

Bongaree to Caloundra

The return trip – Dodging the Wind

1

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For those who didn't realise it after the club paddle on Saturday, I left the group at Gallaghers and returned to Caloundra where I had left my car on Friday night. I thought a few of you who were thinking about doing the long trip with me might be interested to see how it went. So here's a summary of how I felt about the return journey...

This part of the trip is *always* all about the numbers. I had calculated the high tide at Coochin Creek to be at 1pm. That is about 2 hours after the high at Brisbane Bar - a nice round figure for calculating a passage run from either end. From experience here I think there is about a 15 minute window where the height of the tide may affect this slightly.

Then it's all about watching your average speed and knowing the distances to get to that point at the right time. I had just over 12k's to Coochin and left Gallaghers just after 11am. So was aiming to average just over 6kph for the next two hours. There was no point arriving early as then I would be going into the incoming tide from the other end. For your info, when we pulled up at Gallaghers, the average moving speed for the large group was reading 6.1kph, including our drink stop and waiting time etc. We were all going around 8kph for at least the first half an hour.

Aiming straight up to Mission Point from Gallaghers is almost directly North West. The wind at that stage was still light but coming from the North East so no headwind at all, just from the side. I considered putting up the sail, but a look at the GPS had me doing between 9 and 10 kph with the tide still running strong. I thought the conditions might get harder further up so put in a bit of effort to keep ahead of the game. That turned out a good idea. Once I came around "The Point" and started heading slightly North East, the wind then became a factor and I could see my speed slowing.

Mission is always a good place to pull up for a few minutes. It's the last pretty place to stop and 8.5k's from the change point. I took the opportunity to have a banana and a drink and mentally prepared myself for what was ahead. Also by this stage the cloud we had enjoyed earlier had now gone completely.

On taking off and paddling at a steady rate my speed had now dropped, sitting between 6 to 6.5, depending on the wind gusts. I was happy at this as it was the desired average speed and it was still quite comfortable on the run up to Lime Point. It was fascinating to see at this point with the higher than normal tide to see the water spreading into the wetlands in a couple of places. I should have

taken a picture of the 'No Camping' sign that was sitting in about 6 inches of water.

When I started turn left and point NW again, I put the sail up to see if I could get a little assistance. It did help a little, but was drifting me out towards the middle of the channel where I was trying to keep towards the eastern bank for when I turned into it.

As I crossed into the more open area there (I guess the eastern extremity of Tripcony Bight), I looked up the shortcut up the eastern side of Long Island. That is very shallow and can only be done in a kayak approximately half an hour either side of high tide. If you have to follow the main channel on the other side it's just over one kilometre longer.

Whitecaps, waves, and what looked like 20 knots was funnelling straight towards me! That was almost scary. Wind against tide, wow, in what's normally pretty calm water. I thought "Ok, lets punch into this, it's not too far, should get better once I get through this". Gritted my teeth and headed north. Well, sort of north. I was going nowhere into this! And only an hour ago I was doing 9's. I could hardly get the paddle around without fighting to stop it blowing out of my hand. It might have been more than 20 knots. I am not a wind speed expert but that wasn't pretty. After the first 100 metres (or was it only 50) I just started to think that I wasn't going to make the time at the other end. I also started thinking back to stories I have read about wind waves on lakes. Like Lake Alexandria at the Murray Mouth and how dangerous that can be. In that moment I made a connection to those stories, and maybe just learnt a little bit more respect for the conditions. Not that they were huge here but steep, short, and every one was breaking over the front up to the cockpit.

Change plan! Ok, looks like I was now going the other side of the island, and I was just hoping it didn't look like this on the other side too. So I turned to go west, now side on to the wind and waves, but found I was bracing as much as paddling. How to get out of here fast? At that angle I popped the sail up and got some good speed to push me across. I had to work hard with the balance and bracing, and with every third wave or so splashing over the cockpit. If I had others with me here I would have gone backwards until I got back to the deeper calmer water.

A fun but wild ride and once around the bottom of Long Island it was "Wind, what wind?" Only a light breeze. In the middle of all that excitement when I had a moment to glance at the GPS the screen was displaying 'Low Battery'. I was hoping it would hang on for another 20 minutes until I got past Coochin. I had charged the batteries before I left home but had been on continuously since I started 10pm Friday night. Spare batteries were in the back hatch, I couldn't see anywhere to land so I thought I should be Ok to wing it for a little while.

That side of the Island was also a slightly better angle for the wind and I was still getting tide assistance. I was moving back up to a reasonable speed again. I felt a lot more relaxed at that stage and knew I was about spot on for the timing. Now I think this was only the second time I've been up this side of that island and I think the last time was about 4 years ago. My GPS by now had gone completely blank and I was trying to visualise what I had seen on Google Earth countless times.

Dodging the wind. That was foremost in my mind now. Using the breeze, I had drifted to the western edge of the channel when I came to the first small island. I stayed to the left and a larger one was pointing at me, I went left side again and avoided the wind and the tide was still coming in. Then I went right to go past Coochin Creek (or so I thought). I could still hear boats and jet skis in the navigation channel on the other side of the islands I was going around so all was good. Then I followed the main bank on the left until I saw the houses I thought was on Roys Rd. All good, and the tide still going my way, just as I had planned. A few minutes later I saw a gap in the mangroves and could finally pull up, stretch my legs for a moment and change batteries.

