

AROUND ISLESBORO, NORTH HAVEN & VINALHAVEN I. IN PENOBSCOT BAY, MAINE

When I paddled around Deer Isle and Isle au Haut last year, I saw the three big islands of Islesboro, North Haven and Vinalhaven on my western horizon and decided right then that they would be the goal for my next year's trip in my 17 foot Kruger Sea Wind sea canoe. I had longingly studied the area on my NOAA charts ever since I got my little 22' sailboat in 1974, but I never made it around the formidable looking southern tip of Vinalhaven, just as I also never made it around the equally intimidating looking southern tip of Isle au Haut. But 2012 finally was the year I would do it, I told myself, and do it solo in a slender, covered sea canoe. I could not wait much longer. I was not getting any younger, better or stronger to meet such challenges. So I carefully planned a leisurely six-day trip for the 75-mile loop around those three big islands, with my beloved NOAA charts and the MITA (Maine Island Trail Association, see appendix) trip booklet. Going solo, the three 3-mile open water crossings needed special attention, I knew.

Three days after the 22-mile ocean race in Gloucester, MA, the Blackburn Challenge, which I have raced the past 11 years in my sporty solo outrigger canoe, Nancy drove me down to Wadsworth Cove in Castine, which I had chosen as my starting and finishing spot. The weather forecast was not the best, but that could not be changed. I was confident I could beat the rain and thunderstorm predicted for later that afternoon. But it was foggy, real foggy. We had the large crescent beach all to ourselves to set up the boat. One large sailboat was anchored just off the beach, then disappeared in a cloak of gray, only to ghost back into view minutes later. The air was laden with moisture; you could almost wring it out. It was one of those typical Maine take-offs, I thought to myself. And yes, I was barely 50 meters/yards off the beach, when Nancy and the entire beach disappeared in the fog. It must have been the same time that I disappeared in the fog from her point of view.

My first hitch over to the northern tip of Islesboro was a 3-mile stretch of open water. The tide was coming in from the south; so was the wind. I compensated my chart course first about 20 degrees for the western variation in this area, then 10 degrees for wind, tide set, and to be on the safe side so I would not miss the tip of the island. It came down to adding about 10 degrees to the true chart course ($+20^\circ$ for variation, -10° for wind and tide set) = $+10^\circ$. And 45 minutes later land appeared where it should – a very comforting feeling.

I then felt my way south along the western shore of Islesboro till I heard and soon thereafter saw the new "Margaret Chase Smith" ferry boat from Lincolnville Beach come in to the dock on the island, right across from my target for the day, Warren Island. It is Maine's only state park that is only accessible by water. I had reserved a camping spot in advance, checked in and set up my tent on #5, in earshot of the beautiful, rich ringing bell buoy, and right across from the panoramic view of the

Camden Hills across the bay, which should appear, after the fog burned off.

At noon, I was joined by 10 young sea kayakers in brilliant yellow boats. After they had pulled their boats out on my tiny beach, they suddenly noticed they had missed their spot, # 6, by a couple hundred yards. But lunch time was lunch time! You know young teenagers! When that was taken care of, they pushed off again, literally, poling their way over rocks, mud and seaweed back to open water, because the tide had gone out while they were eating and chatting. Only the leader lifted, pulled and slid his boat over the seaweed-covered intertidal zone back to open water. No one else got the message or felt that was necessary, not in rental kayaks.

Soon after the group had left, the rains came down in earnest, and the wind picked up. The predicted thunderstorm went north of my place, which I did not mind. Just around sunset, the sky suddenly cleared, and the panorama of the Camden Hills was briefly bathed in a splendid golden glow before night fell.

