

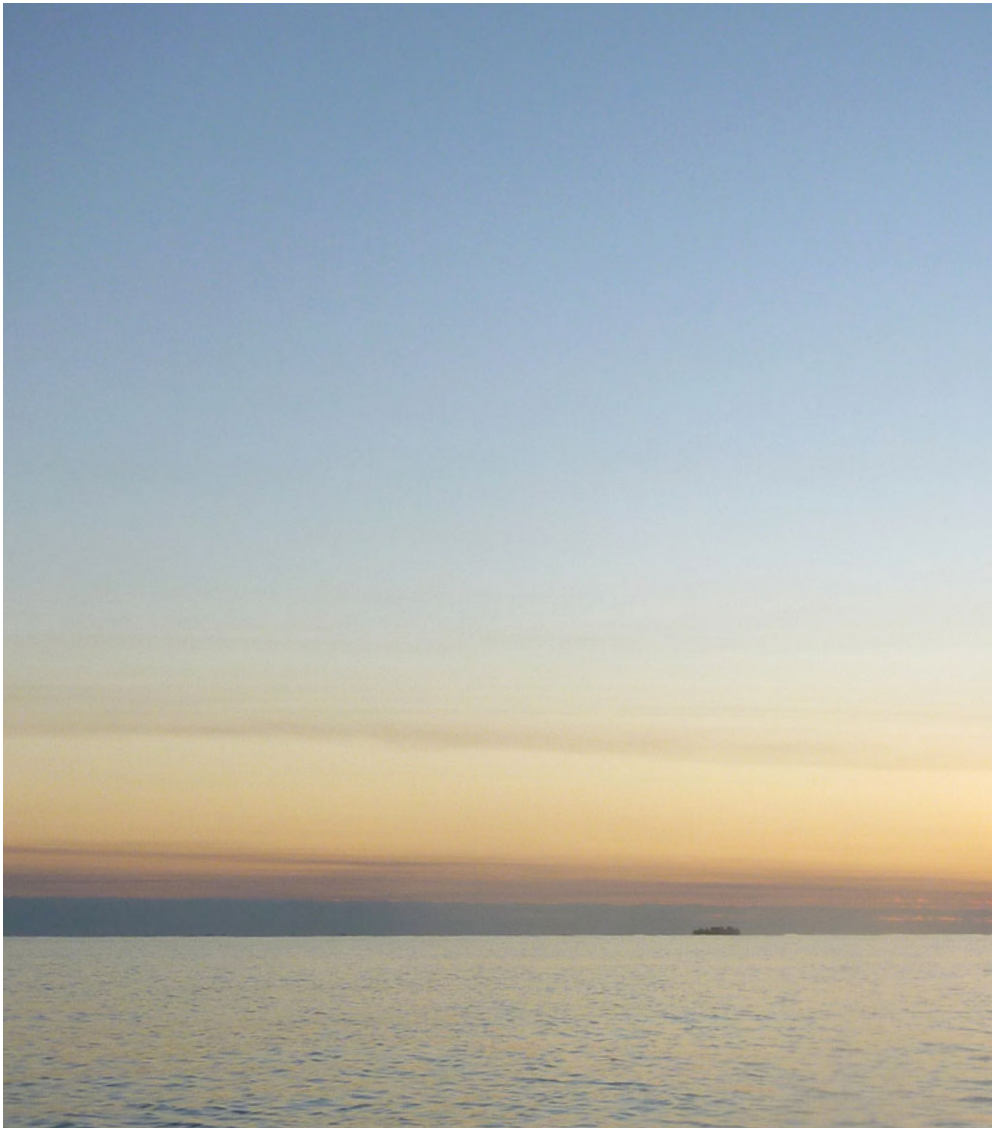
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NORTH REEF EXPEDITION 2011

by Mark Sundin

The remote islands of the Capricornia Cays, some 80km off the Queensland coast, have been the subject of local sea kayaker's dreams for many years. Last year three intrepid local paddlers – Gary Forrest, Eddie Safarik and Paul Wilton – made the first crossing out to the southern tip of the group when they successfully paddled their Nordkapps 95km from Fraser Island to Lady Elliot Island. ►

Above: Chris James leaving Lady Musgrave Island (photo: Rob Mercer)



Above: Sunset camp on Fraser Island (photo: Chris James). Opposite from top: Sea turtle in the Lady Elliot Island Lagoon (photo : Rob Mercer), North Reef in the pre-dawn glow (photo: Mark Sundin).

The experience was typical of many of the first big crossings in this part of the world: an epic in every sense worthy of it's place in local folklore. Their expedition carried on as far as Heron Island, before finishing at Gladstone via Masthead Is.

