

Victoria Point to Mooloolaba via Moreton Island – by Howard Rogers

Paddlers Howard Rogers and Eddie Safarik

May 3rd – May 6th 2013

Having cut my teeth on a slightly mad trip to Broughton Island a day before the 2013 RnR I wanted more, although not necessarily the back snapping, bone crunching, fibreglass fragmenting surf break that we had to land through on our return, courtesy of several enthusiastic instructors and a Taran lover.

Eddie Safarik answered my add for a late week paddle to the Big Sandhills on Moreton Island but was uncertain of whether he would leave me at the Amity Banks and continue solo along the exposed east side of Moreton Island. The week before the trip I had immersed myself in all five volumes of *This is the Sea* and wondered how I too could participate in my own version. I was longing to break free of inner Moreton Bay, so with Eddie on board prospects were wide open.

We set off at around 8 am from Victoria Point on a Friday morning, Eddie in his tangerine Valley Nordkapp and me in my orange Tahe Marine Seaspirit, apparently “a girl’s kayak” according to one club member. Based on the forecast it was just going to be a two day trip with a south-easterly forecast on the way out followed by a calm Saturday before a 20 knot southerly kicked in making a return to Victoria Point less attractive. Eddie had suggested Victoria Point as the preferred departure point to have an easier run compared to a paddle across the wind from Manly.

Loading the tangerine dream and the “girls kayak” at Victoria Point



I had not completed any particularly long paddles before so to make the heavily laden kayak less of a log I put my sail up to take advantage of the light south-easterly. The wind was so light initially the sail made little difference other than blocking the view and providing a slightly larger target for the multiple Stradbroke Island ferries that crossed our path. At least we were denying them of a fare. Eddie was a little disappointed that the predicted 20 knot wind was late but we made good time to Peel Island assisted by the outgoing tide.

Dolphins with Moreton Island in the distance



After passing to the east of Peel Island we headed into the Rainbow Channel with the Amity and Warrangamba banks to the west, by which time the wind had picked up and was pushing us along at around 8 km/hr. By the time we were level with Amity the clouds had disappeared and the channels between Moreton and Stradbroke were a beautiful spot with almost pure white sand bars, aquamarine shallows and deep blue at depth. A small tiderace had developed just past Amity where I waited while Eddie assessed the best way through the sandbars. There is a clear channel marked on the charts just past Amity point which at low tide we followed to the southwest before heading north-west and then north to the south-west tip of Moreton Island at Koorinal where a few boats were moored in Days Gutter. The channel between Stradbroke Island and Moreton Island is a no fishing zone. The shark that darted under my kayak reinforced this point.



Sailing towards the Big Sand Hills



Edde in a small tiderace off Amity



The beach at the Big Sand Hills camp site at high tide



We stopped at Koorinal for lunch and then wandered into the Sand Bar which is a bar with beer and food. It's a pity we hadn't visited the Sand Bar first, lunch would have been more of a feast. The Sand Bar is the place (the only place) to be in the evening at Koorinal.

We left Koorinal about three hours before high tide and were pushed along by a good current. The wind had also picked up to around 15 – 20 knots so I hardly put in a stroke until the Little Sand hills. The stretch between Koorinal and the sand hills is quite shallow and protected from any south easterly generated swell. We were averaging between 8 – 9 km/hr along here and I was spilling wind so that I didn't get too far ahead of Eddie. Dugongs are common in this stretch but none came out on our run but plenty of dolphins passed by. The dolphins appeared curious about our kayaks but were clearly bored by our lack of bow wave to ride.

Approaching the Little Sand hills at high tide meant we could get close to shore and paddle through the maze of shallow mangroves. There is a lot of birdlife in this area and plenty of fish. We arrived at the Big Sand Hills camping site at the northern end, spot on Brian Mcarthy's gps point where there is a sheltered campground with a bore. Arriving at low tide would probably mean a long portage or trudge with wheels. We had a 10 m portage and Eddie set up camp adjacent to his tangerine dream, his true partner if he is honest. I used the bore water for cooking. It is a little tannin stained but no ill effects so far.

