

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Epic paddle on the 'Great Potomac' tests stamina, skills

No paddle? No problem. Flexibility and teamwork (and wine and Ibuprofen) are the key gear

By Igor Boras, with introduction by Ralph Heimlich

In April I got a call from a person wanting to do a long kayak trip on the Potomac River for his birthday during the week before the Memorial Day weekend. Because the proposed itinerary was so ambitious, I returned the call and then corresponded with Igor by email as he refined his paddle plan. The original itinerary (with my comments in italics) was:



Photo/Ward@ Belle Haven Marina

Two conditioning paddles: *The paddlers (from left to right): Tom Cross, Igor Boras, Dan Leeds, Anton Boras, Jim Olson.*

May 18 - Key Bridge to Washington Marina and back

May 20 - Washington Marina to Belle Haven Marina and back *About 16 nautical miles.*

Then the paddle:

May 24 - Belle Haven Marina to Leesylvania State Park, hugging VA coast (sleeping home at Alexandria) *About 23 nm, quite a long day.*

May 25 - Leesylvania State Park, VA via Mallows Bay, MD to Fairview Beach, VA (sleeping in Colonial Beach) *It is 10 nm to Mallows, and another 10.5 to Fairview Beach, for about 20 nm.*

May 26 - Fairview Beach, VA to Colonial Beach, VA, hugging VA coast (sleeping in Colonial Beach) *It is 30 nm, which is a REALLY long day.*

May 27 - Colonial Beach, VA via Coles Point, VA crossing to Piney Point, MD, sleeping in Pines Point hotel *It is 26 nm to Coles Point, and another 6 nm on a direct line to Piney Point, for 32 miles, and another incredibly long day. The 6 mile open water crossing could be a real danger if you have a T-storm halfway across.*

May 28 - Piney Point, MD to Point Lookout State Park, MD, hugging MD coast *16 nm to Point Lookout.*

We have multiple copies of laminated nautical charts, fog sirens, pouches for cell phones. We will call off the

trip in the case of lightning or high wind. *There is a T-storm on the lower Potomac almost every day from June to September. It isn't so much a matter of "if" as when it occurs during your paddling day. We will have a LOT of food and water and extra clothes and sun screen. We are planning not to paddle 2 hours after low tide and try to "ride" the time between high tide and low tide.*

Thank you so much for your help; it was very valuable. We rented touring kayaks, Dagger Stratos (14.5) and Old Town Wilderness (14) polyethylene boats, one with rudder and the rest with skeg, from Annapolis Canoe and Kayak for \$159/kayak, including paddle, PFD, water pump and paddle float.

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Day 1 - Belle Haven to Leesylvania State Park—Five of us, Igor Boras,

Anton Boras, Dan Leeds, Jim Olsen and Tom Cross, started at Belle Haven about 9AM and finished at Leesylvania SP about 3PM (23 nm/6 hr = almost 4 nm/hr). It was hard but very enjoyable - first blisters showed up for two people. Even though I had paddling gloves, next time I would get a pair of padded paddle grips. We basically went from one point to another using the nautical laminated charts. The folks were enthusiastic and collected trash along the way. That idea was abandoned next day due to the hard work and need to preserve energy.

Day 2 - Leesylvania State Park to

Caledon State Park—I called it a

marathon. One of us left a paddle at the beach the day before, so we had to wait until the state park opened at 9AM to rent one. Started at 9:30AM and ended at 7:30PM (24 nm/10 hrs = 2.4 nm/hr). We crossed the river at the narrow point before Quantico without much problem. Hit a rough patch at Mallows Bay but stayed OK. Went around the eastward bend of the Potomac, point by point, until we hit Maryland Point (Lions Camp Merrick) and then we crossed the river. Endless paddling from point to point was particularly tiring. Crossing the river was a rush. After the crossing, people were really tired, but we eventually made it to Caledon State Park. We missed the campground but hit the beach upriver from it and tied the kayaks to a bicycle rack. We walked 1.5 miles to the parking lot (otherwise it would have been four miles) and met John from the Dennison Street Inn who drove us back to their B&B in Colonial Beach. There, after our showers, his wife made us dinner at 9:30PM; we ate and drank wine.

She also offered to do our laundry and we accepted.

Many more blisters and much soreness. My son alternated between three pairs of gloves as each would create a blister at a different spot. I also had two blisters. Our bodies were hurting, so everybody was

taking ibuprofen. I saw the condition of the "troops" and decided to shorten the trip next day.



