

# Penrose State Park 1996

## Kayaking? What's that?

By Thanksgiving 6:00 PM is dark and cold in the Northwest. The sun hurries to its bed like the all the rest of us. But August... ...August is a different story. The six o'clock sun in August is in no hurry to leave and grants its warmth to land and sea alike until late in the day.

Under an August sun Connie and I first paddled kayaks. We met a disparate group of other first-timers in early afternoon and and paddled around a few bays near Boston Harbor in the balmy evening hours just ahead of sundown. Our hosts brought the boats and experience, shared some of each sparsely and turned us loose on the water. The worst part of that experience was ending it. Literally... ...I fell on my butt into the cold Puget Sound trying to get out of the boat.

## Jumping in

It was such a rewarding experience we began scouring the internet for kayaking information. We spent weekends searching out kayak shops around Puget Sound, and over the winter acquired a large library of books and videos. The best advice we got was to decide what goals we had before we bought a boat.

Well, we're both over fifty and the thrills we sought were fairly mild. We still liked the outdoors and camping and

expedition kayaking seemed an ideal match.

On a foray to the Olympic Outdoor Center in Poulsbo we were walking out the door when Connie spotted a “used boat” 3x5 card on a corkboard.

“Isn’t that one of the boats you’re interested in?” she asked.

Over the winter I'd built a spreadsheet of Kayaks that might meet our needs and with a rough volume formula estimated their relative cargo capacity. At the top of that list was the Seaward Quest. Almost twenty feet long and just under 22” wide, it promised to hold lots of gear and go fast too. The one on this little card was advertised *at \$1000 less than retail!* I asked about it and found that it had been in the OOC rental fleet for two years.

I had to take a look.

At the rental pen, kayaks were stacked one atop the other. We pulled out one boat after another and the Quest's long purple nose slowly became visible at the bottom of the stack.

Two years in the OOC rental fleet hadn't been overly kind to it, but there were no major cracks or spider webbing. After a brief consultation we decided it was the boat I should have, so we bought it on the spot. Contrary to ALL kayaking advice I'd read, I did NOT paddle the boat before buying it!

I was nervous about my new kayak! My reference material said that narrow, long boats would feel “tippy” to a beginner and that wider boats would give better primary stability. But those same references also cautioned about buying a boat

whose characteristics would become boring or tiresome after you had gained experience paddling. I planned to grow into it...

A second trip to Poulsbo bought a rack and brought the boat home. Once back home, I rigged up overhead hooks and cam-locked web strapping to hoist it above the cars in our garage. I didn't paddle it for over a month after bringing it home. Largely because we still didn't have a boat for Connie.

Several weeks later, we came to the Gig Harbor Kayak center. We watched as Mick Micotik, the owner, gave another paddler a "test drive" in a boat that wasn't quite large enough to suit him. It was a brand I hadn't heard of yet, a Current Designs Solstice GTS. When Mick's client returned the boat, Connie jumped in and took it out for a test paddle.

A long wait later I began to wonder if she was going to come back. And when she did, she announced that it was her boat. And so it was. We trundled it home and strung it up in the garage beside mine, where both hung for another month before we dared to take them out.

## **Lessons**

We signed up for a rescue and recovery pool session with Mick and would have been embarrassed if we'd not yet been in our boats, so the week before our first safety lesson, we launched our two new boats at Nisqually and paddled up McAllister creek, then later down towards Tolmie Park. The weather was grand for March and the paddling easy, though my boat felt skittish for the first half-hour.



*Connie and me at Lubr Beach*

Just a couple of hours to get used to the boats , then we loaded them back on the car and went home, ready for our pool training...

Mick scheduled time at the Gig Harbor High School swimming pool. He brought rental boats, but half the eight people showed up with their own. Working as a group we unloaded everyone's boats and maneuvered them through the narrow door to the pool. We lined them up around the pool like seals ready to flop into the water.

The first trick we tried was getting into the boat with another swimmer holding it. I was the first guinea pig, with Mick's son Alex holding the other side of my boat. Three times I pushed, pulled, crawled and inched my way up onto the boat only to have it put the heavy side down when I tried to ooze into my flooded cockpit! I was so proud when I finally did it right and stayed on top for a change.