This left the tantalising target of North Reef at the top end of the Capricornia Cays, some 130km off the coast and still unreachable, for Rob Mercer, Chris James and I to contemplate. For a couple of years we had been kicking around the idea of an achievable, challenging and unique expedition that for three time-poor blokes could be planned to take less than two weeks.

Not to criticise in any way, but the 'epic' sea-kayaking expedition nowadays seems to have to involve a circumnavigation of a country or a continent or an über-open crossing involving nights out at sea and much misery. In addition, they all seem to take way more time than any of us rat-racers could afford. We figured that we could incorporate the elements that make up a challenging true rough-water trip with some idyllic island destinations and, in the process (although far lower down the priority scale), achieve something of a 'first'. Leave the suffering to the mountaineers!

In the plans for this trip we had three serious crossings of 60km and more, the near-certainty of strong following or quartering trade winds blowing up to 25 knots, open unprotected water

with thousands of kilometres of oceanic fetch and a route which runs across sea depths varying from 50m to just a few feet.

We settled on an expedition style that would be fast and athletic, and pledged to get ourselves into shape in the preceding months so we'd be fit enough to go day after day as long as the weather allowed. We eschewed many of the principles of preparation for sea kayak expeditions in that we based our training around short 60–90 minute high-intensity interval sessions, and sought out the fastest rough-water boat we could find. It was crucial in our eyes that we had the same boat (in the end the amazing Rockpool Taran), same gear, similar fitness levels and, most importantly, the same mindset.

This part of the Australian coast has a predominant south-easterly trade wind at this time of the year, but it does swing around to various points on the southern axis which can make planning a big crossing something of a tactical guessing game. When we arrived at our staging point at Hervey Bay, we had a forecast that promised following conditions the next day. The day after that a change producing difficult beam conditions was forecast, which would necessitate a mainland departure from a point some 100km further north in Bundaberg. Belatedly, I contacted Karel Vissel at kayakweather.com who gave us a pointed daily forecast and the confidence to head across to Fraser Island and set up to launch.

The first leg of the trip, an 88km straight line from the top of Fraser Island out to Lady Elliot Island, covers a stretch of water renowned for being confused, unpredictable and laced with shallow-moving shoals and breaking seas. It links the world's largest sand island with the southern extremities of the world's largest reef system. The sheer hydraulics of that combination of underwater topography – deep ocean crossing a huge shifting sand spit, eventually morphing into a system of coral reefs and cays – goes a long way to explaining why it's such a changeable and interesting stretch.

We decided to use a charter to get out to Fraser as the 60km between Hervey Bay and the island is an enclosed bay, which didn't interest us in the bigger picture of paddling the outer islands of the Cays. In a manner I'm sure familiar to all sea kayakers, the boat skipper thought we were barking.

The charter trip out was quick, but getting kayaks and expedition kit off a fishing boat into the surf zone ain't an experience I'd want to repeat! Once on Fraser we had the chance to soak up the isolation of the place and gear up for an early departure the next morning.

The next day dawned overcast with blessed light following winds, and by 7am we were off on the biggest crossing of the trip. Chris had plotted a course taking into account the tide, which would move across our rhumb line twice in the 12 hours ▶



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or so we hoped to be on the water. We stuck to the navigation plan, holding course in the long hours across to Lady Elliot. Chris' navigation plan was a great success considering the lack of chart data for this particular waterway, with virtually nothing recorded for miles along most of the crossing.

We had a couple of dramas on the way over, the most serious of which involved a rudder mounting bolt nearly coming clean out of Rob's hull. We managed to get this back in thanks to a bouncy group raft-up and a handily packed Leatherman.

We could see why this stretch of water has such a fearsome reputation. As we worked past the lee of Fraser Island and its 50km sand spit, big ocean swells would barrel across us from the east. Moments later, a breaking wave would slap you on the back from the opposite quarter: not a place to be taken lightly.

The island's light tower came into view just before sunset and we had the reassuring sight of a flashing light to guide us the last two hours home. Just prior to hearing the roar of the reef, breaking like a glass truck rolling down a cliff, we remembered that we hadn't actually worked out a viable route through the reef to the safety of the island. In daylight this would have been no great drama. In the dark however, after 13 hours on the water, it conjured thoughts of mangled fibreglass and flesh splattered onto sharp coral. Luckily for us the island staff had come out when they saw our lights and lit up a 3m channel through the break to the small coral beach. We were unanimous in agreeing that this was the last time we'd play the 'land-across-a-breaking-coral-reef-in-the-dark' game again, but our memories proved to be short.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that crossings of this nature are boring. There is nothing to look at, the horizon is endless and the miles are there to be made: no other option. The truth is that constantly surfing, trying to link runners, watching the troughs as they appear in front of you, watching your heading, having a quick drink plus another dozen multi-tasks becomes all-encompassing. I was grateful for a degree of challenging water as time passed, way faster than 13 hours of staring at a compass would have you believe.

