

RESTORING A BROKEN SPIRIT

Circumnavigation of the Falkland Islands

by Marcus Demuth

For more information about the trip stats and itinerary, see the website www oceanpaddlermagazine.com

Windy islands

The average annual wind speed in the Falkland Islands is 24 miles/hr. By comparison, Plymouth, UK averages an annual wind speed of only 6 miles/hr. During the preparations for the trip, I learned about a number of British, US and German kayak teams who tried to circumnavigate the Falkland Islands in the past. The almost constant high winds created by the West Wind Drift, the winds directed in a continuous clockwise movement around Antarctica, meant these earlier trips ended in failure. These numbers and statistics were backed up shortly after I landed in Stanley, where I stepped out of the plane and was immediately greeted by strong winds in which I could hardly walk. The numerous Union Jacks in front of the small houses made of corrugated steel were stretched to their limits and were flapping loudly during my first two days in Stanley while preparing for the launch.

Leiv Poncet, a kayaker and sailor living in the Falkland Islands, recommended avoiding paddling during the afternoon when winds are strongest. I should seize every hour for paddling whenever the winds are down, a phenomenon which occurs only "about two or three days a year" according to Leiv. Slightly intimidated both by Leiv's comments and the strong winds which blew through Stanley, I decided to build my paddling schedule and periods of rest entirely around the weather and winds. On most days during my trip around the Falklands this resulted in a paddling schedule from 03:00–10:00 and a second paddle in the evening from 18:00–22:00. The advantage of this paddling schedule was that I not only avoided the strongest periods of winds during the day, but it also provided me a fresh start in the evening after having paddled 7 hours in the morning. By the time I hit the water in the evening, the morning paddle was already a distant memory.

Paul Caffyn describes a similar paddling schedule in his book Dreamtime Voyage about his groundbreaking circumnavigation of Australia. He mentions his elaborate

lunch breaks with long and lazy afternoon naps. He somehow managed all this while making enormous mileage on most of his paddling days. I realized Paul made this high daily mileage not despite these bohemian lunch breaks, but because of them. It seems he made a habit of dividing his day into two six-or-so hour paddling shifts, which enabled him to start refreshed twice a day. Encouraged by Leiv, I happily adopted Paul's strategy for my trip around the Falklands. However, this paddling schedule has its disadvantages. It meant that I would never have a long, full period of rest and the daily trip logistics would double. I had to set up camp twice a day, carry the kayak and kit up and down the cliffs twice a day and I had to launch and land twice a day.

Additional challenge

When stepping ashore on the Falklands, a highly unpleasant challenge awaits the paddler. At present there are 117 minefields within the islands. Both Leiv and the Lonely Planet guide recommended I pick up an updated mine chart from the local police station to avoid landing on a beach which may still have mines planted by the Argentinian Forces in 1982 during the Falklands War. The previous week a yacht passing through the Falklands had been about to land on such a beach with their Zodiac, but was chased away just in time by a farmer who saw them. The local police station referred me to Andy, the commander of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit of the local British Forces. Andy gave me copies of the mine charts and showed me examples of unexploded ordnance and munition that I might find on beaches and further inland during my trip. He recommended that I avoid stepping on them. To make his point, Andy showed me photographs of people who have stepped on one of the 25,000 remaining land mines from the Falklands War. Most of these people were missing one or two of their legs. Andy had no need to urge me to move with utmost caution.

The Falkland Islands are located between latitudes 51–53°S and longitudes 57–62°W in the South Atlantic Ocean, approximately 300 miles west of Cape Horn. The 776 islands of the archipelago, with only 499 of them named and the vast majority of them uninhabited, create a maze-like landscape. Both on a chart and from the cockpit of the kayak, the shoreline looks like a most urgent invitation for kayakers to paddle around the Falklands with its numerous little channels, islands, passes, bays and natural harbours.

Ninety percent of the population of the Falkland Islands, approximately 2,200 people, live in its capital Stanley. Approximately 200 people, the rest of the population, live in 'camp' anywhere outside of Stanley. Camp has settlements consisting of one to several farm buildings and their inhabitants live mostly off sheep farming. The Falklands have a cool, oceanic climate dominated by westerly winds. Exposed to these strong westerly winds, the islands are prone to williwaws – sudden blasts of wind descending from cliffs or mountains into the sea. These gusts, with wind speeds up to 90 miles/hr (known as 'woollies' in the Falklands), are so powerful that they often pick up water from the surface and blast it in the form of spray either upwards or horizontal over the water surface. The annual temperature range is pretty narrow, between an average of 7°C in the winter and 10°C in the summer. This looks quite mild on paper, but the almost permanent wind-chill factor make temperatures plummet below freezing even in the summer.

