

WEST GREENLAND 1999

The Long Journey Home for a Greenland Kayak

- Paul Caffyn

Why on earth would a couple of Kiwi paddlers spend an inordinate amount of time and money to fly with their kayaks to West Greenland? The answer to the question is largely due to the fact that on all my previous odysseys, I had paddled a fibreglass kayak whose lines were taken from a West Greenland Eskimo sea-hunting kayak. Dugouts and sailing canoes were the former traditional mode of transport for my Antipodean odysseys (New Zealand, Australia and New Caledonia), and kayaks were not used in the old days in either Japan or Great Britain. To gain experience in sea ice and view traditional Arctic Inuit skin boats, I set off around Alaska in 1989 from Prince Rupert, to reach Inuvik in August 1991 with sightings only of two skin kayaks in the villages of Hooper Bay and Tununak. Distinctly lacking appropriate tender loving care, the wooden framed boats were stored on fish drying racks with canvas skins drooping forlornly in tatters. I had long dreamed of meeting an Inuit paddler on the water, sadly however fast runabouts with powerful outboard motors had totally superseded the old Alaskan skin kayaks.

My appetite for paddling in Greenland was whetted by articles by John Heath, George Gronseth and Lone Madsen in *Sea Kayaker*, which talked of a renaissance both of kayak building and instruction of paddling skills by the Inuit (see Sources). Kayak historian John Heath wrote in an article on *The Greenland Kayak Club* that ‘by the middle of the twentieth century, the kayak had fallen into disuse, and a whole generation of Greenlanders had virtually no knowledge of them.’ John penned a moving tribute following the death of legendary paddler Manasse Mathaeussen, who was largely responsible for initiating the Greenland renaissance. John noted that:

‘Manasse was in demand for kayak demonstrations from the 1960s until he retired. He took his kayak all over Greenland and to Europe, Canada and Alaska. He did more than any other person to keep interest in traditional kayaking alive.’

I began building up a database of information and investigated the logistics of transporting my New Zealand built boat to Greenland. My bank balance suffered through acquisition of some of the Greenland classics, *Northern Lights* and *Watkins Last Expedition* by F. Spencer Chapman, *Greenland by the Polar Sea, Across Arctic America* by Knud Rasmussen and H.C. Petersen’s *Skinboats of Greenland*. The more I read, the greater became my desire to paddle in Greenland. Unfortunately the logistics problem and cost of transporting the boats proved insurmountable.

By a stroke of luck, or maybe it was synchronicity, at a New Zealand sea kayak symposium I met a long bearded American paddler whose lifestyle I could only envy. In the northern summers he worked on the Greenland icecap and spent the southern summers in the Antarctic, mixing in plenty of sea kayaking between work contracts and thus totally avoiding any winter months in either hemisphere. Kevin Killilea’s slides of what he termed ‘boring days in Disco Bay’ were visually stunning, glassy seas festooned with humungous glassy icebergs. He also easily solved our logistics problem with airline schedules and contact addresses.

In June 1998, we flew with our kayaks from New Zealand via Heathrow and Copenhagen to Kangerlussuaq, just north of the Arctic Circle and headed seaward via the huge former glaciated valley of Søndre Strømfjord. My cunning plan was to paddle south to the airport at Narsarssuaq, stash the boats for the winter then continue

in 1999 around Cape Farewell and up the East Coast to Ammassalik. Then in 2000 we'd fly across to Kangerlussuaq with the boats and head north for Thule.

Paddling partner Conrad Edwards is a natural athlete, tall, lean with an enviable body that has no puppy fat. Of British birth, his misspent youth was spent in the Army although he took up kayak racing in earnest while he was at university. He is a grand companion on a mission, seldom perturbed by sea and weather conditions, smokes a pipe and has developed an interest in Arctic literature. My only criticism of the 'young fella' is that he has an alarming English Pointer dog instinct of making a beeline for the most distant point on the horizon whereas that instinct has long been bred out of me in advancing years. I am more like an old black Labrador now, wanting to sniff and pee on all the beaches.