Eddie and oystercatchers at the Little Sand Hills



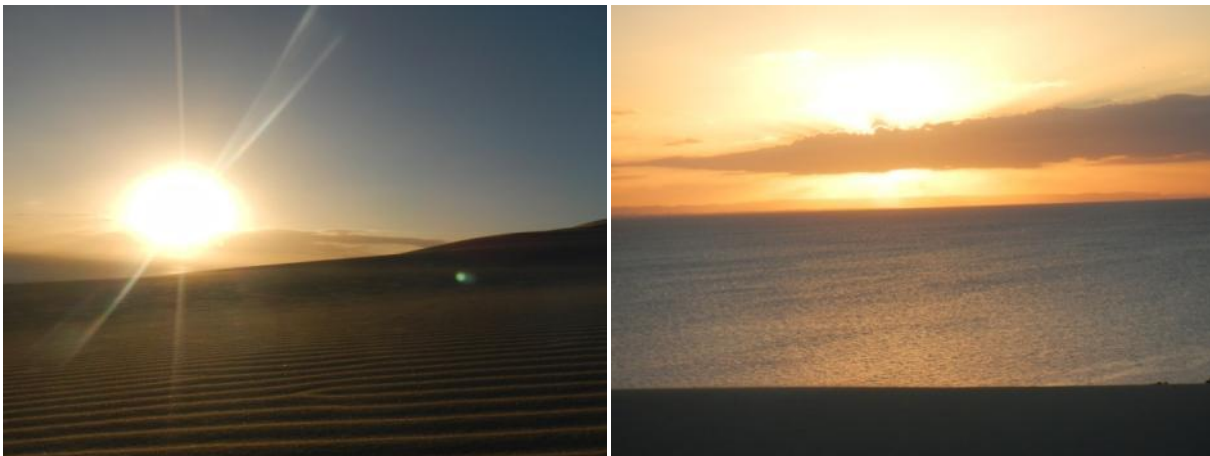
Late in the afternoon we climbed up the Big Sand Hills separately since we both agreed this was not meant to be a romantic evening walk and had to maintain our distance. The sand hills are at the western edge of what is a huge sandblow cascading over the remaining bush on the western side. Behind the sand hills to the east lies a vast expanse of scoured dunes.



On top of the Big Sand Hills looking south



The sun sets across the Big Sand Hills



At this time we discussed our plans. Eddie wasn't up for returning north to travel down the eastern side of Moreton Island and I had a choice of either slogging it out back to Victoria Point or accompanying Eddie to the northern tip (North Point) of the island. Eddie suggested that a crossing to Mooloolaba was achievable, particularly with a 15 – 20 knot southerly forecast in two days time. In my mind this forecast didn't seem like a perfect forecast at all, potentially large waves and wind seemed the opposite of perfect which clearly showed my lack of experience. Later I realised that this was a perfect forecast that would avoid a slog and make the crossing more achievable with following wind and swell, if I could handle the sea conditions. With such perfect weather on the first day I had no desire to return to Victoria Point and committed to the crossing but with some anxiety.

Contemplating the crossing



We took the outgoing tide on Saturday morning from the Big Sand Hills and headed north reaching Tangalooma in calm conditions. Tangalooma is almost a mega resort that stretches for a kilometre or more south of the Tangalooma wrecks. Its palm trees hint of Hula Hula but Jimmy Barnes, the Wiggles and rum and coke are probably more likely. We cruised through the wrecks and snorkelers and lazy fishermen who probably could have found a more challenging place to fish.

Tangalooma wrecks



After Tangalooma Bulwer approached. This is the last stop for provisions if you run short. We had a look around and had lunch in the Castaway Cafe. The steak burgers are good for biodiesel generation but I ate the whole lot anyway. We paddled on to Comboyuro Point where I was surprised to see surf. Apparently this area can be rough at times, particularly on an outgoing tide as the water sucks around the point. Rather than go out wide I followed Eddie through the outer surf break. It was a decent size but not threatening. As I climbed up the face of the wave in a heavily laden boat the boat stalled and slid backwards and immediately I was surfing backwards totally unprepared. I capsized, didn't stay calm and wet exited. At this point I realised deck lines are not full proof for attaching gear. My sail was out, the pump, water bottle and various other essential items were no longer attached. It wasn't a good

look, but initially all I could do was hook my arm inside the kayak to ride out a few waves that crashed through, and luckily my flotsam came along.

Between breakers I broke the golden rule and swam to collect up my gear before the next wave. I wasn't too worried by the surf at this stage and found that hooking my arm inside the combing was a better way to stay with the kayak, partly because it was full of water so it didn't rip my arm off as it accelerated with the surf. Eventually I was pushed into the gutter and started wondering where Eddie was. He turned up and we worked together to do a T rescue. A T rescue is not so easy with a fully packed kayak and requires good cooperation to assist turning the kayak. It was a good lesson. Items need to be attached so that they will not come detached in rough surf and a loose sail is the last thing you want in such conditions. Surfing backwards is next on my training list.

