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FP FREESTYLE



The Seventh Scottish Sea Kayaking Symposium

27th - 30th May 2005

WORDS AND PICTURES: SIMON WILLIS

IMAGINE KAYAKING UNDERNEATH A GIANT FAN, WHICH CAN GENERATE WINDS OVER TEN KNOTS, AND AIM THEM DIRECTLY AT YOU. THE RESULT COULD BE THE AQUATIC EQUIVALENT OF CARNAGE, WERE IT NOT FOR THE SKILL OF THE PILOTS OF COASTGUARD HELICOPTER 'MIKE UNIFORM' AND A SMALL GROUP OF HARDY SOULS WHO ATTEMPTED TO PADDLE UNDER ITS DOWNDRAFT...

This was the last, and highly entertaining, event in the Seventh Scottish Sea Kayaking Symposium, held on Skye during the last Bank Holiday weekend in May. Earlier, the chopper had touched down in the car park, giving us the chance to see what no paddler ever wants to see again - the rescue cot. I took the opportunity to ask one of the two

pilots what colour kayak stood out best from his viewpoint. "Bright yellow or orange is best for us", I was told, "anything except black or dark blue. But we have forward looking infra-red, so we probably spot your body heat first." He paused and added, grimly, "Unless you've been in the water for more than two days. But by then you probably don't care too much."

They certainly had a good view of the kayakers waiting for them off the bay. Approaching from the South, a circle of waves suddenly appeared on the surface of the water, rising and turning white with fury as the Sea King descended and drew closer. By carefully angling his approach, the pilot split the rafted kayakers into two groups, sending one group spinning out into the

Sound of Sleat, the other towards the shore. The machine wheeled away, then returned and dipped even lower to peel off two more kayakers. It looked for all the world like a sheep-dog trial, but instead of a collie steering sheep through gates, here was a fast flying machine playing blow-football with boats. Returning to the first group, the machine dropped to its lowest hover, and kayakers raced to play in the radiating waves. There were a few capsizes and a few swimmers, one of whom later joked "don't have an accident. Involving these fly boys could make the situation a heck of a lot worse!"

Two days earlier, when I drove into the Sabhal Mor Ostaig Gaelic College on Skye, my first impression was, "I never knew there were so many sea kayakers!" We pass on the road and we meet in clubs, but pulling into a car park in which every vehicle has a sea boat on the roof is both slightly intimidating (where on earth am I going to park!) but also truly uplifting. Instantly, I knew I was among friends.

The sheer range and variety of activities on offer was almost overwhelming. I had that child-in-the-sweet-shop feeling, of wanting to do everything.... now! There was choice of six classroom sessions every morning and every afternoon; a choice of five practical sessions every morning and afternoon; and three whole day paddles. Add to this demonstration kayaks from Valley, Point 65, Island and Rockpool, two evening lectures, two ceilidhs and a whisky tasting, and you see what I mean.

What's more the contributors hosting the sessions were top drawer. You want to learn about forward paddling? - Go out with Sean Morley or Brian Wilson.



Need to practice tidal planning in the classroom and on the water? - Doug Cooper's waiting for you. Intrigued by Greenland skills? - Soren Rasmussen's in the bay. Of the twenty-six Level Five sea coaches in the UK, only three were not present, according to the organisers. This symposium has a reputation for attracting the best, and at £66 for the three days, was superb value. This perhaps explains why the one hundred and sixty delegate places sold out months ahead of time. When the exhibitors are included, plus all the partners, relatives and children who tagged along, it added up to two hundred and sixty people in one place, all focused on sea kayaking. Rarely have I been among so many

friendly, like-minded people. It says a lot that we all could leave wet kit out overnight, hanging from roof racks, and not a thing went missing.

Some sales pitches are irresistible. The promise of learning "my absolutely bomb-proof way of getting myself back in my kayak", made Franco Ferrero's "Self Rescue" session among the more popular of the first day. Consequently, just getting on the water consumed much of the allotted time, as twenty-five eager delegates manoeuvred twenty-five sea-boats down a steep, muddy track to a rocky launch site. Eventually, we paddled to a sandy bay and clambered onto a headland ▶