Our 700 mile journey south in 1998 was a corker, highlighted by a close encounter with a pod of sei whales, meeting paddlers and kayak builders with local clubs at Manitsoq and Nuuk, visiting village museums to photograph old skin kayaks and equipment, paddling in awe through densely packed icebergs, and soaking up 1,000 year old Norse History at Gardar and Brattahlid. Kayaks safely stashed in an old wartime building at Narsarssuaq, we flew home to plan the 1999 mission.

Early October 1998 I was stunned by the sad news of Lone Madsen's death on the east coast of Greenland (S/K June 1999). In June 1998 we had spent two days in a small cabin south of Kangamiut while waiting for a gale to ease. The hut log-book contained only three entries from passing paddlers, one of which was from Lone and her two companions, Inngi Bisgaard and Rina Broberg. In 1996 the trio paddled south from Sisimiut to near Cape Farewell (S/K June 1997). That news plus the report by Lonnie Dupre (S/K August 1999) of bad ice conditions on the east coast of Greenland led to a rethink of my cunning plan for 1999. With a tight time frame (Conrad has a real job with only six week's holiday), a hold up with bad sea ice conditions could lead to missing flight connections home. After due consideration we decided to ferry up to Kangamiut and paddle north up the west coast to either Thule or Upernavik.

The outstanding highlight of our 1999 trip was a stay in the small Inuit village of Igdlorssuit. At a latitude of 71°15', the village lies on the north east coast of Ubekendt Ejland where colourful Danish style houses, predominantly blue, red, green and yellow, lie dotted along a narrow coastal plain below a steep barren escarpment rising inland to over 1000 m. We arrived late morning on a gloriously calm day, no wind, blue skies and the sea dotted with huge lumps of ice from calving glaciers across the sound. Fish drying racks and parked up komatiks were spread between the houses, close to the beach, while staked out sled dog teams seemed to take up the rest of the space on the narrow strip. Paddling along the beach towards a small wharf or loading dock, we observed several skin kayaks stored cockpit down on the fish racks, perched safely out of reach of the hungry dogs. Although it was Sunday, we had hoped to stock up food for the next long leg to Søndre Upernavik but unfortunately the shop had just closed its doors. This was a good excuse to stay till next morning, a chance for my paddling muscles to recuperate and a great photographic opportunity, given the glorious weather and scenery.

As we manoeuvred around the old skin kayaks with our cameras, five in total between us, a grey haired Danish chap in blue overalls stopped to chat. As our grasp of both Danish and Greenlandic was rather spartan, we were chuffed Hans spoke English so we could learn more about village life and its history. For over 20 years Hans had lived at Igdlorssuit and currently worked as a mechanic/engineer for the Royal

Greenland fish processing plant. His father, a doctor specialising in tuberculosis, had spent several summers treating Inuit patients at the Thule trading post established by Peter Freuchen and Knud Rasmussen in 1909. Old faded photographs taken at Thule by his father inspired Hans to visit Greenland where he worked for three years at the US Airforce base at Kangerlussuaq. A compatriot wished to return home to Denmark but lacked funds for an air ticket. Although Hans offered to lend him money, the chap refused but said he owned a dog team and komatik at Igdlorssuit - and that is why Hans first visited the village to check out his new team and sled! He stayed, married a lass from Upernavik and learned to fish and drive his team of dogs.

With a population of 120 people and 550 dogs, fishing is the mainstay of the village, carried out throughout summer, and in winter through the sea ice. Autumn, Hans told us, was the worst time for fishing with bad weather. The latest two graves in the hillside cemetery were fatalities from a fishing dinghy capsizing in freezing waters.

In summer the tethered dogs are only fed every three days. We watched an elderly Inuit chap with his six year old son feeding fish from a wheelbarrow to his team. Larger fish were cut in half, while smaller fish were thrown whole to the ravenous, excited dogs who caught their meal in mid air. Two large fish were carried to a patiently waiting bitch suckling a mob of tiny pups. Minutes later, the barrow load of fish had disappeared with nary a scale, fin or fish bone left on the ground, and the chap wheeled his barrow into the sea to wash it clean.