We continued on under blue skies to North Point avoiding the other camping option behind the mosquito infested lagoon near Five Hills. North Point is spectacular. Surf rolls in from the southeast, around the point and then travels almost parallel to the beach for several hundred metres. It's a popular surfing and fishing spot with a grassy camp ground behind the dunes. We camped on the beach close to the point to avoid a long portage.

In the shade at North Point



We discussed the crossing to Mooloolaba for the next day. A 15-20 knot south-easterly forecast and we would go. I discussed my approach to risk and that I had no issue with Eddie going it alone if he felt the conditions would be unmanageable for me. He had no real doubts about my ability or hid them if he did, but at the 11th hour he asked if I got seasick. I do but not in a kayak so far. Sea sickness in motorised boats is more of a problem for me. Eddie recalled his 95 km crossing to Lady Elliott Island where some of the group succumbed to illness and seasickness, making the trip miserable for the victims. Mild panic set in and I asked a couple of fishermen if they had any kwell. "No mate but would you like a cold beer instead." In case you are wondering the idea was not to take the beer to sea and drink it at the onset of seasickness. We drank the beers and smiled. All would be fine?

Kwells? Nope, but we have beer



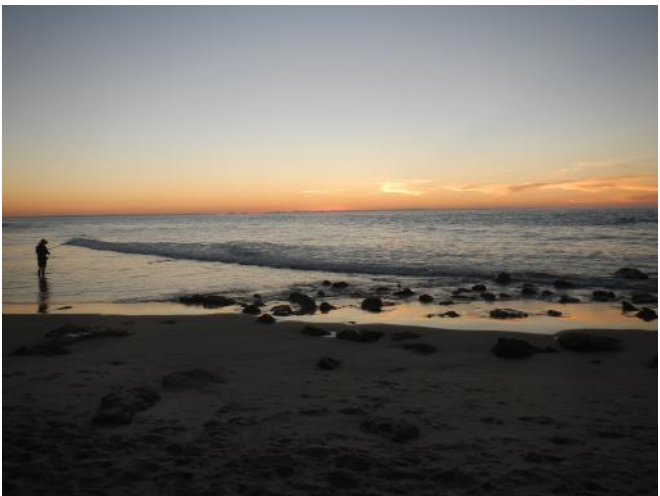
North Point turtle



We rose at 3.45 am on the Sunday morning to be ready to set off at first light. The waves crashing over the point had kept me awake much of the night, which together with the dark, and the cool morning just exacerbated my anxiety. Eddie checked the forecast, which had changed to 20-25 knots. A brief discussion and a risk assessment meant that we weren't going today. This was great. Not the fact we had called it off for today but the fact that there was no need to make it an unpleasant and potentially risky trip for me. Eddie knew what the sea state would be from previous crossings in 25 knots. This was not the sheltered waters of Moreton Bay. An open ocean crossing with potentially large swell and wind generated waves increases the risks. The forecast looked better for the next day.

I was relieved since my head wasn't quite in the right place. I snoozed until dawn and Eddie went for another romantic walk to watch the sunrise. We had decided to wait it out at North Point until early afternoon and travel back to Bulwer since we were both almost out of food and water. I rested and chatted to the many sea kayak admirers. Many 4 x 4 drivers had spotted us on our way north so they were eager to know what our plans were. Meanwhile Eddie made the most of some fantastic surf that rolled around the point. He emerged from the surf after two hours with one of the broadest grins. The waves really were perfect and ran for several hundred metres parallel to the beach.

North Point



Sunset at North Point. The calm before the swell



Eddie and the North Point surf



We waited for the tide to turn and around midday we had a few hundred metre portage back to the water. I thought we were heading straight to Bulwer. We were but Eddie wanted to try every surf break on the way there. I stayed offshore not wanting to tempt fate. We made an easy crossing back through Combuyuro Point and landed on a calm lee shore. We stocked up on junk back at the Castaway Cafe and possibly purchased some of the most expensive canned food available, but considering where we were we weren't complaining.

