

More Manx Miles
Isle of Man Circumnavigation record attempt
July 2010

Well, nobody can accuse me of not knowing how to show a girl a good time! It was a grey Sunday morning, blowing a hoolie and we were staring out through sleepy eyes at a tide race. We had arrived on the Isle of Man with a couple of fast boats on the roof and an aim to improve on Freya Hoffmeister's record for the circumnavigation of the island; but things didn't look too good...

Once we had settled in the first priority was to phone the Weather Forecaster at Ronaldsway Airport. I explained what I was aiming to do and how long I would need. What would he suggest? The reply was quick and confident, "Go on Monday, it will be the only chance you get!" Hmmm, this was a bit soon, no chance of a few days rest? "If you don't go Monday you'll have the whole week to rest – the forecast is for 25-30mph winds for the remainder of the week." Good point, well presented...

And so we found ourselves walking along the coastline on Sunday staring out at the conditions, taking note of the tidal flows through Calf Sound and around Langness – it was quite lumpy out there. In particular the large breaking rollers making their way up the tide race at Langness made me feel a little uneasy, compounded by the way they seemed to stretch out all the way to the horizon. There was no way around this one. At best they looked like providing a rather lumpy ride, at worst it may be prudent to book a dental appointment in nearby Castletown to replace a few fillings! Was this wind over tide or was it always like this? I really wish I knew.



But in best wild water racing tradition a sneak route was spotted down the inside – game on. A quick cross at the top of the race, down the shoulders, dodge the small race forming at right angles further down, stay out of the eddy, then back into the flow and Bob's related somewhere.

After Langness, Calf Sound seemed a bit of a disappointment – paddle through, get wet. A bit splashy but no real drama.

With the trip being brought forward, the remainder of the day became a blur of last minute planning, packing, faff and indecision! Every half hour I looked rather skeptically out of the window at the trees bowing in the wind. Monday would be calm, so the man said...

Ah yes, the planning... this one had been quite tricky. Other than a very brief trip earlier in the year I had not paddled the Isle of Man before. I knew very little of the tides. This left an uncomfortable number of gaps in my knowledge that needed filling, hence wandering around windy cliff tops earlier in the day. In order to improve on Freya's record of 14 hours and 6 minutes it was important to find a good start point and tide phase. Keirron Tastagh from Adventurous Experiences had furnished me with some useful local knowledge, but our conversations had been all too brief. His warning that the Yachting Pilot was sometimes a little vague for a sea kayaker still stuck in my mind.

All too soon the day had arrived and we were carrying the boat down the beach at the intriguingly named *The Cronk*. I was 15 minutes late, as usual, but things looked good out there. The forecast for light and variable winds was matched by the flat and calm conditions, a complete contrast to the previous day – nice one Mr. Ronaldsway!



And so with a blur of stop watch buttons and a quick wave goodbye the paddle started; ahead lay 115km of the Manx coastline. After nearly a year of paddling prototype boats this was to be the first serious outing for the production version of the new Rockpool Taran – it would be interesting to see what lay ahead.

As I settled into my rhythm I came across numerous seals bottling in the early dawn just off the sandy coastline. I attempted to glide silently past using my best technique, but more often than not their hearing was better than my paddling!

As I neared Point of Ayre the conditions were still calm but I was now working into a gentle headwind; over to the side I could clearly see the hills of both Scotland and Northern Ireland. Nearby I watched a couple of porpoises working the eddy line and on the other side I looked over to the impressive lighthouses amid the copious and curious amounts of shingle. Rounding the point the GPS touched 9 kts and it was pleasing to see that I was a few minutes up on time. Now I could also see the Lake District mountains, what a view!

Heading south the breeze was picking up along with a slight swell, but things were still going smoothly as I aimed for Maughold Head. Crossing Ramsey Bay my left leg started to go numb, not good at such an early stage. The padding on the seat was a little too tight it seemed and would have to go. The swell suddenly seemed to increase as I made a few tentative alterations with my knife, a tricky procedure afloat when your bum is still fixed firmly in said seat. Soon there was a little more room and the reassurance of pins and needles as the blood returned into my leg.



At Maughold Head the picturesque lighthouse perched precariously on the cliffs, making for an impressive sight – it was pleasing to make out a small figure stood on the top of the cliffs waving to me. I

assumed it was Pascale and not just some early morning eccentric who enjoyed waving out to sea from the cliff tops! I was a few minutes down now but it was no real problem, my tidal plan was a little vague here anyway.