Expedition underway

Two days after arriving in Stanley I was finally ready. I had completed all food purchases; packed the two food drop packages which would be dropped off by a twin engine FIGAS (Falkland Islands Government Air Service) plane on islands located one-third and two-thirds along the way; and I had sat numerous times with Leiv, Mairi and his friend John Fowler over drinks to discuss the risks I would face during my trip around the windy archipelago. I was also told of the beauty of the land, the type and amount of wildlife and the hospitality and the special way of life I would encounter in the isolated settlements on my journey around the 776 islands.

By 04:00 on my third day in the Falklands I was on the water. I left the natural harbour of Stanley through the 1/4-mile wide narrows under a slowly rising sun. Six hours into the paddle, still digesting the glut of information I had received in the previous two days and trying to cope with my own excitement, I realized that I was finally on my way. It was then that I remembered an arrangement I had made with Falklands Conservation to do counts of species I would encounter along my way. Since travelling along the coast by kayak would bring me in touch with places and bird colonies otherwise inaccessible by volunteers, both Falkland Conservation and I were very excited about it. But amidst my whirlwind days in Stanley, I never checked into the office. My apologies, Sarah, I truly forgot. I would lose a full day of paddling if I were to go back and I was already feeling pressured by time thinking that, with the winds, it would be difficult for me to finish the circumnavigation in the original five weeks I had allocated.

Meeting the wildlife

On the first day of the Falklands expedition I had more encounters with wildlife than I had on all my previous trips together (3 basking sharks in Ireland, 2 stingrays in Australia, zero wildlife encounters in Nova Scotia and two dozen cows and a wild boar in Patagonia). Just after leaving Stanley, two dolphins swam for about 10 minutes alongside the kayak. Three hours later I saw my first penguins, a colony of about 200 Gentoo penguins. Later that afternoon, I began smelling a strong, foul smell on the water. As I paddled southwest directly into the wind and the intensifying smell increased, I heard loud sounds similar to the roar of lions. The culprits were a sea lion colony of approximately 60 animals, basking on a small unnamed tussock-covered island about one mile from where I first encountered the odour. Ten male sea lions roared loudly, always in constant motion, charging towards each other, while their female counterparts lay asleep or tended their small black newborn. I was equally fascinated and afraid since the atmosphere in this colony seemed highly charged and I knew so little about these big animals. Learning about the wildlife was something I neglected during my preparations. I knew generally what to expect, but the logistics of the trip such as the shipping of the kayak from the UK down to the Falklands, arranging the food drops, etc. always took over during my four-month preparation for the trip.

I have never experienced wildlife in such abundance or so closely. Among thousands of penguins, it was sometimes ▶







difficult to make a path through them as they did not move even when you walked directly towards them. It was somewhat reminiscent of a crowded subway platform in New York City. None of these animals were in the least fearful of humans. When I approached a family of seven sleeping giant sea elephants to take photographs I was surprised when two of the animals opened their eyes but, at the sight of me only 2 feet away from their noses, one went back to sleep and the other only watched my movements with curiosity.

Unfortunately, there is a history of depredation in the Falklands. It is a 200-year story of raw destruction and greed. Whaling vessels from North America descended on the West Falklands in the late 1700s principally to hunt sperm whales and southern right whales, but they supplemented their cargo with elephant seals and their oil. Once fur seal, sea lion and elephant seal populations were almost depleted, penguins became the main target. It is estimated that between 1864 and 1880 alone, 1.5 million penguins were slaughtered for their oil and skins. Thankfully, since some of the inaccessible penguin rookeries and seal breeding grounds remained untouched by the seal hunters, numbers were once again able to increase. A new wave of hunting began in 1928, taking a total of 39,606 seals. The last large-scale commercial sea lion hunting operation was called off in 1964 and declared a failure since only 400 seals could be found and killed, and the sea lion was declared a protected species in the Falkland Islands. The 'Conservation of Wildlife and Nature Ordinance' was written in 1999; today protection is ensured by Falklands Conservation (a non-profit conservation agency) and by private land owners. The land has been left untouched and is preserved by not setting foot on the land themselves and by preventing the occasional kayaker from landing.