We camped at the camp ground just north of Bulwer which has great cold showers if you haven't washed for a few days. The planned schedule was to rise at 4.45 am but Eddie was awake earlier so we had a leisurely early breakfast. This was a good option and kept my anxiety down. I had a couple of cans of baked beans while Eddie perfected his cheese toasties. We left the beach at Bulwer for Mooloolaba at 6.15 am in what were calm conditions in the lee of the island. Eddie had planned a course that went almost directly north along the deeper North East Channel for 15 km. This channel avoids the shallow banks to the east and west and in particular avoids Wild Banks. The channel is also marked by large channel markers. The outgoing tide pushed us along smartly and with my sail up we were making 8-9 km/hr easily. There was some swell and wind generated waves in the channel but it was comfortable for the first 10 km until the wind picked up. Out to the east I could see what looked like spume blowing off huge waves that must have been caused by the shallow banks. I didn't look too long. It was unsettling and looked intimidating. After about 10 km we passed a replica tall ship. I suggested to Eddie that the ship should turn around since *Terra Nullius* no more.

With the wind picking up and wave height increasing I was travelling at up to 12 km/hr with my sail, but it was becoming a little difficult to manage since I was out pacing Eddie and needed to stay in sight. Spilling wind from a flapping sail to slow down was making things worse. Eddie came over to steady my kayak and to avoid having to turn upwind to take the sail down. The sea state had picked up and I was no longer feeling so relaxed. We had now travelled about 15 km with 38 km to go. This seems like a long distance in the open ocean, when land features look miniscule and your sea kayaking experience is less than a year. After 15km we headed north-west and possibly passed over Wild Banks artificial reef (not to be confused with the shallower Wild Banks to the south).

Easy paddling along North East Channel before the wind picked up



The swell and wind generated waves were coming across at different directions making for a confused sea state with quite large swell and wind at around at least 15 knots. Some of the swells were very large and came in sets of three. My kayak would flounder in the trough slowing to about 5km/hr and wave No. 2 would wash over from the stern and the kayak would become momentarily unbalanced. Wave No. 3 was less troublesome and after that I knew I could relax until the next set. Meanwhile Eddie kept on smiling. The cross wind played havoc with my tracking at times. The rudder was frequently out of the water making staying on course tiring. My kayak was not

troubled by the cross swell but the wind was getting on my nerves and as a result the kayaks heading was frequently too far south. A little edging helped bring my kayak on course but in the large swell too much edging was unnerving.

At times Eddie was out of sight, hidden by the waves but he kept behind or level with me much of the time to check I was not having too much trouble. We were making good progress with speeds of up to 13 km/hr when I caught a good runner, but probably averaging 7-8 km/hr for most of the time. I was watching my gps continuously, willing the kilometres away. Each 5 km was a milestone and once there was less than 30 km to run I felt a little less exposed, but that was a misguided thought.

Howard hidden by the swell



I went a little off course not because of poor navigation, more because I was not heading for the correct hill. Well maybe that was poor navigation. We rafted up and Eddie chatted to check I was alright. I was slightly affronted. I was fine, well sort of given the sea state and my inability to track straight, but still anxious and mostly under control. While rafted up we wetted our pants together. Apparently this is the only way to relieve yourself in a rough sea.

In one of the squalls



The rudder's not helping



This helped me relax but there is only so much waste water you want sloshing around your ankles. We tracked towards Caloundra for a while just to get closer to the coast which was more psychologically comforting. The sea

state had not relented. A few kilometres off Caloundra we headed north which meant less weather cocking and a slightly easier run.

Feeling comfortable?



Yep, just swell



The sets kept rolling by and early afternoon squalls came in. The torrential rain and wind associated with the squall actually flattened the sea until it had passed through. The rain was pretty cold but the wind and flattened sea state pushed us on even faster. Looking out to sea we could see the squalls racing in towards us. After a while I was hoping for non-stop squalls and then we were almost there.

The lighthouse at Point Cartwright came in to view and we rounded the large swells off the headland for the protection of the bay. Off the seawall the ever enthusiastic Garry Forrest shouted out a welcome and mentioned something

about large coconuts. It was a great welcome and we overnighted in Garry's palace on the canal.

It was early afternoon and we had arrived on time at around 2 pm crossing in under eight hours. I had been focused for the whole crossing, trying to stay relaxed and in particular keeping my hips loose and trying to maintain a reasonable cadence to help with stability. It would have been easy to lose it (control and composure). The seas were rough, we were a long way out at sea with no quick exit strategy, the swell was relentless and that was something I had to literally look past and not dwell on. I had to focus on the kayak and be confident that it wasn't going to do anything unexpected and nor was the sea other than a few large sets.

