

Cape to Cape – A First

By Will Means

It was a little over a year ago the first time I got into a sea kayak, or any kayak for that matter. Through [work](#), I had gotten to know my now good friend Chris Thomas and one day he asked if I wanted to go out for a paddle around Gloucester harbor. I was pretty new to the area and this seemed like a very “New Englandy” thing to do and I’m all about new experiences so I jumped at the opportunity. So Chris, me, and this other guy named Steve who had also never been in a kayak set out on our sunny summer adventure. I don’t know how far we paddled that day, maybe five miles, and all inside the harbor. I wouldn’t say that I was “hooked” but it was a good time and throughout that summer and fall, I followed Chris on several more short trips around Cape Ann, mostly when it was too wet to go rock climbing. If you had told me then that in a year’s time I would be a part of the first kayak crossing of Massachusetts Bay, crossing forty-six miles of open ocean, unescorted, I would have said you were crazy.

Chris, though he may not admit it, is something of a local legend in the New England kayaking community. Chris has been logging hours in sailboats, canoes and kayaks since he was eight years old. He spent twenty years as a guide and instructor and has competed in whitewater, kayak polo, and kayak surfing championships.

I’m also lucky enough to work with Nick Nagel, another accomplished paddler. Nick loves kayaking in all of its forms. He started sea kayaking many years ago (more than he likes to count) but quickly became interested in whitewater paddling and the game of kayak polo. Nick competed in the [US Kayak Polo](#) national championship games just three weeks prior to this trip.

So one day earlier this summer, I dropped in on a conversation between Chris and Nick. They were talking about, more dreaming about, this idea that they had to cross Massachusetts Bay. I guess Chris had conceived it ages ago but it never got off the ground. Nick had gotten interested in the idea and they had been tossing it around for the last few years but still without any real headway. But Nick was adamant. Day after day he would bring it up, jokingly it seemed, almost taunting Chris. One night at the climbing gym, Chris mentioned it to Doug Millen and, without hesitation, Doug said that he was on board... if it ever happened.

Doug “The Machine” Millen has been paddling for eight years, logging over 2500 hours in a kayak, and is a registered Maine Sea Kayaking Guide. Over the last five years he has paddled the entire coast from Gloucester to the Bay of Fundy, so this trip had a special meaning for him in that it would complete his kayaking voyage from Cape Cod to the Canadian border. You can check out his story at www.nekayaking.com.

Throughout the summer, this “joke” about kayaking from Cape Ann to Cape Cod kept floating around and, eventually, it stopped sounding like a joke and started sounding more like a mission. Our CEO at work, [Alexander Falk](#), got wind of it and started showing interest. Alexander is an experienced boat captain himself, a certified instructor, and Commander of the [Marblehead Sail and Power Squadron](#). So when Alexander offered to serve as a chase boat, the dream started to become a possibility. All they needed was one more paddler; someone with nothing else to do, someone too foolish to know better, someone who you could stick in a boat and say “shut up and paddle like hell.” In other words...someone like me.

It started off simple enough. Watch the weather, calculate the currents, the speeds, secure the boats, get in shape, arrange the logistics. And then as time went on, things got more complicated. The weather was fickle; appearing agreeable until the last

minute and then suddenly changing. Logistics were even more fickle. Who's going to drive the car? Where do we start, here or there? And getting five schedules together was downright nightmarish. There were a few false starts that were so close, that calling them off at the last minute would send us all into fits of depression that lasted for days. Tempers flared. Friendships were tested. And we hadn't even gotten in the water yet. By the time October rolled around things were not looking good. Our window of time was closing fast. Winds would come around from the north soon. Temperatures would drop. Mutterings of "maybe next year" were heard. It was decided that Monday, October 9th, was the absolute deadline. If it had not happened by then, it was not going to happen. The boats had to go back to their owners. Our lives had to be returned to normal. We had to move on.

It was Friday, October 5th, when I came into work and saw that excited look on Chris's face. "It's dead calm out there. We're going tomorrow. Oh, but Alex is sick so there's no chase boat. We'll be on our own."

Chase boat, schmase boat. Let's go!



The Route

Saturday morning, October 7, 2007, 3:15 a.m., we embarked from the beaches of Stage Fort Park in Gloucester. It was warm for that time of the morning, downright balmy for that time of the morning at that time of the year. And it was dark, really dark. Just a

sliver of a moon hung in the eastern sky. We paddled straight into the darkness barely saying a word for hours before the sky began to lighten up. By the time we stopped for our first break, we had paddled longer and farther than I ever had in my life.



Sunrise

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That first break had us all wondering what trials the rest of the day would bring. Chris fell out of the boat, we lost one of our marine radios to the depths of the sea, and we discovered a pretty major leak in the hatch of Tango I, Doug and Nick's boat. But soon we were making headway again and the rest of the day was smooth sailing, err, paddling.

At the onset of this, I had three major concerns; the weather, being run over by really big boats, and physical exhaustion. Happily, surprisingly, none of these ended up being concerns at all. The weather was perfect. It was practically dead calm, with light breezes of maybe 5 knots, practically flat seas, and comfortable temperatures in the high 70s. We hardly saw any boats at all, even when crossing the channel. The few that we encountered really just wanted to get a closer look at the lunatics in the kayaks and yell something across the water at us like, "You guys are out of your friggin' minds!"

What I had not counted on, or prepared myself for, was the wildlife. I was told that we might, if we were lucky, see some whales. We would be passing over Stellwagen Bank

which is a spawning area for Humpbacks. I know that whale-watch excursions are popular around here but I've never been on one. I had never seen a whale outside of Sea World. I had never even been out in the ocean far enough that I couldn't see land. And then I found myself in a flimsy little fiberglass kayak, within 100 meters of a pod of feeding Humpbacks the size of city buses. When Chris first excitedly alerted us of whales in the distance, I thought, "Well I missed it." And then when they got closer and I got my first look at the giant flukes slapping the water, I thought, "Oh great now I've seen a whale in the wild." And when they came even closer and we could see several of them jumping, I thought, "Wow this is an incredible experience that I am so lucky to have!" And then they came even closer. Too close. And I thought, "Get me out of here!" And for the first time, I was delighted that I had the burden of controlling the rudder and was able to point the boat in the direction away from the whales. Not that it really made much difference; they could have closed the gap between us in mere seconds. Yes, I know Humpback whales are not aggressive and they would not have eaten us, but the prospect of an accidental bump was enough to keep me paddling strong for a few miles. About the time my heart rate had slowed to normal beat, we noticed the two sharks not twenty meters off to starboard. I don't know much about sharks and I don't know what kind these were but as far as I'm concerned they are all man-eaters. The general consensus is that they were eight to ten feet in length but, if you ask me, they were twenty feet if they were an inch. Luckily, they didn't show any interest and disappeared as quickly as they had surfaced. But, again, I was glad to be in control of the rudder since Chris was actually paddling backwards to try to get closer to them as I was paddling twice as hard to get away from them.

In short, the day was perfect. The weather held out. Our bodies held out. The miles clicked off like minutes and we reached Race Point before sundown, only to find our ride waiting and ready to chauffeur four snoring bodies back to Gloucester. Oh, and I got to see

Cape Cod, which I had never seen before. Another first.●



Will-Terra Firma Copyright Chris Thomas

Special thanks to Joel Thomas of [New England Small Craft](#) and Bob Hicks of [Messin' About in Boats](#) for use of their Seda Tangos. Thanks to Alexander Falk for navigation and preparedness assistance and general motivation. And thanks to Bill Schoolcraft for the ride home.



*Nick, Chris, Tango I, and Tango II
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