In winter the dogs are fed daily as they have to haul heavy freight komatiks out to the ice fishing holes. Fledgling tourist operations were trialed in several villages either for the experience of travelling behind a dog team or hunting for polar bears. Hans related a story involving a German couple travelling on a komatik from Ilulissat. When the Inuit driver was not satisfied with the behaviour of one of his team, to the horror of the watching couple, he shot the dog with a rifle, proceeded to remove the pelt with his skinning knife, then threw the bloody pelt on the komatik. Word spread quickly afterwards and that was the end of winter tourist dog driving in Ilulissat!

We observed seven old kayaks in the village, most with white painted canvas skins, but one traditional seal skin kayak still in remarkable condition. I marvelled at its similarity in profile to our modern kevlar kayaks but had no comprehension that this village was the source of a skin kayak that was taken to Scotland 40 years earlier, and from which the fibreglass Nordkapp kayak evolved, the kayak that been my bosom buddy for 22 years and some 35,000+ miles.

Back in New Zealand I began digging through sea kayak magazines and old files for more information on the evolution of the Nordkapp. In the British magazine *Ocean Paddler* I stumbled on an article with a drawing showing *Lines of the Igdlorssuit Kayak* with an address for the kayak surveyor, Duncan Winning. Hot on the trail, I penned a letter requesting more information and was chuffed to receive a package of photocopied articles from Duncan to whom I am indebted for the following information.

A professor from St. Andrews University in Britain, Harald Drever, had a long association with Igdlorssuit and he persuaded a young Scottish university student and paddler, Kenneth Taylor, to undertake a one man expedition to the village where he would study the kayak and its place in Inuit culture. In 1959 Kenneth arrived in the village with his own rigid kayak, a PBK 15 designed by Percy Blandford, but later had a slimmer beam skin kayak built for him by 50 year old Emanuel Kornelsen.

Faced with initial shyness from the villagers, after a week spent recovering from the 'flu' Kenneth concentrated on a working Greenlandic language which quickly helped break down shyness barriers with the locals. He camped in a ridge tent and was extremely comfortable and warm between two reindeer skins lent to him by the village headman, Ludwig Quist.

In a 1962 article in *American White Water* Kenneth noted that most village kids between the age of 9 and 12 were instructed in the art of kayaking by a paid instructor in a specially built kid's kayak but it was rare for boys to own their own kayak before the age of 18. On a seal hunting trip with two villagers he capsized but was rescued and his cockpit sponged out using support from a raft of three skin kayaks. In a footnote to Kenneth's article, John Heath noted that of the 18 active kayakers in Igdlorssuit, 13 could roll and most knew several methods. One of the three experienced hunters who could not roll confided that he was such a good paddle bracer he did not believe it mattered.

At the end of summer, Kenneth returned to Scotland with his Igdlorssuit skin kayak where Duncan Winning took photographs and made a drawing which led to the development of several canvas covered and plywood replicas. After Kenneth moved to the USA in 1964, Joe Reid and Duncan carefully surveyed the skin kayak and Duncan produced a longitudinal profile and cross sections. Duncan passed the drawing onto Geoff Blackford in the early 1960s, who increased the boat length, enlarged the cockpit and raised the foredeck to produce a plywood boat called an *Anas Acuta*. Why on earth this name was used is beyond me, sounds more like a pain in the posterior, however in 1972 Frank Goodman began commercially producing this boat design in fibreglass.

In 1975 Colin Mortlock planned an expedition around the North Cape (Nordkapp) of Norway, and was seeking a kayak with better load carrying capabilities than the *Anas Acuta*. He approached Frank Goodman of Valley Canoe Products who rounded out the hard chines of the *Anas Acuta* to produce a new round bilge fibreglass model, with bulkheads, deck accessible storage compartments and a pump, which he called a *Nordkapp*. Word of the success of Colin Mortlock's expedition spread as far as New Zealand where in 1977 a trip was planned in secret around the south west extremity of the South Island, a wild and rugged section of coastline with a reputation for gales and huge seas which is known as Fiordland. Grahame Sisson, a kayak builder, imported a Nordkapp mould from Great Britain for the Fiordland expedition in early 1977 and began building boats for New Zealand paddlers. The August 1977 expedition of three paddlers made only 90 miles before abandoning their trip. Huge seas and sharks dampened the Fiordland paddlers' enthusiasm however the boats performed a treat in the big seas. This led to Max Reynolds and myself trialling and purchasing two of these kayaks. In December 1977 we nervously set off from Te Waewae Bay to paddle around Fiordland, after agreeing that there would be, "no turning back." Following 27 days of gripping paddling, capsizes at sea in breaking humungous swells and a kayak cracking loop onto a boulder beach in the dark, which smashed my helmet and sent a tooth through my lip, we limped into Jackson Bay 350 miles later, both determined never to sit in a kayak ever again!