Tough decisions

I paddled 92 miles in 23 hours in the first two days on the 'Paul Caffyn schedule'. On my third day, I thought about a comment Justine Curgenven made during her circumnavigation of the South Island of New Zealand with Barry Shaw. "The hardest part was to know then to go or not to go." After paddling for two days into only moderate headwinds, the wind now blew at Force 6–7 straight from the west, the direction in which I wanted to paddle. Was it safe to paddle today? Yes. I could paddle in between the 10-mile-long Bleaker Island and the mainland. I would still be exposed to high winds, but there was very little swell in the protected bay. Was it economical, or even smart, to paddle all day into a Force 6–7 headwind, making one mile/hr progress while paddling as hard as humanly possible? A clear "No". I felt there were plenty of reasons to stay put and declared it a non-paddling day as I would if I had been at home. Then again... there were also plenty of reasons to go. If I declared every windy day in the Falklands a non-paddling day, I feared I would not finish my circumnavigation in 5 weeks. I decided it would be best to at least try setting out. I wanted to find out first hand how it feels to paddle in such conditions, so decided to break camp and declare that 3rd day an experiment. I paddled myself to complete exhaustion 3 times during that day. Each shift was interrupted by a 3–4 hour break which included setting up camp, a meal and a short nap. I made a total of 15 miles on that day, less than a third of what I had paddled on each of the previous 2 days of paddling. However, at the end of the day I was still satisfied that I could write the total mileage of 107 in my dairy. I then decided that my new strategy would be to never declare a paddling day a non-paddling day again without having at least tested the waters. If winds and waves proved to be too high and dangerous, I could always turn around and say that I had tried. This was a strategy which I would regret deeply only a week later.

Feeling low

With the increasing winds, the short periods of rest and the long days of paddling as hard as I could, new problems seemed to develop every day. Both my VHF and FM radios broke and left me with no way to listen to the weather forecast. Other gear problems were slowly accumulating. And have I mentioned the kelp fields? As if paddling in the strong winds was not enough, the shores of the Falklands are covered in thick fields of kelp, some of which measure several square miles. The kelp makes the kayak stop immediately and makes you feel like you are paddling through freshly poured wet cement. Not only is the kayak not gliding anymore, but it is even hard to get the paddle into







the water, or rather, into the kelp, and it is equally hard to get it out.

It is hard to say which is worse, the psychological blow of being stuck in yet another kelp field, or the slow progress and the increased energy needed to free oneself from it. As my spirits and physical well-being descended further, I developed painful chafing under my arms. This worsened every day. I became more and more tired every day and realized I was having difficulties exercising even the simplest tasks, such as unzipping my PFD, getting in and out of my drysuit or even opening the packaging of power bars. My thoughts and movements became less and less coordinated, and I realized I needed more time to set up my tent than in the first days of the trip. These were all bad signs.

I was also becoming increasingly annoyed by the unpleasant side-effects of my ambitious paddling schedule. Due to the short periods of rest, my paddling clothes never got close to being dry. Getting out of the warm sleeping bag after only a few hours of sleep and standing naked in the cold to get into the wet paddling clothes twice a day became an exercise I started to loathe. The moonscape-like terrain of some campsites exposed the tent and kayak to the full force of the winds, twisting and bending the tent and poles. The kayak, which I tied to the tent at night, was being pushed away by the wind creating more strain both on the tent and my nervous system. On two occasions, the tent got blown away. Only the attached kayak and a single remaining stake saved it from getting blown out to sea with my belongings in it. I made it a habit to wear the EPIRB (emergency position-indicating radio beacon) around my wrist whenever I left the tent or whenever I went to sleep. These annoying problems dominated my attention, threatening to spoil the few better aspects of the trip.

I was mentally and physically exhausted. All I wanted was to finish the trip as fast as possible.

