



BASS STRAIT CROSSING: Claudia Schremmer, Kevin Brennan and Adrian Clayton take a breather alongside Flinders Island with the Strzelecki Range in the background after a long hard slog into the wind. Photo: Bruce Baldwin.



IN TRAINING: Locals Adrian Clayton of Elizabeth Beach and Bruce Baldwin of Krumbach used the Paddle Polaris as training for their epic Bass Strait Crossing. Photo: Peter Jude.

No slowing down for Adrian

HE might be 61 years old but don't try telling Adrian Clayton he should slow down.

The Elizabeth Beach kayaking enthusiast has just returned home after an epic journey crossing Bass Strait in a sea kayak which he completed with Bruce Baldwin of Krumbach.

Accompanied by Sydney-based pair Claudia Schremmer and Kevin Brennan, they set off in two double kayaks from Little Musselroe Bay in north-eastern Tasmania on February 24 and arrived at Refuge Cove on Wilson's Promontory, Victoria on March 5.

Completely self-sufficient, the quartet paddled from island to island, camping overnight on beaches or nearby camping reserves.

The 60-kilometre leg between Flinders Island and Deal Island was the largest stretch of unbroken water and took around seven hours to complete.

The 360 km paddle included two scheduled rest days, one of which was used to climb Mt Strzelecki on Flinders Island to gain some breathtaking views of the islands of the Furneaux group.

There have been numerous crossings of Bass Strait by kayak, from as far back as the 1980s, and this group made one of the fastest.

The kayakers each carried a small sail and enjoyed mostly favourable conditions, so were able to average in excess of 8 km/h for the trip.

By good fortune, these conditions also meant there were no unscheduled lay days; log books entries on some of the islands tell of kayakers stranded for many days, waiting for weather conditions to settle before resuming their journey.

Bruce said the group was really fortunate with the weather during the crossing.

The well-known fickle weather

of the strait and the range of extreme conditions meant if we had been delayed for only one day at any stage of our trip we could still be stuck on one of the islands somewhere in the middle of the strait, confined to wind-blown tents and waiting for the conditions to ease, he said.

There were one or two challenging moments

Probably the one that caused us the most anxiety was encountering very thick fog during the crossing from Deal Island to Hogan Island where we were to make camp for the night.

During this leg, we did not have the benefit of any landmarks to check our course and relied on GPS technology to a large degree to find Hogan Island, which we did not see until we were 200 metres from it.

One of the more technical aspects of the trip was the navigational adjustment we had to make to counter Bass Strait's varying currents to which kayakers, for various reasons, are more susceptible than larger craft.

As part of their preparation for the Bass Strait crossing, Bruce and Adrian had spent many hours kayaking at sea in the Great Lakes region, between Hawks Nest and Forster-Tuncurry.

The channel leading in to Wallis Lake provided them with an excellent training ground to deal with the strong tidal currents, sometimes exceeding five knots that they encountered at various stages during their crossing of the strait.

Adrian said the highlight of the trip for him was seeing the islands of eastern Bass Strait.

These islands are really beautiful, particularly those of the Kent Group which form a national park, he said.

The small island communities were very friendly and helpful. We were given freshly



SHELTER: Claudia Schremmer, Kevin Brennan and Adrian Clayton resting up on Clarke Island after a challenging crossing of notorious Banks Strait which lies between Tasmania and the Furneaux group of islands to the north-east. Photo: Bruce

caught fish by a local on Cape Barren Island and were invited to pick tomatoes from the vine in the vegetable garden maintained by the volunteer caretakers on Deal Island.

One chance meeting on Flinders Island resulted in a deal being struck to get my car from Tasmania back to the mainland thus saving me the time and trouble of doing it myself.

Wildlife encountered during the paddle were many and varied.

We got close to seals, and dolphins raced alongside our kayakers, Adrian said.

Cape Barren Geese were plentiful and there were colonies of Little Penguins on Deal and Hogan Islands where the cacophony of chicks pleading for food from their parents kept us awake well into the night. It was fascinating to watch thousands of mutton birds, returning from a day's hunting at sea, zeroing in on their burrows in near darkness.

Ironically, the comparatively protected waters of Comer Inlet leading up to the finishing point at Port Welshpool saw the most arduous paddling of all.

Here the group slogged into headwinds sometimes gusting at more than 30 knots.

So what possesses someone to paddle 360 km across waters many fear to tackle in a yacht?

For Adrian, who celebrated his 61st birthday on Deal Island in the Kent Group one of his motives for doing the trip was to demonstrate that people approaching their senior years can still take on challenges.

In no way am I ready to put my cue in the rack.

My aim is to make the years I have left the richest of my life, he said.