the Whale Museum in Friday Harbor identified our photograph of the huge bull who passed John Gunn so deferentially as Dylan, a member of "L Pod" –a group of 55 orcas which ranges more than a hundred miles a day in search of salmon and other types of fish. Born in 1965, Dylan travels with a "subpod" of eleven animals led by his mother "Misky," and comprising his aunt "Olympia," a sibling

"Mystery" and seven other relatives. A playful fellow, he and two other male orcas have been seen "surfing" the bow waves of oil tankers headed for Bellingham. The Whale Museum on First Street North in Friday Harbor has scientific and historical displays conveying the story of these intriguing cetaceans.

Later that evening we reached the pinnacle of kayaking hedonism at the little settlement of Doe Bay on the east side of Orcas Island. After paddling thirteen miles from Matia Island (fueled mostly by raw adrenaline produced by our orca encounter) we settled into the last available campsites on Doe Island a half mile from Doe Bay. Intrigued by the rumors of hot tubs and a vegetarian restaurant, we packed our clean clothes in plastic garbage bags and paddled through the gathering dusk toward the lights of Doe Bay. The Guest Registrar explained that the resort especially welcomed kayakers; instead of six dollars, we could pay only four dollars for the clothing optional hot tub and sauna. She also invited us to sample the vegetarian menu and a variety of local beers and wines. The hot tubs indeed were 'clothing optional'; four naked women and a naked man simmered in tubs which overlooked a small inlet with a white sand beach. There we found a cold tub, a clear hot tub and a hot tub with bubble jets. We started with a searingly cold shower, followed by a sauna, then plopped into the clear hot tub. As I simmered in the soup, feeling the muscle tension from thirteen miles of battle against wind chop and currents melt away, it occurred to me that this trip was developing a pleasant yin and yang about it: a good mix of adventure, challenging paddles, walks through wild country and almost decadent (by wilderness standards) pauses for espresso and now chilled Henry Weinhard, hot tubs and vegetarian menus. Would Mountain House beef stroganoff ever taste the same again?

The manager informed us that until around twelve years ago, Doe Bay Resort was owned by the Polarity Institute", a human potential commune devoted to natural foods and healthy lifestyles. In keeping with that tradition, the current owners offer a mostly vegetarian menu (with some chicken and fish entrees), and a generous list of local wines and beers. In 1907 the present café and store was a working Post Office. They are listed in the National Registry of Historical Buildings. Twenty vacation cabins constructed in the 1940s and 1950s still provide comfortable, if rustic, accommodations. Depending on whether the cabin has its own bathroom and kitchenette, a night's stay will set you back \$40 to \$90 in the off season, slightly more during the summer season. A good way to sample kayaking in the San Juans is to join one of Doe Bay Resort's guided kayak tours. The mailing address for more information is Doe Bay Resort, Star Route 86, Olga, Washington 98279 (206) 376-2291.



Roughing It

The grand finale to our "shore liberty" was paddling back to Doe Island along a pathway of platinum moonlight while Paul Downey serenaded us with a beautiful baritone rendition of "Cruising Along on Moonlight Bay."

By ten o'clock the next morning, fueled by a load of blueberry pancakes laced with real butter and maple syrup, we were on the water pulling for Cypress Island and a campsite on the eastern side called Pelican Beach, five miles across Rosario Strait. A mile offshore, North Peapod and South Peapod Islands rode low in the water looking for all the world like the Civil War ironclads "Monitor" and "Merrimac." The flooding current, building to a velocity of three knots from the south, was creating a visible bow wave against the islands. We had consulted current tables the night before and dismissed the swift water as a minor annoyance over such a short distance, especially for us "seasoned" veterans of the San Juans.

A lot of that cockiness evaporated within a half mile when we realized that either South Peapod Island had dragged its anchor, or we were in the grip of an epic flood tide. Peapod was underway to the south, or so the optical illusion made it appear. It was like sitting in your car at a stop light when the bus next to you moves forward, triggering a sensation of drifting backwards and a panicky stomp on the brake.

Sensing the strength of the current, four of us sprinted into the eddy behind South Peapod Island so we could watch Paul Downey and John Gunn in their double kayak flail the water heroically with no visible effect. They were trying to swing south of Peapod, bucking the robust current almost head-on. Checkmated by the swift water, they were being ginned to look an awful lot like a spider in a toilet bowl swirling into oblivion.