Judgement error

I broke camp at the tip of Dunnose Head and was about to cross King Arthur Bay. It was about the halfway point of the trip, but I felt I had very little reason to celebrate since both the skeg and the camping stove broke the day before. I was making my way up the west coast towards my second and last food drop on Saunders Island, which I hoped to reach in 3–4 days. My plan for the day was to cross King Arthur Bay during the morning paddle, an approximate 4-hour crossing of 20 miles, and proceed in the evening along the cliffs towards Death Head close to West Point Island.

A strong gale passed through during the night and, at 04:00, it was still very windy outside. As on so many other days, I found it hard to decide if it was safe to go out paddling or not. Again, there were many reasonable and not-so-reasonable reasons (e.g. finish as fast as possible) both for going paddling and for staying put. The storm from the previous night created a 15–20 foot swell, but the wind seemed to be stable at about Force 3–4. It was overcast and uninviting. I did not know how to decide.

I climbed up two cliffs, looked from each hilltop to the sea and finally decided after one hour of deliberation that it was okay to go. If I was wrong or if conditions worsened, I could always turn around to the safety of the shore. It would have been a good plan if a storm warning had not been announced on that particular day, a warning I was unable to receive since my FM radio drowned in a leaky hatch a week earlier. In addition, I overlooked the fact that the first 3–4 miles of my crossing were fairly protected by three outlying islands to the west, the direction from which the wind, waves and swell was originating. Due to the location of these three islands, I should have concluded that I was looking at a fairly protected piece of water right in front of me and that, after these 3–4 miles, the swell would likely be much higher than the sea state I was able to observe from my campsite. One downside of being a solo paddler is that there is no second pair of eyes to look at a challenge from a different point of view and offer another opinion.

I launched and the first hour of the attempted crossing went pretty well. The height of the swell reminded me a little of paddling on the South Coast of Australia, where I encountered the highest swell I had ever paddled during a trip in 2007. Ninety minutes into the attempted crossing of King George Bay, the swell got higher and also steeper. I tried to compare the swell to Australia in order to calm myself, but it became painfully evident that the ▶







swell was now higher than my confidence. It would be painful to turn around, but I decided it would be wise to abort the crossing. I just wanted to give it another 5 minutes... maybe I was just in a rough patch of water and it would calm down again?

I had not even finished this thought when the wind suddenly increased and, with it, the noise. Unknown to me, 18 miles northeast across the bay at Roy Cove, the wind was blowing at 65 miles/hr. Before I could even make the decision to turn the boat around, a dark and 25-foot wave appeared to my left. What was remarkable about this wave was not only its size, but also its shape. It appeared to me like a pure vertical wall of water. I would not be able to brace into this wave and slide parallel to it, nor would this wave glide underneath the boat like most waves had in the past 90 minutes.

Self-rescue

I high-braced into the wave, but was pushed over instantly. My first thought was that the water did not feel as cold as I thought it would be. I tried to roll up, but I was unable to get the paddle up to the surface. I waited a little and tried again to get in any position that would allow me to set up for my roll. I failed again, ran out of air, wet-exited and was now a swimmer in a full-blown storm in the South Atlantic. All my water bags and bottles were stored in the cramped cockpit and I didn't even see them disappear, but they were all gone. I did witness my foam seat flying over the crest of the waves, disappearing for good within a few seconds.

My first thought was not to attempt a re-entry roll, but to get my body on the back deck of the kayak and out of the cold water. I was looking for a few seconds to catch my breath while my body would be out of the cold water, hopefully warding off hypothermia. I pulled myself onto the kayak and without thinking about it attempted to slide into the cockpit. I failed the first time but, after the second attempt, found myself sitting in a cockpit filled with water. While the waves were still going over and under me, I realized with satisfaction that despite being pushed over a few times, I was able to keep myself up. I righted myself with movements which felt like hand roll manoeuvres I had learnt over the past months during my first kayak polo sessions in New York City.

With the food and camping gear in the hatch compartments and the cockpit fully flooded with water, the kayak was very low in the water and I quickly became cold. I had to pump the water out of the cockpit, or at least half of it, if I was going to have any chance of staying afloat and paddling the kayak anywhere. I felt that I had to pump for my life. I pumped as hard as I could, repeating over and again that my life depended on how well I accomplished this job. Waves were still going over the cockpit, and despite my attempts to block the water with pieces of my spray skirt, the waves were refilling the cockpit. It seemed like a lost battle, but the water level in the cockpit was going down. I took breaks from pumping only for balancing to avoid another capsize. That the seat was missing seemed not to be a problem but quite the opposite. I was now sitting on the bottom of the kayak, my centre of gravity was lower and made me more stable. This might have been just the difference that kept me from capsizing again.