The weather report for the next couple of days sounded great, and I could not wait to get off in the morning. The tide had just turned, and it was a long way to the water's edge over a field of seaweed and rocks. That could not be changed. It was sunny, and a light NNW 5-10 wind sprang up. I set a course towards the south, around 700-Acre I., and from there to Job I. and the tiny rock pile called Goose I. (between Mouse and Saddle I. - I love those names, you must have noticed). At that point I had to muster my energy and check wind and waves in order to traverse the 3 miles of open water to North Haven I. I had the wind from behind. That was great, but as always, it gains in strength over open water, so that I was riding rather large waves from behind, when I approached Pulpit Harbor, one of my favorite sailing ports. A group of 5 porpoises greeted me as I was rounding the corner into the western entrance of the Fox Island Thorofare. Numerous sailboats, including a very fast looking trimaran, were headed into the gut between the two big islands, on their way to the Deer Isle Thorofare or Merchant Row just north of Isle au Haut.

I, however, continued farther south to tiny Ram I., at the northern end of Hurricane Sound. I found a gently rising granite shelf to take out on, and a sweet little campsite in the middle of the island. The island was so small, that I could easily see 360 degrees around, through the few trees surrounding my tent – it was a most delightful spot. My Satellite phone worked fine, as usual, so did my SPOT locator beacon, the water was just right for a swim, and coffee/cocoa tasted great. I also had no complaints about my simple but oh-so-easy to prepare Dinty Moore stews, Bush beans, Hormel chili and Boyardee spaghetti goop. Life was good!

Next day's paddle was my favorite stretch of the entire trip, as anticipated. It was sunny and clear with a light northerly wind. I headed farther south, down Hurricane Sound and the Reach into Carvers Harbor, Vinalhaven's major port. The islands and rocky ledges looked very glacial, and the tide was coming in hard.

At absolutely the tightest spot (the eastern end of the Reach), the big, new Vinalhaven ferry, "Captain Charles Philbrook", squeezed between me and a ledge on her starboard side. We both then swung into the rather large and very busy harbor, Carvers Harbor. I was surprised to see so many lobster boats at their moorings, as if it were Sunday (but it was only Thursday). Or was this a self-imposed wait for the lobsters to turn into hard shells and gain higher prices, or a protest of some kind? I never found out. But the harbor was full of lobster boats for sure, and that at mid-morning.

I made a reconnaissance loop around the boats, before scooting out Indian Creek to the south, back out onto the open ocean. The shoreline was studded with lots of little treeless islands and even more ledges and barely submerged rocks. My chart from here to Bluff Head and Winter Harbor was a navigator's delight, like right now, for me paddling a shallow boat in bright sunshine and a friendly breeze. But it could also be a sailboat skipper's nightmare in dense fog. The southern tip of Vinalhaven resembles and rivals the fearsome, but also spectacular, shore of Isle au Haut. I enjoyed myself immensely, picking my way around those ledges and even inside the narrows between the many off-shore islands.

When my course turned NNW, the wind suddenly picked up, and whitecaps were forming. So I dipped into Seal Bay and finished today's run to Little Hen I. at the mouth of Winter Harbor on the more sheltered inside of the string of islands. By then it was high tide again, and take-out on the tiny beach was easy. I went to the one-tent MITA site, but noticed lots of poison ivy around it. I quickly checked in by signing the MITA log book hanging from a tree, but decided instead to camp on the tiny beach, since I react strongly to poison ivy. I still remember my bout with that harmless-looking, three-leaved plant from paddling around Prince Edward Island. I can still hear the doctor asking me: "What did you do? Roll in it?" Prednisone took care of it eventually.

Another beautiful beach day: great swimming, bird and boat watching (lots of schooners were entering the Fox Island Thorofare from the east), reading and writing with a coffee/cocoa mug in hand – a great escape from society's pressures. I loved it and soaked it all in! However, despite my caution and avoidance of the poison ivy on Little Hen I., my left arm showed off those tell-tale, wet, itchy blisters the next day. I soaped off from top to bottom and did not find any more blisters later. Whew!