Mooloolaba at last



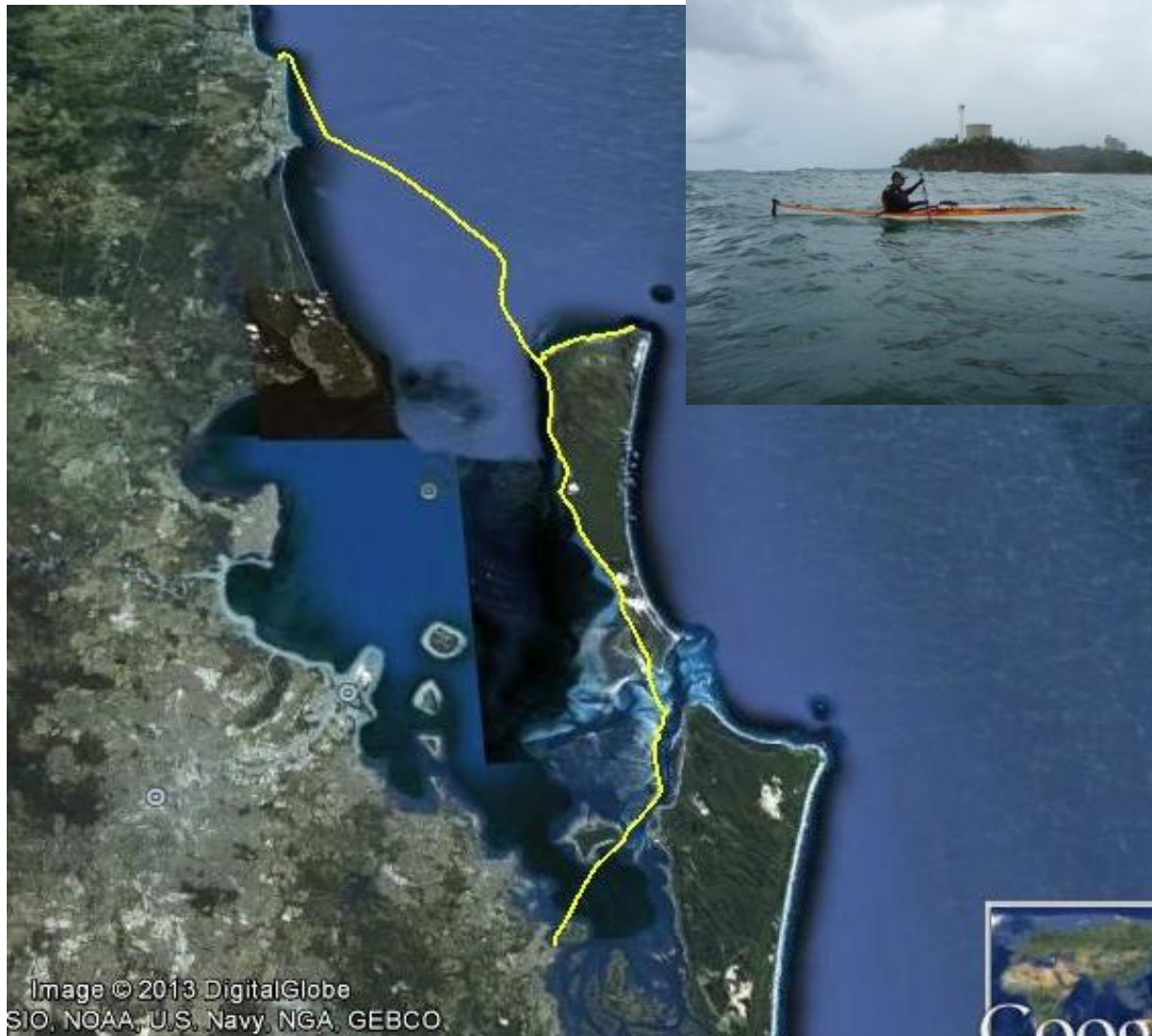
It is a fantastic feeling to have completed a large sea crossing in a 5 m kayak in a lively sea. I am amazed sea kayaks handle the conditions so well. All the club training on flat water and in the surf provided a good foundation for the crossing. This is something that as a beginner is not always obvious. Grade 2 is not just a test it is something you will use if you venture out into more open waters.

For others who want to do something similar just show you have what it takes on some of the Grade 2 club trips, stick your neck out a little and I'm sure the experienced club

members will give you the nod when it is time to graduate. You don't have to be an extreme athlete, just some composure, preparation and trust in others experience, and maybe a few kwells for good measure.

A big thank you to Eddie for pushing me onwards to Mooloolaba, and all those in the club who have provided training officially and unofficially.

Our track from Victoria Point to Mooloolaba



Point Cartwright at Mooloolaba