When the cockpit was only half-full of water, I declared the kayak buoyant enough to paddle. I snapped the spray skirt over the cockpit rim and decided to paddle towards Hummock Island, an island 4 miles away straight to the east. I reached this island without a further capsize despite the breaking swell, wind and waves at my back. I reached the only landing place, a 50-feet wide beach on the leeside of Hummock Island, completely exhausted and in shock. Although I was protected from the direct impact of the storm, setting up the tent in the high winds was still extremely hard work. I spent the next 24 hours on Hummock Island, waiting for the winds to drop and going over the capsize again and again.

I was without water. I had been keeping all the water in the cockpit for the best weight distribution of my gear, never even considering a wet exit. I was already constantly running low on drinking water. The long paddling days with long periods of anaerobic paddling into strong winds created a logistical problem that was totally new to me. I was drinking 4–5 litres of water a day during the two paddling shifts, and usually gulped at least 1 litre right after landing twice each day. With the water needed for cooking and the occasional cup of tea and hot chocolate, my daily water consumption was around 8–9 litres per day, as high as I had ever experienced before. Even on a regular day, I feared I would run out since I was drinking surprisingly large amounts. Now I didn't have a single drop. The Falklands have a very dry climate, with an annual rainfall of only 17 inches in the Western Islands; it is often difficult to find fresh water springs in the often flat terrain.

Re-hydrating

The next morning the winds did drop and I was able to paddle to the next settlement, Roy Cove, where I asked for water and water containers. Dan, the kind owner of the one and only inhabited farmhouse on the settlement, not only provided me with water bottles (one empty whiskey bottle, a former 3-litre cooking oil can and a 2-litre Sprite bottle), but invited me into his house for tea and cookies. He also leant me his ear while I continued to digest my bad experience from the previous day. Dan walked me back down to my kayak at his beach and we exchanged both email addresses and mailing addresses. (His address was easy: Dan, Roy Cove, Falkland Islands.)

I paddled off sitting on a 10% inflated camping mattress (folded over five times) as a kayak seat, aiming for Saunders Island within 3–5 days. Thanks to the Coca Cola Company and some of its enthusiasts who contribute to the littering of this planet, I found more empty plastic bottles on beaches and soon had a water storage capacity of 15 litres again. I counted my progress in the evenings by 'X more miles to Saunders Island', and witnessed more of the incredible wildlife that the Falklands has to offer. Four dolphins played in my bow-wake on my way to Death Head. Death Head is located only 5 miles southeast from Cape Terrible, around the corner from Death Cove and across the channel from Mount Misery. (I'm not making this up.) When I woke up the following morning at a beach north of Death Head, there were 2,000–3,000 Gentoo Penguins around my tent. Although the encounters with the wildlife were plentiful and close, I was no longer truly able to enjoy them due to my now overwhelming fatigue. The chafing continued to worsen and every paddle stroke became a painful reminder that this paddle around the Falklands was the most demanding trip I had ever done.

Saunders Island

At 22:00 on my 15th day I reached my 2nd food drop on Saunders Island. A few weeks before the trip, Suzan and Dave from Saunders Island and I exchanged friendly, but only very brief emails to arrange my food drop. I did not expect anything beyond getting my food package, but I was also hoping for a friendly chat and permission to camp on their island. The reality was that I was greeted while landing on the beach after sunset – it was as if they had waited for me all day. David and Suzan (the owners of the island) and the other couple living on the island, Biffo and Anthony, were waiting in their Land Rovers parked on the beach. I was not only greeted warmly ("We expected you to be here yesterday already!") and invited to dinner, but was also offered a shower and a freshly made bed in their warm guest cottage. I ate dinner in only my underwear since Biffo insisted on doing all my laundry. Both couples were very interested in the trip. When they heard about my now bloody armpits due to the constant chafing and my broken skeg, they recommended that I take a day off and invited me to stay two nights with them.