For the following day I had more gunkholing planned. I would first try to get around Penobscot I. into Winter Harbor via the narrow tidal arm at its SW corner, and from there via Mill River into Seal Cove and the Fox I. Thorofare. The first shortcut was a tidal delight, while the second one did not work out, because it would have necessitated a rather long and awkward portage over mud and ledges. So I cruised around Calderwood Neck and Point instead towards North Haven, where I swung

around Kent Cove back out east to the tiny rock pile island of Little Thorofare.

One mile before I reached my destination for the day, my luck ran out: all of a sudden my starboard rudder cable snapped. 15 years of hard use must have shredded the steel cable, running in a Kevlar sleeve. I beached my boat and got out my repair kit, where I found some Pella window sashcord, extremely tough string, which I had packed for just such a situation. I tied a length to the rudder yoke and over the cockpit rim into the boat to my foot brace/steering pedal. Done! It did not take more than 15 minutes and worked very successfully as a temporary fix. But there was more trouble to come.

Ascending Little Thorofare I. was much harder than fixing the rudder. I encircled the steep little island, but found no pocket beach or rock shelf to take out on, other than the bar running over to the little ledge island. The MITA campsite on top of the island looked great, though. It had an unobstructed view north over Penobscot Bay, from Great Spruce Head I. in the west, past Eagle I. all the way across the bay to Deer Isle and Isle au Haut in the east. So you see, I had to find a way to get up there. High tide made things easier, but it was still rough and quite acrobatic. I eventually balanced my boat on some sharp, more or less level ledges, wedging my bow and stern lines into crevices to secure it. I tried not to worry about how I would get my boat back down to the water's edge at low tide tomorrow morning. I could not see the ledge drop-off below my boat perch at high tide. So I left that problem for tomorrow. How bad could it be?

"Where there is a will, there is a way", I always keep telling myself in tight situations. By the way, this saying was my very first English sentence I learned in fourth grade – a real mouthful for a little German kid, believe me! It has plenty of the 3 hardest sounds in the English language: r, th and w, turning into: "Vay-ah zay-ah iss a vill, zay-ah iss a vay." (Don't laugh! Vut is rrrong viss zet?)

When it was time to call Nancy at 5:00 p.m., I noticed my SAT phone was dead - a first on my many trips. Maybe I had not charged the battery after my Casco Bay trip this May, but worst of all, I had left the spare battery at home, thinking I would not need it on a short one-week trip. Two slip-ups! And I do not take kindly to that sort of thing, being a teacher and all that! So I decided to send Nancy a second SPOT locator message, hopefully indicating to her that I definitely had landed, was still on schedule and did not need to be rescued by the Coast Guard.

Next morning dawned beautifully, but the tide was dead low. The edge of the island looked much steeper and more ragged than anticipated. It also looked much farther down than the usual 10 foot tidal drop. My boat was hanging up there in the ragged, black rocks like a piece of bleached driftwood, very forlorn, but also very dramatic. You've got to record this, I thought to myself, take a picture of your boat high and dry, teetering up there on those sharp ledges, held on tight only by bow and stern lines. If it had been an Old Town Canoe Co. Royalex Tripper canoe, I would have felt tempted to

reenact Old Town's famous toss off the factory roof. Remember that successful ad picture for Royalex canoes? But no, I could not do that to my precious Kevlar boat.

And as I was visualizing the picture for this trip report, which editors Bob Hicks (of "Messing About In Boats") and Tamsin Venn (of "Atlantic Coastal Kayaker") would surely like and appreciate, my left Teva sandal-foot rubbed over some loose rock and slid into a crack in the rocks, a good 3 feet down, or even more, with all my weight on it. I kept my balance, though, being an old gymnast, by flailing my arms wildly. Unfortunately, my right arm held my camera by the safety strap and it "whammo!" exploded on the rocks. Numbed and in shock, I dutifully picked up the camera pieces, put everything back in its bag, including the film that had popped out, when I suddenly noticed the excruciating pain in my left big toe, and the copious blood dripping from toes, shin and ankles. I had known for some time that I had to go digital with my photography, but I would have chosen a less painful transition.