"You guys are going nowhere!" we yelled from our safe harbor behind a low rocky point. "Give it up and eddy out over here!"



Downey the Tidemeister

On the east side of Cypress Island, we shared Pelican Beach with a dozen paddlers from a women's organization, and sixteen business men and two women on a week-long Outward Bound familiarization course for corporate benefactors. Late afternoon, a squall drifted over, speckled our tents with big raindrops, then moved east leaving a phenomenal neon rainbow arcing across the eastern sky. Just before sunset, we followed a steep trail through thick Douglas fir to the top of 840 foot high Eagle Cliff. At the summit, a panoptic view unfolded around us: to the west, Peavine Pass –a distinctive notch between Orcas Island and Blakely Island; Bellingham Channel lay to the southeast; to the northeast was Lummi Island. As we savored the view, a lowering sun transformed the western horizon into a palette of brass and copper shifting to salmon, crimson, then lavender and indigo; the waters of Rosario Strait swirled with the charcoals and grays of rich marble.

For dinner that night, Paul and Norm served up fettuccini adorned with a rich tomato sauce and fresh grated cheese, green beans, and a nice cabernet (one of a variety of wines Paul had stowed in every available nook and cranny of his kayak, bless his soul) followed by raspberry pies which looked like someone had used them as bleacher cushions at a Seattle Sea Hawks game. So insufferably confident were they about their culinary skills under primitive conditions, they challenged Stew and me to a cook-off to be judged by Commodore Gunn. Unbeknownst to them, my wife Claire had packed a killer homemade sauce recipe which had the advantage of having been field tested many times to rave reviews. Our secret weapon in what became the Great San Juan Islands Spaghetti Skirmish would be unleashed on these unsuspecting culinary pretenders in two days.



San Juans Sky Show

We closed the loop to our starting point at Friday Harbor by way of Peavine Pass between Blakely Island and Obstruction Island, spending the night at Spencer Spit on Lopez Island, then traveling through Upright Channel and across San Juan Channel. The crossing of San Juan Channel against a flood tide amid commuter ferries, was made even more exciting for Stew and Norm by a couple of airheads (easy, ladies –if they'd been guys they would have been plain old jerks) racing past in a fancy outboard, oblivious to other traffic. They swerved in a last second near-miss, drenching the two kayakers with a bow wave. Finally on lovely Turn Island, only two nautical miles from our original departure at Friday Harbor, the great pasta denouement unfolded with embarrassing certitude.

Stew Daley began the lopsided contest by serving minestrone soup from a coffee pot. With a napkin draped over his arm, and singing a passable rendition of "O Sole Mio," he poured broth into each of six bowls with a flourish, forgetting that vegetables, being heavier, sink to the bottom. We may have lost at most a point and a half while he scurried back around the table to serve up the vegetables. Hitting our stride after this minor setback, we served up the main course –al dente spaghetti covered with a rich beef-based secret sauce laced with sun dried tomatoes, tender mushrooms, and a savory mixture of herbs, topped with (as Norm and Paul pointed out to the judge) *canned* Parmesan. Freeze-dried beans (which tasted surprisingly fresh) and bread sticks rounded out the entree. Norm and Paul pounded the next to last nail in their own coffin by contributing a robust zinfandel, which had survived 68 miles in a kayak. Cups of rich chocolate pudding with ground walnut topping sealed their fate; Judge Gunn proclaimed Stew and me the winners.



O Sole Mio!

The next afternoon, as my Alaska Airlines flight lifted off the runway at SeaTac en route to San Francisco, I reflected on our remarkable journey: seventy miles through the San Juan archipelago with a group of men who had never paddled together before ... in fact had never done *anything* together before. Unlike some group experiences, the harmony and teamwork only strengthened as the days unfolded. Each challenge, be it weather, currents or long days on the water, enhanced our sense of cohesiveness, camaraderie, and collective strength. Grudgingly, the San Juans had yielded their secret wilderness nuggets to our curiosity and sense of discovery; and by serving as a proving ground for our newly acquired skills, had encouraged us to take northward for our next adventure: perhaps the west coast of Vancouver Island, the Queen Charlotte Islands, or the Discovery Islands.