We had logged into the local Volunteer Marine Radio prior to departing Fraser Island, but our handheld VHF radios were next to useless in such vast waters. Consequently most of our log in and out with marine authorities was done via satellite phone, which is today a remarkably reliable and cheap option in remote areas.

We were then stuck on Elliot for three torturous days by a honking sou' wester, putting up with all the misery you can imagine befalls you on a fully functioning island resort with a cocktail bar. We got a frustrating forecast each day which promised 25 knots of raging beam winds for our next leg (45km to Lady Musgrave Island), and then watched as each afternoon it dropped away to barely a zephyr. The window for the light breeze

was only about 4–5 hours before the next big front would hit, and we weren't game to take on a 6–7 hour crossing in the knowledge that we could get clobbered midway while still having some serious miles to safety.

Once again 'Lord' Karel came good, delivering a lull that would stay down for about 8 hours. After three days of unimaginable hardship on the tropical resort, we punted on the forecast and headed off on what would hopefully be the last 2–3 hours of a raging beam wind and sea.

This was the highlight of the trip: awesome breaking seas, typical of the tropics in that they were short and steep and broke like big marshmallows, but lively enough to keep us bracing and surfing along. The winds began to drop as predicted, and we coasted the final half of the crossing to land at sunset.

Lady Musgrave Island was another picture-perfect coral cay. With the westerlies back up again in the evening, we hung out for another night waiting for a favourable forecast the next day. A group of 25 divers from the Australian National University were camping on the island and treated us to a three-course dinner and a few tall tales of sharks and whales. We were very amused to find out that the island was named after the stoic Lady Jeannie Lucinda Musgrave, head of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League in Britain. We loved the idea of a woman standing firm and fighting hard to stop her sisters getting the vote. We imagined her rousing speeches to the believers: "Ladies, I'm here to tell you that we're not ready to make the big decisions!" Like Lady Elliot and North West Islands, it was extensively mined for bird guano in the late 1890s. This practice managed to reduce the island's overall altitude by about a metre before the poo ran out a decade later.

As forecast, our first proper trade wind started on cue for the 75km leg to the world-famous Heron Island, the only resort island out on the Great Barrier Reef itself.

We shot off the beach at Musgrave at sun-up and raced across the turquoise waters of the cays, passing islands and reefs as the winds and a fresh following sea drove us along. We came upon Fitzroy Reef at about the halfway mark, a huge reef system that was a nightmare for the early mariners of the region. It's an intimidating thing to be out in the deep blue sea and suddenly have your entire eye line taken up with what appears to be an impassable horizon-wide obstacle, white with the foam of breaking ocean swells and the cacophony you'd expect to accompany the spectacle. The swell smashed into this magnificent oceanic barrier, throwing back rebounding waves and seas and giving us an unforgettable hour or so.

We had decided to stop on the lee side of the reef in the dropping tide and hop out for a stretch on the submerged coral, but we got there so fast that the tide was still chest high. The proximity of some very big and curious tiger sharks meant the only things we stretched were our imaginations!

The tiger sharks were a familiar companion on the entire trip: they'd rise with speed from the deep blue to check us out, skew off our bows as they realised we weren't edible and then hang out for a minute or so to see what we actually were. They have a pretty fearsome reputation, but are obviously well fed in this abundant ecosystem. Their bold stripes make them easily identifiable, and it was a privilege to be in the water (err, on the water) with such beautiful animals.

Shortly afterwards we had an encounter with a pod of about eight humpback whales. They ran under, around and through our line for about 10 minutes, big males and mothers with calves, playing, breaching and turning the water around us into a big fishy-smelling spa bath. The best way I can describe the experience is that it was like paddling amongst a bunch of underwater elephants. Man, they are big animals when you're in a skinny little canoe.

We flew through the guts of the Capricornia Cays at a most un-kayak-like speed, with the protected islands of the marine reserve occasionally visible on the horizon.

Despite the beauty of the wildlife and the reefs, that day was all about the water. The convergence of seriously deep ocean meeting reef systems threw up currents, swell, wind-generated seas and fantastic following conditions, producing a challenging paddling day you'd be hard pressed to top. After eight exhilarating hours we had covered the 75km to Heron, and once again took up residence in the resort bar. (This hard-core expedition stuff is a dirty business.)

Heron Island is a very glam resort which also has the world's largest coral reef research station. The manager of the station is a chap named Tim Harvey, who is not only an ex-BCU instructor but has his 1975 Nordkapp HM with him on the island. We spent a great night sharing a beer or two with Tim, and listening to his stories of early paddling in the UK and his research duties with the reef and the wildlife. If anyone wants to know how to properly dive off a moving boat and crash-tackle a dugong or a loggerhead turtle, Tim is your man.

