

I bought a kayak last November, even though I hadn't planned to...

What I had planned was a day trip from Cattle Point in Oak Bay to Discovery Island and back. A late season solo kayak trip in a rented Hobie. An easy trip, lunch on the island and a paddle back at slack tide. Unfortunately, it didn't quite work out that way.

The trip out was lovely. The Hobie Mirage Drive is a pedal driven system, wonderfully efficient and easy to use. The boat it was fitted to was sit-on style, roomy and stable. I made good time and reached my landing in Rudlin Bay easily. Lunch and exploring the park took me up to mid-afternoon and I started to think about heading back.

The currents through Plumper Passage can make for rough water. I'd checked the tide and current tables and worked out that slack would be shortly after four. I thought it would be calm enough to start out before then. What I didn't know was that the rough water – eddies, standing waves, whirlpools – lasted right up to slack.

The route out of Rudlin Bay to Admiralty Point was fine. But once I got into the tidal flow, I realized it was more than I'd bargained for. As I searched for calmer water, a standing wave flipped me out of the boat. Shock, anger, but no panic yet. With my PFD inflated, I collected myself and assessed. Got a hold of the kayak and righted it. The water was cold, but not immediately debilitating and I was, at this point, sure that this was an annoyance, but not a threat.

The trouble started becoming clear as I tried to re-enter the kayak. I was used to doing wet recoveries with a standard sit-in kayak, but this was different. A regular kayak partly fills with water when it capsizes, re-entering, then bailing is the usual process. But a sit-on stays empty. It floats much higher, and takes more effort to re-enter.

Several tries to pull myself over the side only resulted in the boat flipping over on top of me. Plan B, using a rescue float on the paddle to leverage myself up, failed because the tie-downs on the boat were all stretch cord. Easy to use to hold down cargo, they did nothing to secure the paddle. It bent away, completely independent of the boat.

Plan C, re-entering over the end of the boat, was also something I'd practised with a regular kayak. It's a longer process than going over the side, but still not too difficult. But my bare hands kept slipping on the slick, wet surface. The boats I had practised this manoeuvre on had just enough wear that you could get a grip. This boat, being a rental, still had the showroom new finish. A couple of times, I got far enough to reach a tie-down cord. Remember the stretch cord I mentioned? It would have been comical in another situation.

Now was the time to call for help. The VHF radio was tucked into a storage mesh pocket on the boat. But not tethered! Bad planning. I'd relied on the elastic to hold it in. On one of the flip-overs, it had gone to the bottom. Mobile phone, in a zip-lock bag in my pocket. Get it out carefully, hold it out of the water to remove, watch it die seconds after starting. Zip-locks are good for splash protection, but not for immersion.

All this while, I was 50 to 100 metres from shore. I considered trying to swim for it, but the lesson that started in Boy Scout water safety ran like a mantra in my head: Never leave the boat! Using the throwing rope (part of the required equipment for a kayak) I tied myself to the boat. If I lost my grip on it, at least I wouldn't have to swim after it.

OK, if I'm near shore, I can swim the boat there. Keep it pointed to the island and kick. Keep

an arm around the pedals and swim. There were kelp beds in the way, but I could work through them, couldn't I?

I can't say how long this went on. Keeping the boat pointed towards the island was a challenge; from where I was hanging on, I couldn't see where I was going. Each time I checked, I'd veered off and was pointed to open water. It's possible that all this effort actually got me further out. Eventually I realized it wasn't working. The kelp, the current, my position... It was all working to prevent any progress. And when the boat turned, I could see lights coming on in Oak Bay. It was getting late, and I'd been in the water a long time.

I knew I was in a life-threatening situation and all my previous efforts hadn't worked.

This was where I had to rely on Plan D. I'd left my trip information with my wife, and with Ocean River Sports where I'd rented the kayak. I knew if I waited, someone would come looking for me. I was cold and starting to shiver, I'd tried everything I could think of but nothing had worked. As much as I hated it, I just had to wait.