My wilderness first-aid course, which I took along with my daughter Brenda, the raft guide, came in handy cleaning and dressing my gashes. I even buddy-taped my big toe to the next, since I was not sure it was not broken. I felt quite stupid that I had let this accident happen, but moved on immediately, with grim determination, hoping to make the accident un-happen. I packed my gear, took down the tent, carried all bags to a rock shelf from whence I thought I would be able to get gear and me back into the boat and water.

Only one problem remained: how would I get my boat there? Well, believe me, I planned every step and painfully hobbled, while heaving and prying, slipping and sliding, dragging and cajoling the 65-pound boat down to the water's edge. I left some white gel coat on the almost black rocks, which I rarely do. The sharp barnacles did not help either. But I got off eventually. So, what next?

Two Tylenol kicked in quickly; steering was done with the other toes. I was determined the trip would continue as planned. However, I was also very aware that I did not have many other options other than being picked up here and shuttled back to my put-in/take-out place in Wadsworth Cove, Castine. But how could I call for help? My SAT phone was dead. I still had my VHF radio, though, and could call other boats within range or the Coast Guard on channel #16. And then there would be the emergency button on my SPOT locator beacon. Naah! Suck it up! Let's move on!

Last year, some of you might remember, I had to miss visiting The Porcupines off Eagle I. because of wind and tide, but not this year, I insisted. So my course took me straight north past Sheep and Bald to Eagle I. and The Porcupines, which looked just as cute as the name implied. Then I swung northwest into very familiar territory, past Butter and Great Spruce Head I., and from there again straight north past Beach to Eastern Barred I.

And what a delightful place this was. West and East Barred I. were connected with a crescent pebble beach, as the name implies. There was an easy landing, even some sand to rest the boat on, near the MITA site at the very eastern end of the bar. I had read there might be an eagle on Western Barred I., but I saw and heard none.

The shaded campsite was easily accessible over a few ledge steps, the ground fairly level, but a chainsaw would improve this site greatly and quickly, by taking out the many fallen, leaning and hung trees over the only grassy area. You see, I am not comfortable pitching my tent under a hung/leaning tree, after a tree fell on my tent, with me in it, at an official campsite at Allagash Falls in the Allagash Wilderness Waterway in northern Maine some years ago.

The night was miserable. I never knew a mangled toe, broken or just twisted, but swollen big time, could hurt so much. Every 4 hours I reached for more Tylenol, but could not wait to get up, fix breakfast and be off again.

It was another great, sunny day. A light southerly breeze pushed me along across the last 3-mile open water stretch to Cape Rosier, and from there across the mouth of the Bagaduce River, back to Wadsworth Cove near the town of Castine. I had done it, the trip was over, and what splendid scenery I had the privilege of seeing around Islesboro, North Haven, but especially around Vinalhaven Island. It certainly lived up to my expectations. Only Little Thorofare I. will be marked in my MITA trip booklet as a day trip island only. There simply is no way to get a kayak or canoe up there above high tide line, at least not solo. I don't feel too bad that my rudder cable broke – better now than rounding a windy cape. My poison ivy did not spread and did heal. My camera needed replacing anyway, but my toe still hurts a month later as I write this report.

But all's well that ends well. A phone call on a friendly beach-comber's cell phone alerted Nancy at home in Orono that I had landed; and little over an hour later she was there to pick me up. Thanks a million, as always! You are a true gem!

The trip home was smooth; only our big, rambunctious yellow lab Willoughby had a hard time understanding that I could not take him to the park for a serious romp and swim. Sorry, boy! We'll make up for it later.

Signing off on yet another great and almost perfect trip.

Enjoy, be safe, make sure you have your batteries charged, avoid poison ivy, and watch your step on sharp rocks! :-)

Reinhard
reinhard@maine.edu
www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com

NOAA charts for Penobscot Bay, Maine

Maine Island Trail Association, Portland, ME
Maine Island Trail, 2012 guide (MITA's handy trail guide for overnights etc., which is
free with your \$45 annual membership)

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