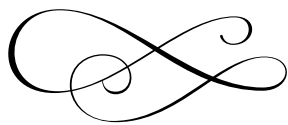


the misadventures of the caffeine cruisers

Nine crusty buggers ignore bad backs, broken kayaks, the runs and even their obsessive pursuit of caffeine as they paddle the south-east coast.

WORDS AND PHOTOS **HUW KINGSTON**



Anna squealed then splashed. I winced and went rigid. It was Boxing Day in Sydney and throwing my four-year-old granddaughter into the salt water did my back in. There are two sorts of people in this world: Those with a bad back and those who are going to have one. The former can quickly become back bores so we'll move on.

For years I'd been planning to paddle that wild stretch of coastline that straddles the NSW/Victorian border, taking in Ben Boyd National Park, Nadgee Nature Reserve and Croajingolong National Park. It's certainly the most remote section of coast in the south-east. For years, planned trips had been thwarted by weather, work or whatever. Now, lying in bed a week before another trip, things were looking marginal at best.

The first week of January is the traditional time for the Coffee Cruise, when a group of paddling mates pick a stretch of NSW coast and, at a leisurely pace, test the caffeine options offered to the hordes of summer holidaymakers. With a hit in the veins, we'd push off from the flat-white sands into the cappuccino foam to seek quiet spots to land and make camp, with only the steam-wand hiss of the sea to add noise to an otherwise quiet long-black night. Not for us the raucous barbecues, screaming kids and inconsiderate instant-coffee sipping neighbours camped metres away.

This year, however, my need for Nadgee had superseded the need to surf in for a double shot. Between our launch point at Boydton, near Eden, and our landing point 100 km later at Mallacoota, we'd find neither barista nor affogato to soothe hot summer throats. On the other side of the ledger, we'd not have to suffer bad coffee to find good, nor spend the \$10 per cup it averages out at when two out of three places





Huw dives headfirst into foam at Nadgee Lake.

Looking up the glorious Nadgee Coast.



serve a beverage unrecognisable as the black nectar.

Fortunately, my back eased (thanks for asking, said the Back Bore), though in my haste to get to Eden I added funds to the bankrupt NSW Government through their major summer fundraising initiative carried out by the State police. A dozen paddlers spread gear across the grass next to kayaks. Stove-top espresso machines sat on spare paddles, fine wines next to flares. Soft cheeses flowed in the hot sun and one paddler was castigated when he was spotted surreptitiously stuffing a freeze-dried dinner down the hatch.

THE FACIAL

The Cruisers this year were a ragtag bunch. Salty old sea dogs like Mike Snoad mixed it up with legendary whitewater paddlers like John Wilde. And talking of wild, it was fitting that we were joined by Laurie Geoghegan, the wild-looking but

deep-down soft and cuddly builder of the Nadgee, that fine sea kayak named after this place we were about to visit.

My old mate Greg, South African by birth but now of Melbourne, turned up with his new Springbok-styled Nadgee, which we immediately nicknamed Bambi. Mixed among the rugged and the rough, the false-toothed and the paunched, was the urbane Art Lidbetter and the urban Mark Pearson.

Those who still cared for their skin layered suncream onto faces and, suitably whitened, lifted heavy kayaks down to the water to push off onto Twofold Bay, a place with a history of whaling from the times of Ben Boyd in the early 19th century. We kayaked past the gigantic modern machine of habitual destruction, the woodchip mill on the southern shores of the bay.

THE MESSAGE

A fair wind was blowing but the sea

You may as well be on your own as your companions dip out of sight behind the whitecaps and the waves.

remained pretty calm as we turned south to follow the forested, rocky coastline. Little groups of kayaks formed and split up as friends new and old conversed and moved on.

Ocean kayaking is the perfect way to see the sea. The boats have plenty of room in watertight hatches for all the gear and provisions for a week or more. The rhythm of the paddle stroke can mirror the rhythm of any journey. Sea kayaking does, of course, offer massive challenges. When the swell is running, the wind blowing and the surf pounding, a day can quickly turn epic. Despite being with people, you may as well be on your own as your companions dip out of sight behind the whitecaps and the waves.

