

Kayaking Capricornia - *A summer kayaking holiday 75km offshore.*

by Jeremy Spear

Mid last year some friends suggested we join them for camping holiday in January. On an island. 75km offshore on the Great Barrier Reef! Seemed like it could be a bit of an adventure at the time. As we were having a family Christmas in NW NSW it seemed a logical extension to our trip. January found us driving north to Gladstone with enough camping gear for 2 adults and 2 children for two weeks. There is nothing like a kayak for use as a luggage pod (Thanks for the help with the cockpit cover Julie – 110km for 12 hrs through rain made the investment worthwhile). Lightweight gear only – sleeping bags etc. A very expensive but very waterproof luggage pod!

We arrived at Gladstone and unloaded all of our camping gear into large stillages which were then forked onto the barge for our 8 hr passage to North West island. We shopped locally and also loaded all of that into plastic crates (there are wild mice on the Is from early settlement days which will try to eat anything not properly stored). The barge company supplied fresh water in large barrels. Bookings to camp on the island are needed to be made well in advance as there is a limit of people camping at any one time as the island is very sensitive to the needs of the nesting turtles. It is very popular and why not, being one of only a few islands on the GBR where you can free camp and be so surrounded by wildlife in a pretty perfect climate. The barge drops it's bow door and delivers you wherever you like within the extensive camping area and then departs leaving you on your own for the duration. There were other campers on the island at the time but we hardly saw them, unless we sought them out. NSW & Brisbane uni dive clubs also stay there and dive basically all day every day in season – they have the only generators and compressors allowed. The snorkeling is great on live reef with very good visibility.

Others camping there also took kayaks so there were plenty of paddling partners. This is different to paddling in the harbour or on rivers. Your life whilst there is dictated by the tides. Low tide means snorkeling, lazing, reading and prepping food. High tide means fishing from a tinnie (highly recommended that you take one if possible – also invaluable for carrying all that gear north) – or paddling.

The sand is quite gritty as it's made from ground up coral and shells. Reef shoes are recommended at all times (yes, some of the kids ignored this advice and invariably ended up with coral cuts – nasty when infected). We paddled with all sorts of wildlife – turtles, both Green and Loggerhead, Sharks – White tip, Black tip and Bronze Whaler, Sand Rays, Sting Rays, and best of all the dancing Manta Rays. The bird life is extensive. So extensive at nights that it can be difficult to sleep. So extensive that you will often find yourself having to give way to them. They crap everywhere (it used to be a guano factory and mutton bird cannery) so you need to cover your tent with a cheap disposable tarp. The Noddies are elegant and harmless. They fly out to sea in the morning and back in dusk. In their thousands. There are distinct clouds of birds landing in the gaps in the trees at night. Do not stand in their way – they have right of way and will hit you. Especially if you are wearing a head mounted lamp. Mutton birds are extremely graceful at sea and their GPS is incredibly accurate but once on land you have never seen such bumbling boobies. They crash land into anything left in their way – tents, children, camp stoves and then squark a few times before noisily regurgitating the excessive salt from a day's hunting. They then disappear down their burrows. Do not play French cricket near mutton bird burrows as the poor fools will try to hatch your missing tennis balls so you have to dig them out!

Oh – and never leave your kayak on the beach. There is nothing like a 100kg turtle mother intent on laying her eggs to bulldoze it out of the way. Failing that if she nests nearby she will probably fill it with flung sand – hundreds of kilos. Fortunately we worked this out first – although one Canadian canoe was barged and filled one night.

You can't get much closer to nature than to share a hammock suspended from silky oak trees with one of your children, on the beach, under a full moon with brilliant stars above, only to be bumped from underneath or have sand flung at you by a laying turtle from 2 metres away. Some truly memorable experiences.

The sea is warm, as are the nights. True trade wind SE slight breezes. The swells are typically very slight, although there can be a bit of a chop and current with localized weather patterns.

Not a good idea to capsize whilst surfing the big stern waves from turtles whilst not wearing a PFD, whilst technically 75km offshore, in an offshore breeze. Getting back in is really quick if you think of the sharks! We did see some big sharks but only when we went looking for decent Coral Trout for food. The fish were well protected under a coral bommie about 12m down. We were half way down when the two bronze whalers came directly towards us about 2m below us. This saw us going vertical and landing in the tinnie quite gracefully. They are very well fed and were only checking us out (we hoped). During our stay we caught a few fish. Others caught more. Full moon at the time gave us some big tides and several hundred nesting turtles every night. They labour up the sand towards the low scrub for about 2 hours anytime from dusk. They then dig a big hole into which they lay their eggs. This is then filled up and they depart hastily – hopefully to the next high tide thus saving about 200 metres of crawling. We also saw many baby turtles hatch and head towards the sea. One in fifty make it that far and not many of the remainder reach adulthood. Their predators start with seagulls as soon as their nests erupt and continue to sharks cruising in the shallows.

The kayaking is great. An easy open water 6km takes you to Tryon Is – a BOM met station. North West Island is about 12km by 4km at low tide. It is about 3km x 1km at high. Either way it's a good paddle around – the scenery and wildlife changed constantly and never disappointed.



Some further facts:

You do need to be self sufficient. Allow for enough food for your time there – typically one to two weeks with a contingency for cyclones.

If a cyclone warning is issued you will be taken off early where possible.

There are parks people camping there who maintain radio comms and basic first aid facilities if needed.

North West is an elongated platform reef, 12km by 4km, with a lagoon almost completely filled with sand. It is the largest cay in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, at approximately 105ha and is 75km north east of Gladstone. It has the highest plant species diversity in the Capricorn Group. The large reef of North West offers many sites for divers, snorkellers, reef walkers and kayakers. Fishing is popular but Marine Park zoning conditions must be observed as well as size and bag limits.

Spring to summer is also the time for turtle breeding. In spring turtles mate in the calm waters of the reef lagoon. From late October to February, female green and loggerhead turtles come ashore to nest above the high tide mark. After 7-12 weeks incubation in their sandy nests, the turtle hatchlings emerge and scramble down the beach to the sea.

Seventy percent of the total breeding population of wedge-tailed shearwaters on the east coast of Australia nest on this island. During October hundreds of thousands of these birds as well as black noddies arrive. In April most noddies and adult shearwaters leave. The fledgling shearwaters remain in their burrows for another six weeks before they too fly off. The white-bellied sea-eagle breeds during the winter months and it's nest sites are now restricted to six islands including North West.

Some helpful links:

Qld Parks – Information and Bookings for North West Island:

<https://www.epa.qld.gov.au/parks/iaparks/gds/IAGDS020.do?parkId=47>

Curtis Ferries - The barge company.

It cost us around \$700 for transfer to & from the Is for 2+2. Water is \$5 per 44 gal plastic drum. You won't run out.

<http://www.curtisferryservices.com.au/>

Book soon to avoid disappointment.



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