As I rounded Maughold Head I expected the tide to pick up a steadily – it didn't. Keirron was right.

Things were slowing down and quite markedly so. Heading south the speed was depressingly low and a few calculations showed that at this rate I would be lucky to finish before the Fish & Chip shop closed, never mind improving on the record! Over the next 60 minute leg I lost 30 minutes! It was tiring and demoralising as I scratched my way along the cliffs near Clay Head, looking for any agreeable flow.

More time was lost and as I closed on Douglas Head I was nearly an hour down! But then things began to pick up as the tide finally joined me. The gentle swell was bouncing off the cliffs, no real problem but just enough to interfere with a smooth stroke. Even so the speed was nudging nicely upwards now as I cruised down the coast towards Langness. Holding 6kts or so I was steadily clawing some time back.

Twenty-four hours earlier the tide race at Langness had looked foreboding, but as much as I looked I couldn't see the expected whitecaps. I moved over to the right early in order to get ready for the sneak route. But as I neared the entry the conditions looked a lot friendlier than expected - straight down the middle then. As soon as I hit the tide race the Taran came alive; it just glided through the waves so smoothly. Like a thoroughbred it just wanted to be given more rein. As I passed Scarlett Point I had regained more of the lost time, I was now only 20 minutes down.



Dodging the eddy beyond the point it was 7 kts all the way towards Spanish Point. Or it should have been; a combination of daydreaming and fatigue actually meant I was heading to the Calf of Man until I

belatedly realised. I cursed my lack of concentration as I swung inwards towards my true destination, but looking at the flow I realised that staying out had done me little harm.

Sneaking below the cliffs I paddled to a pre-planned stop in a narrow and rocky gully, to find Pascale perched atop a sunny rock. Laid out there awaiting me was food, drink and dry clothes, a very welcome sight. My breaks always take too long, so in this case we set an alarm to sound every 5 minutes. It did and it didn't make any difference! The break took just as long as always but at least I knew how quickly time was going by.

It was a slippery scramble to relaunch, and then out through Calf Sound. It was disappointingly relaxed through the main channel as I crossed the eddies searching for the remains of the north bound flow. There was now a stiff head wind and with little help from the tide it was going to be a slog. The lunch stop had put me further behind the plan, but that was to be expected. The next stage would be a bit of a grind up towards Niarbyl and then onto the tantalising hope of tidal assistance beyond Contrary Head.

The eddy behind the reef at Niarbyl gave a false hope of a bit of flow but it was dashed as I worked against the tide at the headland. It was all getting to be a bit of tedious by now, there were a few more hours to go and the figures still didn't look too impressive for the record.

Contrary Head looked like an intriguing piece of coastline, well worth a return visit to potter around someday. But all I wanted now was a bit of flow to help me along, the name promised as such but the expected tide didn't materialise as I rounded the headland.



Now I could see the impressive view of Peel Castle, perhaps there was tide there? I could see a small figure below the ramparts waving madly; it made me chuckle as I thought of the people standing near Pascale - watching this mad woman once again waving furiously out towards a seemingly empty sea.



As I passed Peel the tide was finally moving in my favour again. The finish line wasn't quite in sight but I was definitely homeward bound. The featureless coastline didn't make for easy navigation – now was the time to trust in the GPS. It was interesting to see how time seemingly contracted and dilated throughout the day; my final burn started with just under an hour to go – usually something that only lasts a matter of minutes!

And then as I pushed beyond the line it was all over. I looked across to the slipway, waiting for it to line up with the chimney of the house beyond - that was it, I had finished. The time showed as 12 hours 38 minutes and 3 seconds; the GPS showed a distance of 62.6 nm (115.9 km) and it had been a long day.



It *had* been a long day and not all of it had gone to plan. But I had learned a lot on the way around and though I was a little disappointed with my performance I was pleased that the final time was only 8 minutes down on the plan. Not too bad I suppose.

Of course with a few changes there is time to come off that. Don't be shy now...

Many Thanks to:

- Rockpool Kayaks
- Pete Baars of Summit to Sea
- Phoenix Spraydecks

And of course, Pascale

John Willacy

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Sample photos at: <http://angleseypaddling.jalbum.net/Isle%20of%20Man%20Circumnavigation2010/>