

AROUND NEW ENGLAND AND THE CANADIAN MARITIMES

IN A SOLO SEA CANOE

A SUMMARY

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The island concept

When asked by other paddlers, where I have done most of my long-distance paddling, I tell them that I have paddled around New England and the Canadian Maritimes. “Me too”, is normally the answer, “some stretches in New Hampshire, Maine and even up in Nova Scotia”. I smile, and notice that maybe I should have said: “I circumnavigated all New England states and most of the Canadian maritime provinces, a 4,000 mile loop...and also in many other places”.

At that point I am mostly staring at blank faces, of paddlers who cannot picture any of what I just said. How can a 60+ year old guy go 4,000 miles solo in a 17 foot sea canoe, totally unassisted, mostly on the Atlantic ocean. And what about that “loop around New England and the Canadian Maritimes bit. It is no island I ever heard of”.

You are right. It does not stand out like a clear island, like Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Iceland or the British Isles. And yes, I could have added that I did not do it in one long trip, but over seven summers (roughly one 1,000-miler and six 500-milers). I was still teaching and could not take off more time from school and family duties. But if you look at a map, you will notice that it can be done: you can navigate a boat around all those states and provinces in one big loop, without a single portage.

I got intrigued about that option when I was reading about Howard Blackburn, dory fisherman and solo sailor extraordinaire from Medway, Nova Scotia and Gloucester, Massachusetts. One of his sailing trips was “the inner loop”, as he called it, from New York, up the Hudson River into the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes to Chicago, and from there via the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers into the Gulf of Mexico. Then, hanging a left at its mouth, he eventually rounded Florida and sailed back up the Atlantic to New York (see Joseph Garland: *Lone Voyager*). A young rower recently retraced Howard's route in a modern rowing skiff, as you can read in Nat Stone's *On the Water*.

The “Outer Loop”

A great story! But my heart is in the northeast of the US and in maritime Canada, not on the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. So I wondered what would happen if those boaters had gone northeast instead of west, when they got to Albany and Troy on the Hudson River. What if they had not taken the Erie Canal, but rather the Champlain Canal, into Lake Champlain and from there into the Richelieu River, the Chambly Canal and into the St. Lawrence eventually. All you have to do then is hang a right in Sorel, paddle past Québec City, get around the Gaspé peninsula, paddle along New Brunswick's Gulf of St. Lawrence shore and around Nova Scotia eventually. In Digby, prudence will dictate taking the 3-hour ferry ride across the Bay of Fundy to St. John,

New Brunswick. But from there it is a more or less straight hitch down the Atlantic coast back to New York and the Hudson River. So you see, it can be done.

Strange as it may sound, all 6 New England states and 2 of the Canadian maritime provinces (New Brunswick and Nova Scotia; Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland being islands already) form an “island” you can paddle, row, sail or motor around. This “outer loop”, as I like to call it, is a big one like Blackburn’s “inner loop”, about 4,000 miles around. (German ocean kayaker Freya Hoffmeister might scoff at that after having circumnavigated Australia and South America, but to my knowledge, nobody has paddled my “outer loop” solo and unassisted.)

But getting back to my “modest” 4,000-mile loop. Right from the beginning I was intrigued by the varied terrain I would come through, as well as the strands of history of our early explorers that I would encounter. There were John Cabot, Jacques Cartier, Samuel de Champlain, Henry Hudson and George Waymouth, not to mention the more seasonal Basque, Spanish, French and British fishermen. And let’s not forget the Vikings, who landed at L’Anse aux Meadows, at the northern tip of Newfoundland, around the year 1,000. I had read so much about that area that I was very eager to get started. And why not start with a big bang, a 1,000-miler. I wanted to make a statement as a 60-year-old geezer (in 1999), a “pencil pusher” (professor), but also a trained athlete.

Yes, I was able to pull it off without a hitch, no mishap or damage to boat, body or soul. I averaged 27 miles a day for 37 days in my first 1,000-mile stint. That equates to 37 marathon distances in a row with only one stop-over in Québec City for re-supplying. And as usual on my trips, I stopped at no motels or commercial campgrounds, no stores, no marinas, except for topping off my two 10-liter water containers - a very frugal, focussed affair.

The trip begins

I could have started my loop anywhere, but I chose Lake Champlain to give myself a chance to get ready for the big St. Lawrence and the open Atlantic eventually. The 150-mile long lake was very scenic with its mountains along both the western and eastern shores, accentuating any blow from the north or south. The Richelieu River and the 9-mile Chambly Canal, which avoids the river stretch of the “mile roche”, the 1,000 rocks, and a couple of hydro dams, were absolutely delightful, and oh so French. I loved it. Getting out into the St. Lawrence at Sorel was a different story. The “Canada River” as it was formerly known, is now a mighty seaway with huge freighters and bulk carriers. No vessel smaller than 20', weighing less than 2,000 pounds, without a motor, is allowed in the locks, as I found out on a later trip from the last of the Great Lakes to Québec City. But no locks and no problem now. The St. Lawrence is free-flowing from Montreal, and it is much bigger than I had pictured. However, in places it was choked with islands, making navigating quite challenging. You need real NOAA charts; no road or fishing maps, please!

Past Québec City the river gets real big, 30 miles wide at its mouth. And “the tides they were a-ripping” around each point. I was taxed to the max, especially rounding the formidable, steep, rocky cliffs of Cape Gaspé, the “end of the world” in Mi’kmaq. The Canadian national park Forillon at its tip also forbids paddlers to camp anywhere along its 25-mile long shoreline, which turns this corner into a real nightmare.

I was dancing all right. So paddlers, watch out!

