

Kayaking Across the Adriatic Sea 2

Fighting a former-communist government agency had not been a part of our pre-trip planning. Unfortunately, our attempt to be the first sea kayakers to cross the Adriatic Sea unsupported started and ended with us locking horns with the Harbor Master's office in the Croatian city of Split. We had envisaged this expedition as a way to unite and celebrate the ancestry of two countries, Italy and Croatia, from which my and Shane's grandfathers hail and to retrace a historic Dalmatian fishing route; a 45-mile open water crossing from the port of Komiza on Vis Island to Palagruža Island.

Shane picked me up from the airport on Saturday March 11th, and his message was simple. The Harbor Master had threatened to arrest us if we paddled more than 500 yards from shore. We headed directly to his office and discovered we needed permission to attempt the crossing. When asked they could not provide us with a detailed list of requirements to acquire this permission; it began to dawn on us that the most difficult battle of this expedition was going to occur before we left the beach.



The instigator of all the problems was a Marine Search and Rescue member who read an article about us in the local newspaper. He then contacted the Split Harbor Master, stating that, in his opinion, we should not be allowed to go. Both bureaucrats happily conceded they had no experience with sea-kayaking nor the possibility of using them for long sea voyages.

On Monday we went back to the Harbor Master's office with a dossier full of our accomplishments. They refused to give us permission stating we did not meet the 'unwritten' requirements and required a support boat. Already local media darlings, we turned up the heat and scorched the Harbor Master with a plethora of articles, interviews and TV appearances. We even recruited Tony Prijon, owner of Prijon Kayaks, and Stipe Božič, Split's famous Everest mountaineer and adventurer, to our cause. Our daily trip to the news stand and stroll across the Riva was empowering. The locals would recognize us and smile unsure if we were crazy but certainly impressed that we were fighting for

what we believed.

We were fortunate that a friend of Shane's, Nigel Turnbull, was able to offer his yacht, *Tamara*, as a support vessel on short notice and two days later we applied for and received permission to leave. But their permission was conditional on that we didn't leave Croatian waters. We didn't care at that point – we were going to Italy with or without their brainless permission – or so we thought.

Our first rest stop early into our 28-mile first day was at a lighthouse on Brač Island. The lighthouse keeper and his friends smiled and said that they had read about us in the newspapers and heard a radio debate about us that very morning. We shared a half-liter mug of red wine and water called *bevande* as well as a piece of pound cake while answering many questions about our journey.



Camp for the first night was in a very small cove on the Pakleni Islands off Hvar Island.

The next day on our way to Vis Island, we encountered a stiff 15-knot breeze and an annoying 3-foot swell. When we paddled into Komiža harbor, much to our delight, we encountered a small cluster of town's people pointing and huddling around the harbor, excited that we had made it. An older woman came over and gave us a welcoming orange soda. We were reveling in our 15-minutes of Croatian fame.

We began our second day 45-mile open water crossing at 4 am. The weather forecast was predicting southeasterly winds shifting to the northwest.

Palagruža appeared on the horizon after 9 hours of grueling work giving us a second wind we desperately needed. The day ended up consisting of over 12 hours of paddling with the wind shifting as predicted but strengthening to 25 knots and producing 10-foot breaking sea swell. We later learned that Shane and I were the first to cross between the islands in human power craft since 1937. Fishermen had rowed this channel in their dories for 800 years in a yearly competition for the best fishing grounds.



We landed, set up camp and then walked the long hill to the lighthouse. Once again the lighthouse keeper said "Welcome, I saw you on TV and knew you were coming! Do you want some wine?" We shared a meal with his family perched in their cliff-top, rocky islet home in the middle of the Adriatic Sea and mentally prepared for the 'illegal' crossing to Italy. We had completed the most difficult crossing of the expedition.

The straightest line to Italy, and the closest passport control, was a 35-mile crossing, passing through the international shipping lane to Vieste. We left at 9:30 am and were 15 miles southeast from Palagruža and 20 miles from Italy when a frantic Harbor Master radioed for our position. Once we identified our location the fight began.

Threats of arrest, jail and fines were fired at us. We offered a compromise but they informed us that they had alerted the Italians and that the police launch they were sending in pursuit would cross into Italian waters to pick us up if we proceeded. We were facing significant problems for not only ourselves but also for our friends on the *Tamara*. Sitting on perfect paddling waters, with the aroma of Italian espresso wafting on the breeze, we made the difficult decision under duress to shut the expedition down and sail back to Split.



The local media again swarmed us when we docked – not even Hajduk, the local soccer team, was receiving as much attention for their big game later that day. I expressed my happiness to have completed the journey from Komiža to Palagruža but my disappointment that the Harbor Master did not see the value in our expedition and prevented us from reaching Italy. Shane wasn't so forgiving, calling the Harbor Master and the officials from the Marine Search and Rescue petty bureaucrats and automatons who would have made Tito, the former Yugoslav dictator, proud. Croatians recently missed entry into the EU and maybe will not be invited to join until 2011. Our experience is a hint of the many problems facing this beautiful and historic land.