After three hours or so of paddling we pulled into a beautiful north-facing beach near Mowarry Point. While not necessarily expecting it to be deserted in the first week of January, given a walking trail runs nearby, we were intrigued to



Left: The camp among the dunes near Lake Barracoota; Above: Greg brings Bambi in to land.

find two French-Canadian girls, one doing yoga on the beach and the other waist deep in the water.

Before the suave but unsophisticated Mark Pearson could ask what two nice young ladies like them were doing in a place like this, Ian, their companion, appeared from a tent up behind the beach. I'd be disappointed if a bunch of blokes turned up in my paradise, but we were given a warm welcome even when we squeezed more tents into the tiny area. Peace offerings of real coffee and fruits from the sea courtesy of Laurie 'the Great Provider' certainly helped.

The sun dipped behind the beach as the red wine flowed for us and the mozzies. The Back Bore stood up, pushed his hips forward to arch his sore spine and told of how close he was to not making this trip. One of the French-

Canadians announced she was on a break from her job as a masseuse and did he care for a massage? Day one; not a bad start to the trip.

Our second day started clear and calm as we paddled down toward Green Cape. Dolphins arched their backs out of the water (in a non-boring manner) and played beneath our kayaks. In order to see how the other half lived, we pulled into the protected inlet of Bittangabee Bay, with its national park campground. We threaded the kayaks through kids playing with Christmas toys and dads paddling in circles on sit-on-top kayaks. After a lunch on the beach we left to head into a sea now choppy from an increasing northerly. This was the signal for the sailors in the group to hoist their sails and speed south. The rest of us surfed as best we could down the

following sea, passing beneath Green Cape lighthouse and into Disaster Bay.

Nadgee Nature Reserve lay across the far side of the bay. It was good to be getting there and fitting that the sea had a little anger about her. I'd heard so much about the wild seas and massive surf on kayaking journeys I'd missed. Double sea kayaks looped backwards and dumped on beaches; paddlers unable to get off beaches for days. At this meeting point of the Tasman Sea and Bass Strait, the winds blow stronger, the seas rise higher.

Merrica River sits on the northern end of Nadgee, facing across to Green Cape. A deep, tannin-stained river flows from behind the beach, twisting through rocky cliffs until the fresh water dribbles out at its mouth. We camped above the beach, enjoying a fine supper of fresh mussels and a sizeable flathead caught by the Great Provider. Despite the attention lathered on some of its crustacean colleagues, the simple mussel is hard to beat. Boiled until the shells open and the meat is just tender, a prick of wasabi paste, a view down the beach...

THE PLASTIC SURGERY

The following morning we paddled south into Nadgee while Laurie went back north to build Nadgees. Soon we were among the sea caves, the turquoise sea darkening as paddlers dared to reverse-paddle further and further into the caves. Looking over shoulders to avoid narrowing rock walls; looking forward to pick the swell to ensure you weren't picked up and sent surfing to a horrible end. The games we play.

Tumbledown Mountain formed the backdrop to the surf breaking on Jane Spiers Beach, which ran into Newtons Beach before sand gave way to red cliffs sandwiched between rock shelves and heath.

Landings often pose difficulties in Nadgee but we hoped, with the relatively benign surf, to be able to get in at Nadgee River. Some of the Cruisers executed fine landings, others got trashed in the surf. Some managed to roll, others swam. Then, with nearly a kilometre of beach to aim at, in came the Back Bore. Picked a good wave, surfed in with absolute style, smugly ignored those waving their right arms madly on the beach. Wave broke, foam surrounded him, as did numerous rocks in the river mouth. Like a pinball wizard, his kayak bounced off one rock, then another and, for a finale, mounted a fine specimen at speed. Fork against empty plate, foil on a filling, nails down a blackboard. Fibreglass on rock. Good one, Huw.



Clockwise from left: A Nadgee sea cave; Huw's kayak after surgery; Paul heads into a sea cave.



