

# AROUND PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND, CANADA

## OR: KNOWING WHEN TO BAIL OUT

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### **A celebratory loop around the island**

When Nancy and I visited PEI this past February, we were truly impressed to see an island totally engulfed in ice: the 9-mile-wide Northumberland Strait, as well as the entire North Shore, the usually wide-open Gulf of St. Lawrence, were frozen shut as far as the eye could see. All bays and harbors were iced in, no boat in sight, except on land, waiting for Spring to come.

It had been a historic winter, with record snowfalls as well as record low temperatures. But thanks to the new (1997) bridge, the island was functioning just fine, except for the fact that there was only one seafood restaurant open on the entire island: the Claddagh Oyster House in Charlottetown. But we noticed that Charlottetown and the island were already gearing up for a big celebration a few months hence, the sesquicentennial (150 years) of the Charlottetown Conference of 1864, which led to the eventual formation of Canada.

It looked like a real big deal with lots of festivities, and I thought to myself: "Wouldn't it be nice to be part of it, like paddling a celebratory loop around the island, once the ice thaws." I had canoed around the entire island before, in stages, finishing my last 3-day stint at North Cape (where I had started) in the year 2000. "About 400 miles around – I can still do that," I thought confidently. "I know and love this place like a real old friend."

### **Towards Seacow Head Light**

So, come June, a few days before Father's Day, Nancy and I were off for Charlottetown, where my trip was to start and end. The newly painted North River lighthouse is such a significant place, just a tad north of Victoria Park and the Governor's Mansion, where the Conference took place. I knew there even was a small lane right down to the water's edge for an easy put-in/take-out. The ice was gone, and spirits were high, as I pushed off, just as a big cruise ship entered the inner harbor through the outer gap at Fort Amherst/Port-la-Joye.

Nancy watched through field glasses as my little Verlen Kruger solo sea canoe disappeared, turning right for a clockwise circumnavigation of the island province. I had set myself a daily goal of 20 miles, which I maintained all the way to the most western end of the island, West Point.

My first night out I camped on a thin strip of sand at Black Head, with the ubiquitous steep red sandstone shore behind me. Day two provided some great views of the elegant 9-mile-long bridge, but the wind had picked up, and the tide was running hard around the many breakwaters of Borden Harbor, and under the bridge itself. I had wanted to touch one of the big "feet" of the bridge with my paddle, as I had done on my previous trip around the island, but I had enough to do to stay upright in the tidal chop and just to make it under the bridge.

After a brief lunch stop in the lee of the approach ramp to the bridge on the NW side, I headed for the next big point, Seacow Head Light. Over the years I had learned that points are best rounded in the early morning calm, and not in the much windier afternoon. There was a lovely sandy beach in the bight before the lighthouse. No private houses anywhere, but the beach was shoaling and running dry fast. I had to get out in a hurry and hope that the morning flood tide would pick me up from my beach abode – which it did.

The lighthouse itself is very picturesque, sitting on a spectacular bluff of red sandstone. I had to take a picture or two, which is always a big deal: set up the boat in the right spot for the perfect shot, take off your paddling gloves, finagle your day pouch (with sunscreen, glasses, granola bar, bug net and camera) out of the netted shelf below the sprayskirt and deck beside your left knee, open the pouch zipper, get the camera out of its zip-lock bag and case, turn on the camera, and, if you are still in the perfect spot, shoot! After that, you do the same, only in reverse – so you see, taking a picture is always a big deal.

## **Towards Cape Egmont**

The morning was overcast, the wind very light, and I made good progress to the long Summerside breakwater and from there almost due west towards Cape Egmont, my next significant point. But since I did not find a suitable beach for my tent before the cape, I rounded it and ducked into Cape Egmont Harbor. It had a very protected boat ramp, which made taking out and putting in the next morning easy. Since the lobster season had not started along the western half of PEI, there was only one boat in the harbor. Most boats, I learned, were fishing for mackerel along the North Shore. So I carried my gear up the ramp and pitched my tent just a tad to the side. I had a great view of the lighthouse and enjoyed a splendid sunset. Life was good, I thought to myself.

The weather report that night, though, predicted strong winds and rain for the next couple of days. How bad can it be, I wondered. I had paddled around the outside of Nova Scotia and even up the western shore of Newfoundland. In all my literally thousands of ocean miles, I can count the wind days on one hand. OK, I had occasionally been forced to cut my daily goals short, but not very often.