The following day was more than I could have dreamed. I slept in a real bed, I ate three long and big meals with the families, I received a very effective and healing ointment for the chafing from Dave and Anthony went down with me to the kayak to take a look at the broken skeg. The outlook was not encouraging: the plastic pivot had fallen out of the skeg box and was missing. In addition, the skeg cable was not only kinked but also ripped out of the skeg. Before I could say to Anthony "This looks like it's hopeless, let's forget about it", Anthony, a helicopter and plane pilot for British Antarctic Survey, articulated his plan. He would tool a new wood pivot with a router, come up with a new skeg cable and build a device to attach the new skeg cable to the partly broken skeg.

The only problem was that Anthony had promised to help Dave sort and castrate sheep. As sheep shearers from New Zealand would arrive the following day to start shearing the 7,000 sheep of Saunders Island, it was essential that the sorting happens that very day. Anthony suggested my job for the day would be to do his ▶



job – to help sort and castrate sheep – and he in turn would take care of the skeg repair! At the end of this wonderful day on Saunders Island we again met for dinner. Anthony told us about his successful repair of my now flawless and smooth-working skeg, and about his 11 years working as a pilot in the Antarctic. Biffo shared how much she appreciates her life so close to nature in the Falklands, and how she witnessed the invasion of the Argentine troops and the resulting Falklands War.

Home run

During the following seven days paddling eastwards along the North Coast and towards the finish line in Stanley, all I could think was that I wanted to be back on Saunders Island. I wanted to see these wonderful people again and learn more about their self-supported and independent life on a sheep farm on a small island at the edge of the world. Although the swell along the North Coast was usually high, between 15 and 20 feet, my anxiety caused by my experience in King George Bay had eased during this last leg of my trip. Like the south and west coast, the north coast also featured dramatic cliffs and long exposed sandy beaches with high, dumping surf, but landings were comparably easy and safe due to an abundance of sheltered coves. Most of the coves even had a small stream providing fresh drinking water and were usually less than five miles apart from each other. The landscape also looked much more inviting and friendly, less harsh with more vegetation. This was in contrast to the sometimes bleak and exposed landscape in the south and west which featured black sand due to erosion, shipwrecks from the past and present, parts of torn fishing nets and huge piles of oversized driftwood. The north coast seemed almost as landscaped as the shores of the little artificial lakes in Central Park.

Restoring the spirit

Twenty-two days after setting out from Stanley I paddled back into Stanley harbour, closing the 615 miles loop around the Falkland Islands. One of the first things I did after arriving at the Bed & Breakfast in Stanley was ask Kay, the owner of the Bed & Breakfast, if and how I could fly out to Saunders Island. I asked Kay if she thought it would be a good idea to show up there again, and then jumped into the shower. My showers are short, thus I was very surprised to hear Kay telling me after stepping out of the shower that she just spoke to Dave, Suzan, Biffo and Anthony and they all would be happy to have me back on Saunders Island ("Of course I know them", she said, "I lived for 20 years on Saunders Island myself!"). The following day I stepped into the little FIGAS plane which took me the distance it had taken me seven days to paddle in 55 short minutes. The plane flew very low over the kelp fields and coastline of the North Coast and I was able to retrace my days and appreciate being high and dry. In the following 10 days on Saunders Island I did not have to worry about williwaws, fast approaching storms during crossings, cracked tent poles, non-working camping stoves or putting on cold and wet paddling clothes at 03:00 while standing naked in 30 mile/hr winds. On Saunders Island, not only my armpits healed but also my spirit healed. I ate fresh mutton, the best racks of lamb I have ever had in my life, freshly caught mullet and home-grown vegetables – and all of this in the best of company.

When I think back to my 2009 Falkland Islands Expedition, I think mostly about my new friends on Saunders Island and the other generous, sharp and always helpful people I met in all the settlements along the way. I also think about the sea lions, the penguins, the albatrosses and all the other curious and friendly wildlife who all allowed me to experience them from such a short distance. I haven't thought about the paddling itself yet. The paddling seems the least significant part. ■

About the **Author**



Marcus Demuth lives in New York City and works as a kayak instructor for Manhattan Kayak Company. In 2007, he circumnavigated Ireland as a fundraiser for the Royal National Lifeboat Association. Past expeditions brought Marcus to Iceland (2008), the South and West Coast of Australia (2007), Patagonia/Chile (2006) and Nova Scotia, Canada (2005).