Learning to use a paddle float is a breeze after the swimmer

session. I DID make a complete yellow rainbow once, but only once! (That's when the yellow paddle float on the end of your paddle completes an arc through the air as your boat puts its heavy side down again.)

Our playtime went swiftly and when it was over we emerged from the pool confident in our ability to get back into our boats. A month later we returned to the pool to practice more rescues and try to take on the eskimo roll. I left that session convinced that I had to stay on top of the boat.

### **Penrose State Park**

We collected gear for months and did a number of day paddles around the Nisqually area, our longest an eight mile stop-for-lunch circuit over to Devils Head, a state owned beach on the Kitsap peninsula.

Armed with local charts and tide tables I began planning our first overnighiter. On Memorial Day weekend, we would paddle from Nisqually across to Anderson Island, then around its western side, up Drayton passage, through Pitt passage and on to Penrose State Park. It was a reasonable distance and at that time was one of the closest legitimate campsites.



### Devil's head

We had to paddle through Pitt Passage en route. A narrow channel between McNeil Island and Key Peninsula, it flows at four knots at maximum flood or ebb. We paddle about two and a half knots. To time this right, we had to paddle against the ebb tide along the southern shore of Anderson Island.

From Luhr Beach to Anderson Island is about two miles. My boat was the most stable it had ever been when loaded with gear and the morning was warm and sunny. We crossed and hugged the shoreline along Anderson island where the shallower water slowed the ebb. And after rounding into Drayton passage between Anderson Island and Key Peninsula, we began to get a push from the tide. The sun warmed the glassy sea and there were few other boaters. We aimed straight up the middle toward the west side of Pitt passage.

The ebb was slacking just right when we got to Pitt

Passage. Deer grazed the shoreline of McNeil Island, and trucks patrolled its roads. We were quickly through into Henderson Bay and followed the shoreline to the first point. Dogs chased us along the shoreline while kids playing on rope swings stopped to look and wave.

At Penrose Point we paddled over the marine park section at low tide and hovered above colorful starfish, anemones and other plant and animal life. Red Rock Crabs scuttled from shadow to shadow beneath our strokes and ahead of us a guy on a single scull appeared out of the bay and raced off to our right, *very* fast.

Penrose State Park has buoys for anchorage on both sides of the point. It's public dock is at the back of the bay, across from a commercial marina that appeared ready to collapse into the water. Several large powerboats were already tied up at the dock and there we encountered our first problem.

The dock was at eyeball height on us. We talked about it for a bit, then decided I would anchor her boat while she climbed up on the dock, then she'd move hers and help anchor my boat while I climbed up. It worked!

We had to lay on the dock to reach into our hatches and unload first one bag then another until the boats were empty and the dock full. Then we hauled the boats up to sit atop the wide dock and locked them down with cable locks.

Three trips each finally got all our gear up the path to our reserved campsite. It was only fifty yards from the dock, but they were all uphill yards. The park had suffered a lot in the ice storm of that winter. Bare and broken treetops were as evident here as elsewhere in the South Sound, but most of the downed

limbs were already cleaned up in the few open camping areas.

Saturday dawned sunny, warm and calm so we set off across Henderson Bay to Kopachuck State Park. Lunch on the beach there let us share on-the-beach seat time with a bunch of curious kids.

From Kopachuck we paddled back across Henderson Bay toward Home (the community.) Near Van Geldern Cove we paddled across a shallow sandbank with sand dollars by the hundreds both on the bottom and floating on the surface. I'd never seen them floating before.

Our hopes of finding an Ice Cream parlor in Home were dashed when we arrived at the back of the bay. At low tide a tiny stream worked through a wide muddy seabed that kept too much mud between us and the store. Disappointed, we turned for Penrose and made our way back to its dock in Mayo cove.

While we were afloat we decided to look over the decrepit marina across the bay. One of its low (sinking?) docks gave us an easy exit, and after tethering our boats we climbed the stairs to the Marina office where we found not only ice cream, but beer too! Sun, sky, sea, kayaks, ice cream AND beer! Warm weather heaven! Too soon we added both cold and fluid calories to our special paddler's diet and hopped back in our boats for the short trip across the pond to the park dock.