As soon as I got powered up again, I checked the time and then toggled over to the map although I knew I didn't have to. I couldn't believe my eyes when it said I was up Coochin Creek. I thought it must have got some water in it when I changed the battery. It had to be wrong! I found it really hard to accept I was wrong for a moment and really wanted to keep going. But the little voice in my head said "Trust your GPS". Once I slowly started going back (only one kilometre) I could see it working for me.

I have Google Earth open on another screen as I write this and it looks so easy. But those mangroves all look the same. Looking now it's not that many degrees away from the direction I was going and I don't normally run a deck compass. I was basically navigating by the sun and wind direction. Where I went wrong was my second left took me into Hussey Creek, and when I veered right off that down a channel back north, thought Hussey creek was Coochin Creek and went from there. If I had gone only one more kilometre I would have found houses on my right, which then would have triggered confusion as that should have been Bribie Island in my mind.

Once back on track and around the top corner of Coochin Creek, the tide was now still running to the north, but outgoing not incoming. That corner just amazes me how it does that. And I only lost 15 minutes with that manoeuvre.

"Home Charles" I called. "It's hot out here so let's get going". I still felt pretty fresh as the last hour had been reasonably easy. I think the extra 15 minutes helped me with the speed now as the tide was going out faster than I had seen it up here, but still the wind was the concern. I just used the islands to hide behind and kept in the calm water until I got to the Roys Rd boat ramp. On the run from there down to Lighthouse Reach I hugged what now became the north bank and could see plenty of whitecaps on the other side. GPS was still running at a comfortable 6. Tuning the corner towards Halls Creek, I just thought "This is going to be horrendous".

Anyone who was on my previous club paddle up to here may get the feeling what it was like when the northerly was blowing against us and we struggled, but this time the tide was with me and it was much worse. Normally when I cross the channel to the other side, I usually line up a point about 45 degrees and slide on over. I went backwards! It was getting disheartening to see the number three continuously looking at me from the GPS, with planned tide assistance! I had already done over 40 k's for the day and not sure how the 24 the previous evening or the touch footy game before that was affecting me, but I was feeling pretty shot by then.

Still, I could get a bit of shelter as long as I was a metre or two off the mangroves. I hugged the island side and was doing alright. I was trying to look into the trees and enjoy the scenery and birdlife to keep my mind off the workload. I stayed that side until I got down to the Lions Park as it still looked easier than going across the Golden Beach side. I pulled up and had a snack, walked over to the surf and flopped into the water. Didn't think I was capable of swimming at that stage, but it felt clean and fresh. I got there about 3.15 and I think the speed averaged around the 4.5k mark for that final stretch from Coochin.

Last bit was just a sail across the passage to the power boat club and I didn't put the paddle in the water until I got near Military Jetty and only had 300m to go. It was a very relieving feeling to hit the beach there. I was so pleased that I had taken the decision to start from the power Boat Club and not town where I had originally planned. I wouldn't have looked forward to another 3.5k's into that wind.

Did I say I was stuffed? I couldn't drag the loaded kayak off the beach up into the park, so unloaded it an armful at a time. I found a friendly boatie to help me get it on the racks as just wasn't capable of doing it by myself. And didn't the car aircon feel great! I didn't bring a wash down hose with me as I changed plan, so on arriving home had to wash the car as well. That didn't really matter as the old Conondale had no breeze so another play with water wasn't that bad.

Dehydrated? You bet. I tried hard to keep up the input. I'm not sure of the litres I drank but after Gallaghers had a bottle with a Staminade mix, and an insulated colder one I had been saving for the really hot part, as well as a couple of others. Yesterday was a wipe out, spent mostly on the lounge sleeping through the cricket and just checking my gutters in the rain. Today (Monday) isn't so bad but still feeling the heat effects. Muscles aren't too bad, a little sore as I would expect but not painful or anything, I just know I had a good workout. While moderately fit, I think this also has a bit to do with a good technique and using the core muscles. And the hands weren't too bad although a little sore in places by the finish.

How would this have worked as the original plan as a club paddle? I don't think *anyone* would have enjoyed it! I'm not even sure I enjoyed it - yet - ask me next week. It was a challenge in the conditions. If I was going to put this on as a club paddle again, especially grade 1, I think we would have to be flexible to start at either end depending on wind direction. I couldn't put anyone through that in those conditions.

Why did I do it? Seemed like a good idea at the time. I didn't really think of the night run down until about Thursday. That just sounded like a bit of fun. Then I had to do the return trip. I did have a chat with Tony before I committed myself to this and knew what I was getting myself into. Maybe just a little crazy. I do have in the back of my mind to do the Hawkesbury Classic. It won't be this year but you just sometimes need something to work towards. When I got near the end of this one, realised that the Hawkesbury distance is adding another leg back to Bongaree on top of what I just did. Maybe not as trying conditions but it would be a good place to train for something like that with navigation in the dark and distances, testing clothing and nutrition etc.

And one more thing to finish. Sometimes I think that challenging yourself in hard conditions sets you up for when a special opportunity comes along. Maybe like when my mate Boyd and I did the 14 day trip from Mackay to Airlie Beach last year, or a crossing to Moreton. You get to really appreciate the beauty around you and the kayak you are in is just an extension of yourself and you aren't even thinking of the paddling. That's the reward for all these efforts and the drills we do as a club.

Safe paddling - Mal