Memories of those gruelling Fiordland days faded only too quickly, for the sea kayaking bug had bitten me rather deeply. I continued around the South Island to complete my first odyssey at Te Waewae Bay with a champagne reception. Over the years, as post odyssey blues (very similar I would suggest to post natal depression)

led to hauling out a world atlas and scheming further missions, my kayaks were progressively modified. Kevlar was used for the Aussie boat, *Lalaguli*, and a deep draft, aluminium over-stern rudder added to a fibreglass shoe which slid over the Nordkapp stern. Pushing my minimalist, lightweight philosophy to the maximum, we built a 30 pound kevlar/carbon fibre boat for the Japan trip and turned the seat into a middle bulkhead, with the addition of a third hatch/compartment just aft of the cockpit.

Then on 1 August 1999, 40 years after Kenneth Taylor took his made to measure seal skin kayak back to Scotland, Conrad and I paddled two state of the art kevlar Nordkapps into the village of Igdlorssuit, completing a full circle around the world, back to the source from where these marvellous boats had slowly and progressively evolved.

Late evening, I joined Han's two young children on the gravel beach where Louise was wading through shallows to catch with her bare hands, small fish to feed an attentive, clustered group of young pups while Hendrik towed a replica of a fizz boat through the shallows. These replicas are cut from a piece of 5" x 1" timber, bow end trimmed to form a triangle, and a small knob of wood nailed to the stern as an outboard motor. A 3' length of string from a nail at the bow is attached to the end of a short pole which is used to swing the replica in fast arcs over the sea. Attaching a second boat with a short tow line and loading pebbles as ballast added to Hendrik's pleasure with this simple toy. Wherever I saw these common kid's toys, or indeed at the village of Arsuk where we watched youngsters playing delightedly in blue and yellow plastic inflatable rafts, I was saddened by the fact that they were not playing in kayaks. Cable television, beamed in from Nuuk, seems to take precedence with adults in the evenings where as perhaps in the old days, the adults immersed the kids in the art of kayaking.

We joined Hans and his wife for a late evening feed of boiled seal meat on the bone, and were settling into our sleeping bags on the floor of his living room when Hans called out to look through the window. Although it was midnight, the lighting across a glassy sea was magnificent, a soft golden glow of dusk falling on majestic icebergs in the sound, with a distant backdrop of valley glaciers and broad icecaps. Close to the beach, a white Igdlorssuit kayak was gliding past, a black haired Inuit in a white parka moving the boat seemingly effortlessly along. What a magic moment.

Ten gnarly days later, we slid into the harbour at Upernavik where we decided to pull the pin on paddling further north to Thule. Days of mind numbing concentration on a compass bearing through pea soup fog, violent buffeting winds off vertical rock headlands and two gripping eight hour days on the outside coast, dodging rolling icebergs on breaking seas, were too much for the my old black Labrador instincts. We spent hours in the local museum soaking up the sight and smell of the old skin kayaks and umiaks, and stood totally absorbed by beautiful colour prints taken by Danish paddler John Andersen of village life in northwest Greenland.

Although disappointed at not fulfilling the mission to Thule, from two summers and 1400 miles of paddling along west Greenland's coastline, I gained an insight to the sea and weather conditions in which both Inuit skin kayaks and paddling and rolling skills evolved over the centuries. Well designed kayaks and bombproof rolling or bracing were mandatory for survival. And best of all, our modern kevlar boats were able to visit their ancestor mum and dad skin kayaks in the small traditional Inuit village of Igdlorssuit.

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