I climbed out of the kayak into the river's fast tidal stream and dragged my boat onto the shore. The audience laughed and cheered for the worthy performance. The only issue now was the 20 cm hole in the bow of my kayak.

Nadgee River was, if anything, even more impressive than Merrica. We squeezed tents onto a narrow strip of grass along the river beneath the aptly named Impressa Moor. The cliffs of Black Head protected the beach from the worst of the southerlies that were now springing up. These were forecast for the next day or so and meant we'd happily enjoy a day exploring the area rather than paddling into them. Anyway, there was an appointment with a surgeon to attend to.

The skin was given an exfoliating treatment to remove the outer layers and wrinkles caused by the errant rocks. Then new skin was applied, smooth and fresh. She looked a million dollars by the time

we'd finished the boat-ox treatment.

Some surfed the waves before dinner, some walked the beach or clambered over rocks and others headed up the calm waters of the river for the three kilometres or so before the channel became too tight, too shallow. We fried freshly caught fish and cooked curries. And Paul sat apart from all this goodness, trying desperately to boil that last bit of chewiness out of his freeze-dried dinner.

Short blacks accompanied pancakes for breakfast as we sat for hours doing nothing much at all. Then someone suggested we needed activity and, like sheep, we split into two flocks. One walked north, the other followed some old trails south the 3 km over Nadgee Moor to Nadgee Lake.

The strong southerly was pushing piles of foam onto the lake's shore. With naked abandon I threw myself into the soft embrace of the slimy foam for another therapeutic Nadgee moment.

THE EMERITUS CHAIR OF KAYAKING

The whole day built toward the big moment. John Wilde, paddler of numerous first descents of Himalayan rivers, national slalom paddler, and survivor of shark attacks, attempted the first crossing of Nadgee River on an inflatable armchair. I suppose after

achieving so much so young, you enter your dotage looking to the more obscure. John had recently paddled the Whitsundays with a bar stool for company. Now, having looked down from his throne upon us ground dwellers on our tatty bits of foam mat, he was determined to use his skill and his throne to humble us ever further. The picture paints a thousand words.

The headwind had dropped a bit when we left Nadgee River to go interstate. The NSW/Victoria border meets the ocean among the massive sand dunes of Cape Howe. The last beach in NSW, Howe Beach, had been the scene of a couple of epics for some of the Cruisers in past visits. But today a gentle surf flopped onto the beach, inviting us for a visit. Here we came across Laurie's apprentice fibreglasser from Nadgee Kayaks, immersing himself in the real Nadgee. He should have been at work but he convinced us (but perhaps not Laurie when he got back) that it was part of his training!

Once around the cape we were in Croajingolong NP. We left NSW under a blue sky and entered Victoria under grey, a demarcation line running out to sea from the cape. Ten kilometres away lay Gabo Island, where we entertained hopes of a possible camp. We headed toward

With naked abandon I threw myself into the soft embrace of the slimy foam.

the island, the wind making for slow progress. The low 2 km long island offered some shelter from the wind when we were hard up against it. Gabo sits less than 1 km offshore with a shallow channel separating it from the mainland. It has a magnificent lighthouse on the southern tip, constructed from massive granite blocks quarried on the island. We went around the tip beneath the lighthouse and through a narrow, bouncy, washing-machine channel of confused water.

The only beach on Gabo is a small one on the west side. We pulled up there for lunch and a snooze on the grass. Camping is not allowed on the island, the only accommodation being one of the

lighthouse keepers' cottages. We half hoped the caretaker would allow us to camp but knew the reality.

A few of us wandered up to check out the lighthouse. We came across the caretaker tending the veggie patch, hidden in a hollow out of the winds. He explained they'd had a cancellation that night for the cottage. Excellent, we thought, why not treat ourselves to a night of luxury on the island? He said bookings could only be made through the Parks Victoria office in Mallacoota. We called but just got the answering machine. We thought to offer him our fine company, but nine salt-encrusted blokes wouldn't have cut it. Had we been female French-Canadian masseuses, things may have been different.

