

The Chesapeake Paddler



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A Circumnavigation of Manhattan *By David Moore*

BRRRIIINNNGGGG!

The alarm clock rouses me to darkness. It is 3 am—time to get moving if I am going to make the 5:45 am launch with my paddling group. We need to start on time so we can hit the tides and currents that will get us around the island. What island? Why Manhattan – popularly known as New York City. (Properly speaking, it is only one borough of the city.) Today is the annual Circumnavigation of Manhattan, and 30-plus miles of paddling await us.

My host and trip organizer Jerry Blackstone and I head south from Yonkers. We stop for coffees and arrive at the Downtown Boat House. We are the first to arrive in the diminishing darkness.

Across the Hudson River, the lights of Jersey City dot the horizon. It is 4:45 am. We unload and wait for the other paddlers. They appear gradually, and the pier fills with boats and gear. Fifteen kayakers soon crowd the dock.

We launch about 6 am and head south. We're going down the Hudson, towards New York Harbor.

The morning is clear with light clouds, a startling contrast to the rainy past couple of weeks. The Statue of Liberty, well to the south, greets us with the dawn. We get an immediate surprise; despite our calculations, the current is not against us. We are riding runoff from the recent rains upriver. The flow has overwhelmed the current. Ground Zero opens up on our left, the distinct space left by the World Trade Center. As we round the Battery, the Coast Guard notices our presence and announces to the world, "Security! Security! All mariners note that 15 kayakers are in the water heading towards the East River."

Well, almost. We wait for the Staten Island Ferry to leave its pier before we enter the East River. The East River is much narrower than the Hudson and the flood tide pushes us quickly upstream. We are moving at 6 to 7 mph while barely paddling. I put paddle to the pedal, and soon my GPS registers 10 mph. I fly out in front of the group and then slow down because we are a group, and there is traffic on the river.

We hurry past the United Nations Building and up the East Channel around Roosevelt Island. As we



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do, a line of powerboats passes us going in the opposite direction. Their wakes add to each other and reflect off the banks. We're in four feet of clapotis and shouts of "Whoopee!" erupt amongst us. We're playing in the waves and still moving at 7 mph.

We soon arrive at our first break point—a beach on Long Island near the Hellsgate. The Hellsgate is a dangerous zone of standing waves and whirlpools, formed by converging currents of the Harlem and East Rivers and the Long Island Sound.

During our break, we discuss how to best cross it. We are well over 2 hours ahead of schedule at this point, so we take a long break. A nearby sculpture garden offers a nice diversion.

Soon, it's back to the boats before the rising tide carries them away. We cross the Hellsgate without too much difficulty and head into the Harlem River against a 2 mph current. This is a toughest part of the trip: the river is filthy, the scenery is not great and I am tired from only three hours of sleep. The current changes to slack as we slide by Yankee Stadium, then flows with us as we head towards the Hudson.

Eventually, we stop at a boathouse funded, in part, by Bette Midler. It is a lovely facility, but the guard refuses to let us rest there. Fortunately, there is a beach behind the floating structure. We take a break and then push on towards the Hudson.

Finally, the scenery becomes pretty. We are in a gorge as we pass the northern tip of Manhattan. We round the corner through some eddies and find Dyckman Beach. We land carefully, for there is a lot of broken glass. We look for toilets, food and drink. There is a child's birthday party underway—we are a sharp contrast to the kids in their best clothing!

We relaunch and discover that simply holding our position is difficult. A 3 to 4 mph current tries to push us downstream. But soon we're flying down the river again. We blast below the George Washington Bridge and breeze past the Waterworks.

Now, the river is congested. Coast Guard regulations require us to stay in the channel, so we are forced out with the large craft. In fact, we nearly collide with two barges that are crossing each other's paths. They go on either side of us. Their wakes, a 15 mph wind, some chop and clapotis make for interesting paddling.

Ferries and other craft are zooming around us. We form into a tight group for the remainder of the trip.

And, here we are: back at the Downtown Boathouse. At 3 pm, it is quite different from the darkened facility that we departed from at 6 am. Kayaks are everywhere in the water and people line up for free rides on the dock (the boathouse provides free paddling opportunities to New Yorkers). Volunteers do all the work; in return, they get to store their boats in the facility. The boathouse also provides loaner kayaks; in fact, a couple of paddlers from our group used them.

I do a couple of "victory" rolls and pull my boat out of the water. Jerry, the others and I load our gear and go in search of food.

Seems these New York paddlers enjoy the same things we CPA paddlers do: they also paddle to eat!

