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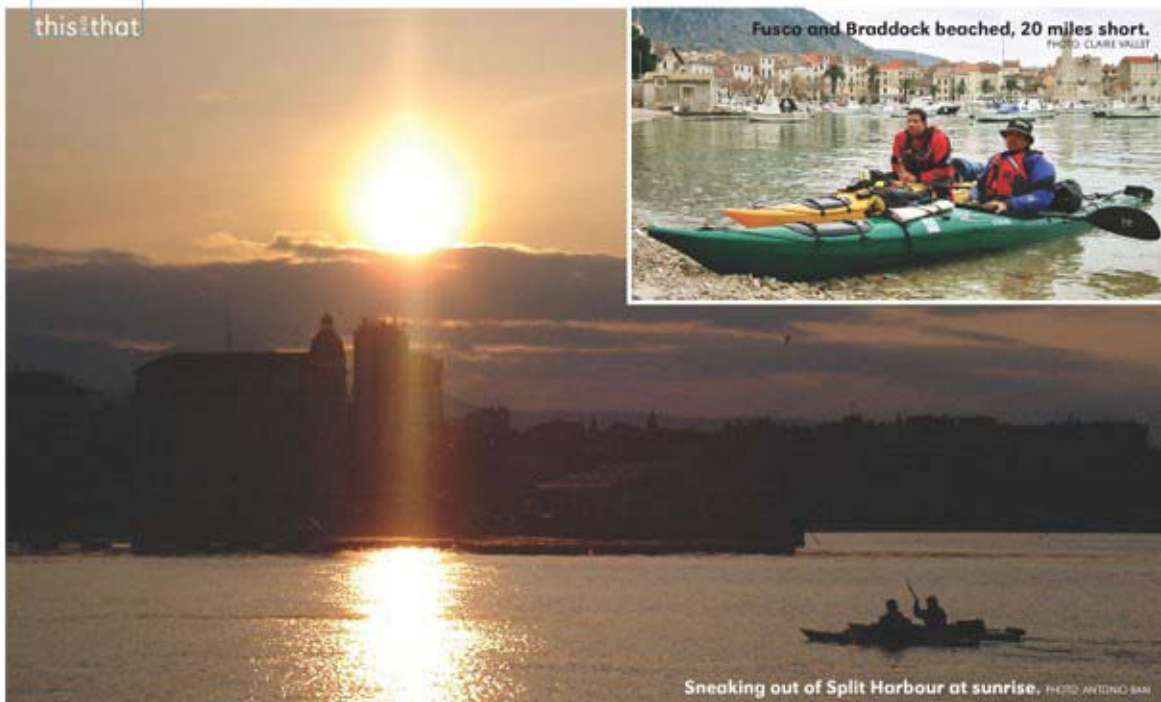
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SUMMER 2006 • Vol 6 No 3  
display until NOVEMBER 1, 2006  
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Cover price \$5.95 (US \$5.95)



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Fusco and Braddock beached, 20 miles short.  
PHOTO CLARE VALLIET

Sneaking out of Split Harbour at sunrise. PHOTO ANTONIO BARI

## Deep in the Red Tape Sea

KAYAKERS BUTT HEADS WITH BUREAUCRATS IN CROATIA

>> "Spending time in a Croatian jail probably would have been below average."

That's one way Ray Fusco justifies ending his expedition within a half-day paddle of its goal.

Sometime in the middle of the day on Saturday, March 18, Fusco and Shane Braddock were 15 nautical miles into the fourth and final day of their island-hopping crossing of the Adriatic Sea from Croatia to Italy. They were about to leave Croatian waters and make a run for the Italian shore when Croatian authorities radioed that their police boats had received permission from Italy to pursue, impound the team's boats and bring them back on charges of violating Croatian law.

They were only 20 miles away from their destination at promontorio del Gargano, close enough to see the beaches and limestone cliffs that are the backside of Italy's boot. "Now they're going to scorch us like we scorched them in the press," says Fusco when he recalls the moment. "They've got four hours to hunt us down."

A week before, Fusco and Braddock had arrived in the Mediterranean city of Split, Croatia, with the innocent goal of paddling the 130-odd nautical miles across the Adriatic via a historic fishing route linking several islands. Since Braddock is a Croatian-Australian and Fusco an Italian-American, the quest also had the atavistic appeal of linking their family homelands. It seemed like a sound and simple plan.

Not so, it turns out, in a former communist state whose bureaucrats are not down with the notion of

the humble kayak as a seagoing vessel. Local press coverage attracted unwanted attention from search and rescue authorities, who in turn convinced the Split harbourmaster to stop the expedition from leaving port.

Fusco and Braddock spent a few days intensively blitzing the media to shame the authorities into letting them go ahead. Finally it was explained that they couldn't do the trip without a boat escort. Not a problem: they went and got one, lining up some friends with a sailboat to tag along. Then the harbourmaster added in a Kafkaesque flourish that they were not to leave Croatian waters—finishing their trip would be out of the question.

Fusco and Braddock went for it anyway, figuring when they got to the end of their red-tape tether they would just cut the twice-daily radio check-ins with Split, ditch the escort and bomb it for Italy. But the threat from comrade harbourmaster turned out to be no bluff. To avoid nightmare scenarios of foreign jail time, the team had to put their kayaks on the sailboat and turn back.

Not quite finishing the trip was a disappointment, but Fusco and Braddock became minor celebrities in Croatia and were greeted like rock stars on the streets of Split. A renowned Croatian historian has invited the pair to return to join the high-profile maiden voyage of a replica fishing boat. In a round-about way, the bureaucrats in Split did them a favour. "Once they told us no," Fusco concludes. "The story kind of got better." —Tim Shuff