## **Towards West Point**

Next morning started gray, and the sky was dark with rain. I donned my Gore-Tex rain suit and even my wide-brimmed rain hat. And as I pushed off, the rains already began to come down. The easterly winds made me hug shore as I headed north, deep into Egmont Bay, so I would not be blown out to sea.

I was very apprehensive about the many-miles-long sandbars off Maximeville, where I had found miles and miles of impenetrable surf the two years I paddled by here (finishing one stint one year and starting my last stint to North Cape the next, in 2000). The tide was still calm this morning, and all went well all the way up Egmont Bay to Percival River. At that point the wind had shifted to the southeast, and I felt OK taking a short-cut across the bay. With the wind from behind now, a 3-mile crossing to Grande Dique Point should not be too bad.

The first mile was fun. Then the rain let loose, and the wind increased significantly, forming big breaking rollers in no time. During the last mile of my crossing I was drenched in sweat, paddling as hard as I could, occasionally bracing right and left, watching the waves like a hawk, as they tried to pass me from behind. I knew I was committed and had to fight it out, which I did, but I cursed my decision and promised myself never to short-cut anything wider than a mile, in strong winds and tide.

The wind increased even more as I followed the shore towards Brae Harbour, where I was blown behind several long barrier sandspit islands towards West Point. Even in these more sheltered waters, the waves were breaking fiercely, and the tops were flying off. I went deeper and deeper behind the long, low sandspit islands, till I finally ran out of water and had to pull out. To my surprise, big Egmont Bay was only 30 feet to the left of that last sandspit. Great, I thought. I can pitch my tent amongst the dune grass here, and when the wind calms down, I can put in on the bay side - no backtracking necessary, to get out from behind those barrier islands.

Setting up my tent in that wind was challenging, but I had done it many times before: weigh down the limp tent with all gear before inserting and erecting the pole-frame. I also left one heavy 10 liter water bottle and one heavy food crate in the boat so it would not fly away. And I always tie it up for the night. Since there were no trees or heavy rocks around, I tied my boat to my tent frame.

## **Towards hypothermia**

I was wet with perspiration from paddling so hard in my Gore-Tex suit, as well as wet from the driving rain. But I got into my tent fine, dried off, got into my polypropylene long underwear, wool socks and watch cap, and crawled into my sleeping bag. It was also getting noticeably colder. My tent was whacking violently in the strong gusty wind, threatening to self-destruct. According to my weather report, it was blowing 30 knots, with higher gusts, and it sounded as if it would continue to do so for 48 more hours. I tried to ignore it, while I started my propane stove beside me in my tent and enjoyed a cup of coffee, followed by a cup of cocoa.

Supper was fine also, but rain was beginning to force its way through the zippers along doors and windows, creating a fine mist in my tent, which inevitably settled on top of my sleeping bag. Then the drips started, which I initially tried to catch in my cooking pot, dish, sponge and towel. But before

long, practically everything was wet: my socks, my polys, my sleeping bag, and the rain water was pooling around my Thermarest mattress. It felt like riding a surfboard. I finally got out my aluminum-lined survival blanket, covering everything in my tent, and tried to fall asleep.

### **A Father's Day not to remember**

Morning could not come soon enough, as I was wet, cold and stiff. My thermometer showed temperatures in the 40s, and my morale also was at a new low. The condensate, which had formed on the underside of the aluminum blanket, had made things even worse. The alu-blanket had kept me somewhat warmer, but also got me much wetter. All night I was afraid my rainfly would be ripped off and my tent reduced to a shredded tarp. Not a promising, uplifting picture.

And then it dawned on me: this is Father's Day. Hurray! But I had nothing to cheer about. The rain continued all day; so did the gusty wind. I was pinned down on that thin sandspit, being hit from all sides, while the waves were crashing on the Egmont Bay side of my sandy perch. This was so different from my six earlier stints around the island, which were all done around Father's Day and left me with many very positive memories. (See my article "A Father's Day Special" on my website HYPERLINK "<http://www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com/>" www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com ).

I made it through the long day, though, huddled in my tent, and the following night also; the bad weather never let up. That night I just told Nancy, on our brief pre-arranged call via satellite phone, that I had not moved an inch, but was OK, even though wet and cold. I then tried to cheer myself up with positive thoughts and recalling happy events of fatherhood, having raised four kids, but as it is in every family, numerous low points also popped up, which did not help lift my spirits at all. Even reading yet another Clive Cussler adventure story did not do it. I was fading fast.