I was wearing fleece, neoprene and polypropylene. A windproof jacket, but no gloves or hat. It was reasonable cold water gear for a short immersion, but not for a prolonged soak. The best I could do was to pull up the hood to protect my head, and get a leg and an arm up and out of the water on the boat. Not much, but it would have to do. It was dark by this time and I waited. I know I called for help occasionally, in the hope someone might hear. More than that, I don't remember. I kept thinking, holding on, that I had to come home for my wife. It would be two of us dying if I didn't survive.

The end came with a flash of light passing over the white plastic of the boat. One pass, then a return. I waved my arm and knew I'd been found.

The rescuers were the RCM-SAR crew from Oak Bay. (I didn't know it at the time, but the Victoria RCM-SAR station, the Coast Guard as well as the Oak Bay police were involved after the alarm went out.) In a few minutes, I was out of the water and headed for shore. My cold wet clothes were removed and warm covers put in place. I was cold enough that I couldn't speak. All I could do was nod and hope they knew it meant "Thank-you!"

Looking back, I can see glaring mistakes I made. But I can also see things I did right. In the end, I did just enough right to overbalance the things I did wrong.

It was a mistake to try and navigate Plumper Passage before the slack tide. I knew it was rough, but I didn't know how rough. Several people said it was a difficult area and I should have asked for more information. A part of not asking was pride. I was reluctant to look like I didn't know what I was doing.

Another failing was to not prepare for the worst case. I was ready for a minor upset. A quick dunk and quick recovery. I wasn't prepared for the violent ejection and long immersion that I experienced. My cold water gear was not what it should have been, and my equipment was not properly secured. (Specifically, the VHF and mobile phone.) In addition, I had no emergency signalling gear. It was only a day trip, I thought, so I wouldn't need flares or other kit.

My experience with the boat itself was another point of failure. I was familiar with it if no emergency came up. But I hadn't practised re-entries and recoveries with it. I'm comfortable with re-entering a standard kayak, but the sit-on style was different. And it's possible that the inflatable PFD I was using may have made the situation worse. The bladder extends out front when full and it may have made re-entry problematic.

Paddling alone is always a risk. Some people believe you should never be out by yourself. For me, the solitude and quiet are the main reasons I kayak. I'm not going to give that up, but I will make certain I'm fully prepared in future.

On the plus side, I was wearing a PFD and had at least some cold water gear. My body temperature was down to 32° by the time I was rescued, but it would have been even lower, perhaps fatally lower, if I'd been completely unprepared.

It's difficult to spot a person floating in the water. It's a lot easier to find a boat. Staying with the boat made sure I would be found. Floating by myself, I probably wouldn't have been found before hypothermia killed me.

The most important thing that led to my rescue though, was the float plan I left with people ashore. Ocean River knew I was supposed to be back by late afternoon. So did my wife. Both were concerned when I didn't show up on time and between them initiated the search. Without that information, it could easily have been the next day before anyone came looking. By that time, it would have been a recovery, not a rescue.

Equipping yourself for contingencies can look expensive. It's possible I might have been rescued sooner, or been able to self-rescue if I'd had signalling gear, a better PFD, full cold water gear, etc... It's all an expense and I have to admit that was a factor in getting myself kitted out.

But the aftermath of this accident was costly too. The kayak was never found, taking my dSLR camera, my GPS and other kit with it. In the water, my mobile phone, watch and glasses were lost, and in the rescue my clothes were cut away. The final bill ran into the thousands of dollars. I can't even start to guess the costs of medical treatment and the costs to the search organizations.

The cost of not surviving is incalculable.

In the end, it's been a sobering lesson. Coming this close to mortality, looking into the abyss, is frightening. It hasn't changed my spiritual beliefs, but it's made them clearer. It's made my friends and loved ones even more precious to me.

It's said that a wise person learns from their mistakes, but a wiser person learns from someone else's mistakes. I'm hoping there are a lot of wiser folks out there.

Jim Cliffe

Victoria, BC

48° 57'N 123° 13'W