New Brunswick's Gulf of St. Lawrence shore is quite different from the steep, rocky Gaspé peninsula. I encountered about 300 miles of sandy beaches, great for swimmers, but not always for boaters, since the shore break could extend way out to sea in any wind, making landing very taxing.

Near the bridge to Prince Edward Island (built in 1997) the New Brunswick shoreline changes yet again, turning mostly into rusty-brown sandstone, almost all the way to Canso Strait, the 10-mile-long arm separating Cape Breton Island from the rest of Nova Scotia. This island is one of my all-time favorites, but also one of the most challenging paddling venues. The shores are steep, take-outs for the night are hard to come by, and the northern tip into Cabot Strait (pointing towards Newfoundland) is real rough and foreboding, trust me. But it intrigued me a lot, because it may have been the place where John Cabot first landed in the New World (in 1497), and not on Newfoundland, as many historians maintain. Sailing latitudes, John Cabot must have headed for the northern tip of Newfoundland OK, since it is on the same latitude as his point of departure, Dursey Head, the southwestern-most cape of the British Isles, at 50° 40'. But he missed his target in a northeast storm, we hear, and all of Newfoundland, as a matter of fact, and thus must have eventually landed on Cape Breton Island. (Read more about it in my article "John Cabot's Prima Terra Vista" on my website.)

When I did my 1,000-miler, prudence and time dictated that I postpone Cape Breton Island for a later date. At that point it was too daunting and intimidating. However, it stayed on my mind, and at age 68 I finally did it, and the following year I paddled up the western shore of Newfoundland as well. Yes, I made it all the way up to L'Anse aux Meadows, the "Bay of Jellyfish" ("Meadows" being a British corruption of the French word "méduse", meaning jelly-fish). Around 1,000, the Vikings landed here also. But that is a different story.

Finally the open Atlantic

Rounding Cape Canso at the eastern end of Canso Strait (Nova Scotia), the open Atlantic hits you with a jolt and refuses to let go of you. Waves and swells are so much bigger, and in summer the wind is mostly in your face, from the SW, at a constant 15-25 knots. And then there is fog, lots of it, which makes navigating by dead-reckoning amongst the many islands and around the headlands a real challenge. I paddled about 550 miles along Nova Scotia's rugged coast, till I rounded into the Bay of Fundy at Cape Sable Island, taking out at Digby eventually. After the ferry ride across that notorious bay, I mostly rode the ebb tide back to Maine from St. John, New Brunswick. Maine with its Maine Island Trail was very familiar territory for me. And oh, what a relief it was to find legal overnight spots on the many islands of the trail (see the MITA Trail Guide). This was much harder on the more exposed stretch between Boston and Portland, and even more so towards the stretch to New York: PRIVATE, KEEP OFF! However, I managed fine with my stealth camping. On my 4,000-mile trip I was thrown out only three times: once in the Canadian National Park in Gaspé (Forillon), then on an unmarked military recreational area south of Boston, and again at the Columbia University rowing club on the Harlem River, New York, despite my written permission to camp there.

That was a hard night, believe me, waiting for 3:00 a.m., my starting time towards

formidable Hells Gate, where I had to hit dead low tide (at 5:00 a.m.) in order to flush though the turbulent narrows into Long Island Sound. The rest of my last 500-mile stint from Lake Champlain to Boston went fine, even though the Connecticut and Massachusetts shoreline scenery was extremely boring: one beach house next to the other. It was a relief to see Nancy at my take-out at Revere Beach/Boston. With this, the last segment of my big “outer loop” was complete. I had done most of my segments in a clockwise direction; only the stretch from Lake Champlain to Boston and up to Machias, Maine was done in the other direction, because of prevailing winds, river flow and ocean tidal considerations.

Summary

So there you have it. My “outer loop” is an island, and there are no portages whatsoever. Did I ever worry I would not be able to finish my trip? Not really, because I never set myself up for failure and only concentrate on one segment at a time, often only one mile, the next point of land and so on. Every stretch is carefully researched ahead of time, with my NOAA nautical charts and Coast Guard Sailing Directions. All pertinent information is transferred to my charts, as well as all danger and take-out spots marked with a magic marker. And I always have a plan B. So “failure is not an option”. As you can see, I am no drifter “going with the flow”, but a prudent planner. I maintain that success is no accident, but is carefully planned. I carry a VHF radio to get the latest weather report or use it to hail other boats, marinas or locks. I also have a personal locator beacon, SPOT, which I press whenever I land, so that my family can see exactly where I am on the Google Earth satellite map. And each afternoon at 5:00 p.m. I call Nancy on my old Iridium satellite phone for a quick, 3-minute safety check-in.

To some people, my trips sound rough and reckless, but to me, they really aren't that extreme. OK, I travel solo, since I found out that traveling with a partner or in a group is usually more of a liability for me than a safety net. (Yes, I do enjoy paddling with family or a close friend, but not on my more demanding long trips.) I am well equipped, informed and in shape. I know what I can or can't do, and am prudent enough to bail out when necessary. Nobody pushes or goads me into situations I don't like. I am solely responsible for myself. **I AM IT**, and I am fully aware of that. Thus for me, going solo is the ultimate challenge, offering ultimate rewards. I like it that way.

Happy paddling, my friends,
make good decisions, be safe and enjoy.

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For more detailed trip reports with pictures and charts/maps go to:
www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com

Boat: 17'2" Verlen Kruger Sea Wind sea canoe with Zaveral bent-shaft carbon fiber canoe paddle

Maine Island Trail Association: check out: www.mita.org

Joseph Garland: *Lone Voyager*.

Nat Stone: *On the Water*.