Jim and Anton get ready for Day 2 at Leesylvania State Park. Photo/Igor Boras

Day 3 - Caledon State Park (lower end) to Route 301 bridge—

John, the B&B owner, drove us back to the park; we started at 9:30AM. My son started very weak—worn out from the Day 2 marathon and after Mile 1, he decided to go back. I paddled with him back to the park where the B&B owner returned with his pick up to take him back to the inn.

The four of us had a

pleasant ride to the bridge. Aiming for the bridge was nice because we had in sight, after three or four hours of paddling, a spot where we would finish, unlike the seemingly endless bays. We lost an hour while going back with my son and then deciding what to do, so we arrived at the bridge about 3:30PM (12 nm/6 hr = 2 nm/hr). We had a great meal at Denson's Grocery Restaurant and local wine (Ingleside Winery). Due to exhaustion and a bad weather forecast for the next day, one member of the team decided three days was enough. The remaining three paddlers decided to cut the distance again for next day.

Day 4 - Colton Point (MD) to Piney Point (MD)—We were afraid of

bad weather, so John drove us with three kayaks to Colton Point, right across from St. Clements Island. We had an inconvenient ramp launch because the local property owners did not allow us to use their sandy beach.

We left about 10AM and finished at 4PM. We were much faster this time and made it to land before the storm hit at 6:30PM. We locked the kayaks in the Island Resort and Inn garage and feasted on crab cakes and beer at the Ruddy Duck Restaurant next to the hotel.

Day 5 - Cancelled—The wind was too strong and weather was cold, so we decided not to risk it. Because there was little to gain, and a lot to lose, we went back to Annapolis with help of the friend who dropped after day 3 and my family (with a trailer) to return the kayaks and equipment.



Photo/Tom Cross

After a long day in the boat., Igor was super happy to reach Caledon State Park.

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WHAT WE LEARNED:

- Importance of teamwork—When we had adversity, we came together and solved the problem instead of being desperate.
- Distances are relative—When you see the end point ahead of you (goal), it may be farther than you think.
- Long trips are big mental exercise—You need to shut down the mind and just focus on rhythm and direction in order to put in the long miles.
- Importance of training/preparation—None of us knew what it means to paddle six to 10 hours each day. Paddling one hour doesn't give you a feel for what 10 hours are like.
- We were well supplied with food and drink, about four liters/day each, and reapplied sunscreen during every break, about every two hours.
- Having a spotter (cabana/bail-out boy) would have made the trip shorter. People were not able to quit because they knew they had to reach the end point each day. If there had been a bail-out option, some would have quit.
- Ideally, this trip would be done in 10 days, but who can take 10 days away from the family? Perhaps we should have planned distances to match the time available, since we had to shorten it along the way.
- You should NOT mess with the Mother Nature—we respected the wind and weather and dropped the last leg.
- Comfortable lodging with good mattresses and without bugs made a huge difference in terms of rest and readiness for next day.
- We are all better for doing it and will have everlasting memories of our time on the Great Potomac River!



Dan, Jim and Tom take their first break of Day 3 after passing Caledon State Park.

About 15 years ago, I was hiking with my wife in Shenandoah National Park on the Cedar Run/White Oak Canyon trail, which features 8 great waterfalls. A group of young, unprepared students in flip-flops with

little water for the hot August day hiked along with us. At the first waterfall, they were very enthusiastic and screaming about it. At the third one, they were happy. At the fifth they lost gusto; they were okay with it. At the seventh waterfall a young man said to the girl, "Here's another one." She replied, "Damn WATERFALLS!!!!"

That is how we felt sometimes, "damn mansions, damn bald eagles, or in my case - damn fossils". Nobody

is cheerful when running a marathon. No marathon runner appreciates when somebody says, "just a little bit" because he knows how hard it is to make each new step to "a nearby place". The mental state was just to reach the next point and the one after that, and so forth—no projections, no frustrations, just paddle, look around, look at the directions and think about something else.

However, every marathon runner is happy when the race is over. We were very happy and considered this trip a great success because it gave us a different perspective on the mighty Potomac and gave us an idea of what our bodies can endure while our life is on the descending arc of "over the hill" (except my son, of course. He's still YOUNG).

Thank you for assisting me and please let me know if we can assist anybody in the future. ♦

Did you enjoy reading Igor's story? Do you have compassion for his friends who endured so much to help Igor pursue his goal and celebrate his 60 years' young birthday? Do you appreciate how honest he was about his own novice shortcomings? Whatever fortuitous path led you to kayaking, those of us who love the water could hardly be living in a more ideal location for indulging that love. The Chesapeake Paddler is here to expand the information base for hundreds of CPA members, offer new opportunities, and stimulate imaginations. The Paddler wants to present many and varied voices and perspectives.

Please tell us of one of your experiences on the water, as Igor did, by submitting an article. Please.