We looked around the lighthouse and buildings. On the old floorboards of the small museum was painted the intriguing message, "well & Truly laid!! Cath A McDonal, 8/12/1913".

In 1987, on my first visit to Australia, I was sitting in a pub at Salamanca Place on the Hobart waterfront. I sat at the bar and a character with a wild beard and windswept hair got chatting to me. I'd been travelling for over a year and had met thousands of people along the way. Giving the same answers to the usual questions had become tiresome, so occasionally I'd change the reality.

"I'm from Scotland," I replied. "I'm a lighthouse keeper on an island off the west coast."

"Hmm, that'd be an interesting job," responded my fellow drinker.

"It is. I spend six months on the island, then have six months off. I love to travel so for each six months off I pick a country or continent and head off. This is my first time to Australia."

"And what sort of light is it?"

"Sorry?"

"What sort of light is in the lighthouse?"

"Oh, a big electrical one. Big bulbs, big mirrors, that sort of thing."

"I see," he replied, winking at me, a



Paul Loker crosses the border into Victoria.



The solid structure of Gabo Island lighthouse.

young lad in his early 20s sat on the stool next to him. "And what pattern does the light flash?"

Feeling slightly uncomfortable and perhaps sensing something coming, I diverted the conversation: "Enough about me, what do you do?"

"I'm a lighthouse keeper." The final word came out as part of a big chuckle.

My bullshit was sprung. I'd chosen the wrong profession; a chance in a million. I bought a drink for one of Tasmania's last lighthouse keepers, from Maatsuyker Island off the far south coast.

TAKING THE WATERS

Our final camp was across on the long beach running to Mallacoota. A few of us headed close to try to spy a suitable landing and camping spot. We negotiated our way through a reasonable surf and dragged the boats up the beach. Then I got a phone call from Mike Snoad. John Wilde had become suddenly and violently sick after leaving Gabo. With both ends running, he had well and truly fallen off his throne. He and Mike had managed to land on the tiny, rocky islet

We thought to offer the lighthouse keeper our fine company, but nine salt-encrusted blokes wouldn't have cut it.



THE ESSENTIALS

Getting there: Eden is about six hours drive from Sydney and Melbourne. Mallacoota is about six hours from Melbourne and eight hours from Sydney. Both routes follow the Princes Highway.

Places to stay: Camping is the name of the game for this part of the world. Permits are required for camping in Nadgee Nature Reserve. An application form can be downloaded from the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water website (www.environment.nsw.gov.au/nationalparks) under Nadgee Nature Reserve. To stay at Gabo Island Lighthouse Keepers, Cottage, bookings can be made by calling (03) 5161 9500.

Access: Sea kayaking in this part of the world is a committed activity. Most of the coast is very exposed with limited landing spots. Some points with road access include Eden, Boydtown (south of Eden) and Greenglades in Disaster Bay. Beyond Greenglades there is no road access until Mallacoota. Paddlers should be experienced and prepared to wait out lengthy periods of bad weather.

Climate: While experiencing a temperate coastal climate, this far south-east corner of Australia experiences regular wild weather, located as it is at the meeting point of the Tasman Sea and Bass Strait. Storms and consequently big seas can occur at any time of year.

of Tullaberga and were cleaning up. Paul and Greg paddled back out toward the islet to offer help.

Eventually, they brought John across and he managed to land. We found a perfect bowl in the dunes behind the beach for our final camp. John lay down for a few hours and came good from whatever caused such a sudden sickness. We shared our final meal and squeezed the last drops from the wine bladders.

I climbed above the camp and sat on the dunes. On one side was the laughing of my companions and the light of the sun setting; on the other the noise of the surf and the first flashes of the lighthouse.

There was one final treatment to be had before the short paddle to Mallacoota. I strolled barefoot across the dunes beyond our camp to Lake Barracoota. The white sand and I fell into the clean, clear freshwater lake. I washed off a week's salt, drank the waters and reflected on a fine coffee cruise that had everything except the cafe.

Oh, and by the way, my back is fine. Thanks for asking.