From Heron we were in reach of our expedition goal: the elusive North Reef. It was a mere 31km from us, and the next day dawned clear and calm. We soaked up some sun, had a big gourmet buffet brekkie, then set off at about 1pm to paddle the distance to the lighthouse. In hindsight, this was probably an hour too late.

Chris had a moment of comedic terror en route when he stopped for a bite to eat and tried to free up a coral pebble from his shoe. With one foot hanging over the gunwale, he had a brief and unwelcome visit from a four-metre tiger shark. He relinquished his peanut butter wrap, popped his foot back on the safe side of the laminate and carried on. About ten minutes later he pulled heavy on a paddle stroke and whipped up a metre-long sea snake onto his blade, wrapped tight around the shaft. He shook it free and made a bit ►

Right: Sunset on Fraser Island (photo: Rob Mercer).





Above: Running repairs on the big crossing to Lady Elliot Island (photo: Rob Mercer).

of a girly squeal. I pointed out that they can only bite your pinkie with their tiny back-set venomous fangs, and he countered that his pinkie was about 4cm from the snake's head and looking very tasty.

An hour later, on a calm sea with a long-period but low swell running under us, we could clearly see the North Reef and its lighthouse. Alarming, it then began to momentarily disappear. We realised that the long-period swell was hitting this oceanic outpost and jacking up out of all proportion, producing some seriously big waves on the reef surrounding the tiny island. It was fifteen minutes until sunset.

Working our way towards the reef with the sun now below the horizon, it looked like the huge swells were wrapping 360 degrees around and closing out the entire joint. With the crash of the breaking seas on the reef drowning out all our girly squeals, we crept to the lee side of the reef in the dark and spotted a small gap that looked blue as opposed to white and frothy. Ten minutes ticked by with us peering through the dark trying to see any breaking waves before we decided it was time to have a go. We collectively put our feet down and coasted through what turned out to be a yawning gap in the break to land on North Reef.

Looking at the charts later on, we should really have seen the potential for the swelly conditions. Only 5km out to sea from North Reef, the ocean floor drops away from about 50m to nearly 500m. A long-period swell like the swell running so lamely underneath us in reasonably deep water was always going to do a Mavericks once it hit the

shallows of the reef. And what a display it put on for us: real white-knuckle stuff.

North Reef was the goal of our trip but we had few ideas, except for some sketchy historical photos, of what it might be like. Frankly, we were overwhelmed by the power and isolation of this tiny island with a booming reef, big ocean swell wrapping 280 degrees around, pure white sand, the wisp of vegetation clinging onto a wafer-thin topsoil and the most majestic lighthouse I've ever seen – all standing firm in the middle of the chaos.

The lighthouse at North Reef has all the drama associated with the northern hemisphere Stevenson lighthouses. It was manned up until the 1960s and, even then, considered too harsh a place for anyone except single men. Early photos showed the light tethered to the reef by a series of steel cables, as originally it was literally just a lighthouse on a rock. We found the remnants of those original anchor points in the coral surrounding the island, along with the engine block of a recent casualty of the place.

From our campsite we could see the distant glow from Gladstone 130km to the west, backlit by a carpet of stars you'd have to have seen to believe. North Reef has a high seas feel unlike anywhere I've ever been in a kayak. We spent the next morning walking laps of the island (about a 12 minute stroll) and soaking in the atmosphere of what really is a supremely beautiful place.

The minor issue of getting back to Australia now took over as our priority, and we plotted a line

taking us back to the coastal town of Keppel Sands via North West Island and the continental Hummocky Island. We covered another 135km getting back, including probably the greatest day of pure paddling I've ever had when we rode a freshly developed sea and 25 knots of breeze across the final 39km to land. Imagine surfing non-stop for four hours and you might get close to the exhilaration of the final day of our fantastic trip.

On our arrival we were greeted by Chris' dad, Rob who had followed us along the coast in the car so he could be in place whenever and wherever we made landfall. We're obviously deeply indebted to him for taking care of this massive logistical problem, without which we would have had one almighty car shuffle to organise.

In all, we covered 365km in seven days of paddling with four weather and wind-enforced rest days. The expedition was a success in the context of setting out with a plan to get somewhere in a certain style and bloody doing it. But of course it was much more than that. We camped in isolation on some of the most beautiful islands you can imagine, paddled heaving and varied seas, saw so much 'big' oceanic wildlife it almost got boring and came back great mates. ■

Mark Sundin lives in Sydney, Australia, is a qualified sea instructor and paddles everything from elite racing skis to his beloved British skeg boats. To view a video diary of the expedition, visit <http://vimeo.com/27966443>.