As we closed the tent fly and settled in for the night a light drizzle began. Later the wind made itself heard and it began to rain harder.

Rain and wind woke us on Sunday morning. Spring growth



overhead kept us a little drier than if we'd camped in the open. We packed inside the tent to reduce wet gear to just the tent and its rain fly. Loading the boats as we lay on the dock was easy too with extra room from consumed supplies.

Mayo Cove was calm as we paddled out. Small ripples danced across the surface but we couldn't see much else from deep in the cove.

Around Penrose Point the chop increased from the 3-4 inch kind to about two feet. Waves and wind marched directly at us from the next point at South Head, southwest of us, so we chose to go directly into them rather than sneak along the beach and have to deal with them on the beam.

My longer boat split the oncoming waves easily. Connie's, on my right, slapped down on the oncoming wave, but she said she was doing fine. As we made our way easily through these smaller sets we both gained in confidence.

Paddling into the lee at South Head gave us a chance to assess the next leg and talk options. We knew conditions could worsen but we were okay with what we'd encountered so far and decided to press on. But rounding South Head put us on a more southerly heading which set the wave action on our beam. It was more of a struggle than going straight into the waves but with the friendly shore nearby we discovered that we could handle that too.

In Pitt Passage we turned due south, but the narrow channel protected us from westerlys, but the water was slopping all over, with a little beam push to it. We hugged the sometimes overhung shoreline until we could land at a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) beach not far from

Longbranch and take a break.

After fifteen minutes of break time we started to get stiff. Working out on the water was a better option than freezing under the root overhung bluff so we launched back into the slop. We detoured into Longbranch Harbor to get a break from the wind and have a look-see.

Long Branch is a small, well protected bay, but within half an hour we had taken it all in and made our way back out to Drayton Passage. The weather had eased and the water calmed considerably, it no long slapped at our beams, although now it was in ebb so we had to stay closer to the Key Peninsula shore.

We stopped to grab lunch at Devils Head, a pretty (DNR) beach on the southern tip of the Kitsap Peninsula. The sun tried to break through and lunch was refreshing. Soon the wind shifted and felt like it would pick up again.

Crossing to Tolmie State Park was easy. It's one of our favorite stops, but today we paddled by and turned for home, just a couple of miles up Puget Sound to Luhr Beach.

We were tired and the day had so far been full of tension. It was a relief to be back on our home shore, and we weren't paying as much attention as we should have been when we slipped past Hogum Bay and onto the oyster beds south of Luhr beach.

My relaxed paddle stroke hit something, then a stroke or two later hit on the other side. Connie said her paddle was hitting bottom too. The water ahead was clear and I thought we could get over these shallows easily in our kayaks. but the

tide was too low. In a few more strokes I was hitting bottom with every stroke, then I was aground.

“Back up, back up,” I shouted, hoping we could get out of here by going back the way we came.

“I’m trying!” came the answer, “I’m trying.”

We thrashed and backed and turned, frantically seeking deeper channels between hummocks beginning to show their tops. We looked for passage to deeper water, fending off hummocks right and left with paddle and hand. Eventually we came to a sandy bank where water rippled out to the deeper channel. We bullied our way across the rippling water.

Now we were a mile from our landing. I had seen the oyster bales awash further out when we entered the oyster beds, but their meaning hadn't registered until we hit bottom. Now we were all the way out in the channel and had to go around the emerging shallows.

We followed the channel marker poles toward the Luhr Beach entrance. Connie looked over her shoulder and warned that a menacing dark cloud was moving up behind us. We turned into the channel with another half-mile to go just as a strong downburst came from that nasty little cloud and whipped the water into sharp sets of wavelets that slapped hard at our sides trying to push us over.

Rain pummeled us so hard that the water’s surface erupted in little white marbles standing an inch above the surface. Mother Nature gave us a spanking for being stupid.

Shouting to each other to be heard over the wind we used

short choppy bracing strokes to keep balance in the gusts, and when we finally made it to shore we just sat on the rocks catching a breath.

Connie looked over to where we'd first hit bottom.

“You know don't you, that we could have stepped out of our boats and walked them over the hundred yards between here and there?”

I didn't have the nerve to ask if she'd had that thought while we were thrashing around amongst the Oysters or after we got out.