Needless to say, I had a miserable night. I do not think I slept at all. I was too busy shivering from the wet and cold and being pounded into submission by the relentless, aggressively gusty wind. By 7:00 a.m. Atlantic time (6:00 a.m. EST/Maine time), on the third day of this ordeal, however, I finally pulled myself together and decided **the trip was over**. I felt hypothermia creeping up my legs and sides and beginning to dull my senses. I had read enough about hypothermia and heard nasty, downright dangerous accounts from paddling friends, so that I decided to make a good decision while I still could. 48 hours of that torrential rain, storm winds and continuous cold (below 50° F.) were all my body and mind could tolerate.

### **The bail-out**

The weather report for the next couple of days was also not very encouraging: more strong winds, now from the north, veering to the northwest, exactly my direction of travel. The rain had stopped for a brief moment, but the strong wind warning was still up, as was the small craft advisory, of course.

From my previous rounding of the western edge of PEI I remember writing: "Round this corner only in the best of weather, especially North Cape with its mile-long bar extending NW into the Gulf of St. Lawrence." In a brief 3-minute call I told Nancy that I had decided to paddle the remaining 6 miles to West Point Harbor, leave my boat there and walk the mile to the lighthouse, which, we had both read, had an inn connected to it, where I could dry off and warm up. Nancy agreed 100% with my decision – what a sweetheart! As a matter of fact, she even offered to pick me up "today!" and to try to be there by nightfall, after the long drive from Orono, Maine.

I suddenly felt very relieved to have made the decision and to have talked to Nancy, and I felt somehow reenergized by her support. I quickly rolled up my wet sleeping bag, packed all my gear back into my waterproof bags (most of it never made it out), loaded my boat, climbed in and pushed off. At that moment, things felt right again.

The wind had already veered to the north, which meant it was an off-shore breeze, at about 20 knots or so, with higher gusts as before. I crabbed my way to the west (i.e. steering NW, while actually going west with the strong northerly), making sure I would not get blown too far out into the bay. Almost two hours later I entered the harbor of West Point, pulled out at the boat ramp and secured everything. Except for two fishing boats, the harbor was empty, especially the pleasure boat slips. I figured my boat and gear should be safe till later that afternoon when I could pick it up.

I walked the mile to the lighthouse, got a nice room with a view of the ocean, took a hot shower, had a couple of cups of hot coffee, and soon began to feel a lot better. I even found a helpful person with a car, who car-shuttled me back to my boat, so I could pick up some of my essential gear,

especially my electronics and a change of dry clothes. I had a granola bar for lunch, since the inn did not have a dining room. I then walked the beach, took some pictures and watched the Canadian TV coverage of the World Cup soccer matches in Brazil. Life was good again.

I estimated Nancy's time of arrival to be 7:30 p.m. PEI time. So I hopefully walked out to the parking lot looking for our white VW Passat to arrive – and there she came, 3 minutes early. What a girl! (By the way, we just celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary!). We turned right around to pick up my boat and gear at the harbor ramp. Everything was exactly as I had left it. Then life was lovely in the inn. Nancy's PB&J sandwiches for supper never tasted better.

### **Lessons learned**

Well, the weather stayed dry the following day as we drove to the North Shore at Cavendish, our favorite stretch of the island. We eventually ended up in Charlottetown, as I had originally planned, even though by car and not in my trusty Verlen Kruger solo sea canoe. Ah well! But I was proud of myself for knowing when to quit. This was extremely rare in all my many trips, and not easy for me. But hypothermia is nothing to ignore. It can have dire consequences. Please remember that also, my paddling friends out there!

Steamed mussels and a large glass of Guinness at the Claddagh Oyster House and Irish Pub in Charlottetown tasted almost as good as they did at the beginning of this trip. So you see, all's well that ends well!

PS: After returning to Maine, I followed the weather reports for PEI. It's a fact: people there had not only one of the fiercest winters on record, but also one of the worst Junes: lots of rain, cold temperatures and strong, gusty winds, mostly northerlies. That would have been very challenging for my trip, had I somehow continued, or it would have necessitated many more wind/rain days ashore, something I do not really enjoy. So it seemed I did not really miss anything glorious in this year's harsh June weather window. In retrospect, I still believe it was a good decision to stop my trip in West Point Harbor, after only 86 miles ... but to be honest, I am still quite disappointed.

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