

The Yukon 1000

By Russ Dawkins

The Yukon 1000 mile canoe/ kayak race? Sounded fairly extreme! Was it possible to paddle that far in a kayak, at speed? The organiser, Peter Coates (eccentric professor/ irrepressible Englishman type) said no, it wasn't, but he thought he'd better let kayaks enter to prove it either way. He was half sure they'd either not make it or at very best trail the eight man 'voyager' canoes, and even the tandem canoes by some margin.

It kicked off at 11am Monday 20th July in Whitehorse, the 22,000 people capital city of the Yukon. We'd gotten there (myself, Russ Dawkins and my 5 times only training partner Rob Colliver) 6 days earlier to 'prep the boat', 6 days of interminable tinkering with the boat, packing it/ unpacking it, strings attaching everything to every other thing in case we dropped stuff overboard etc. We had a race plan, routines, you name it committed to paper and memory. Did the race plan pan out, did the routines work? Well yes, for the first 3 days, as we fell steadily behind the first 4/5 boats. Then, having abandoned our routines, we got a lot faster!

The river is huge. A few days in you hit Lake Laberge, 30 miles of non flowing water... I'd never paddled the Yukon before (this was Rob's 4th visit). The rules allowed big, stable sea kayaks only, no skinny boats (way too much expedition/ compulsory kit to carry, including 88lbs of food per pair, tents, bear proof barrels, cooking facilities etc etc). The boat without us in it must have weighed at least 150kg, add to that us, and you've got approximately 320kg, so not exactly a Devizes Westminster K2 racer (my previous interpretation of an endurance kayak race... that now seems like a sprint).

True to the forecast, post starters whistle, the 8 man boat sped off, but chased by 2 of the other sea kayaks, who sat on its wash, disappearing into the distance... by the lake they were gone, several miles ahead of us. Our slow, steady strategy suddenly seemed flawed.

The lake demonstrated the need for the sea kayak rule, big waves, strong winds, boat slewing sideways, half successful wave surfing. I pretty much thought, at this point (only half a day in) that victory for us was a dream.

The rules stated that each team had to stop for 6 hours every night. This, and tracking of teams was monitored by compulsory SPOT transmitters. At what time you stopped however was more flexible, so you could stop and camp late, passing teams ahead of you who'd stopped earlier. Days 1, 2 and 3 passed. The voyager 8 man had slipped to 3rd, outrun by the (surprise?) leaders, 2 tandem kayaks. We were in 4/5th, trading places with a canoe pair.

It became apparent that to be competitive in this race, stopping to get out to stretch your legs was not an option. On 3 of our days we didn't get out at all, the other days once only (a poo, (synchronised both paddlers!) – the only stuff we left in the wilderness, this being a 'no trace' race, and the other unscheduled stop, to change GPS batteries, where upon I sunk in river mud up to my knees, almost losing my only pair of shoes – dropping a place in the process).

It also became apparent that of our 6 hour stop, a maximum of 3.5 hours of that was sleep time (boat on shore, tie up, mosquito jackets on, tents up, water purification, wet kit off, hand care, foot care, cooking, bear spray at the ready, traces of food removed from boat into bear proof containers, hatches all covered and secured, and all in reverse in the morning...)

The saving grace was the continuous daylight – its one hell of a long way north in this race, even passing into the Arctic Circle. Now we were pretty luck with the weather, only having to contend with our tents blowing away, and almost into the river, and 2 days of smoke from forest fires raging not so far away, but we were kitted for sub zero nights and 30° days. Travelling light in this race is not only not allowed, but not an option.

So, anyway, come the morning of day 4, we arrive at Dawson City (once home to a slum camp of the 100,000 Klondike Gold Rush prospectors 100 years ago, and now a handful of wooden facade pretend- for- tourists saloons) 460 miles in and from here on we've paddled further than the Yukon 460, the previous 'longest canoe race in the world', and not even half way, and 2 hours (20 miles) behind the leaders, but in 3rd place. Deplete of energy, I'm wasted and can barely lift the paddle.

Don't ask me why, but then everything changes. We got faster, slicker, waste less time. In 18 hours of paddling we take 1hr 50 mins out of the 2 leaders. As they are setting up camp we pass them, and realise that there,s got to be less than 10 minutes in it. Their expressions said it all; amazement they'd been caught. Now we're well into the Yukon flats, a maze of channels going in every conceivable direction.

Morning of day 5, we jump into our boat 400m ahead of 2 boats moving very fast. By this time we're really on fire and after 64 hours of paddling a 3 hour sprint chase ensues, including dragging the boats across 2 very shallow stretches at a run, more appropriate in a 1 hour race than a 1000 miler. For 180 minutes we paddled at 10-12 mph, awesome in that type of boat. They caught us though, and then after 750 miles we rated up as 3, 3 BRITISH, sea kayaks all together, swapping food (and singing Happy Birthday to Darren from Team 4).

Three however soon became two, as Darren went right at a route choice and we 50 metres behind, opted left, and believe me, in this river, if Team 4 had wanted to paddle against the flow to rejoin us, it would have taken enough time for us to be gone.

So then phase 3 of this race began. Were Team 4 ahead of us, having taken a better route, or behind? For the remaining 14 hours of that day and the 7 the next we hammered it, Rob navigating from the back of the boat with GPS, me setting the stroke rate and looking for the flow, continually calling left and right.

Finally out of the maze of 'flats' we entered an 18 mile glass smooth gorge. Two hours later the Alaskan Pipeway Bridge loomed up bridging the gorge. This being only the 2nd bridge in 1000 miles, we had been expecting it and knew it was the Finish Line. Did we sprint now or agree on a joint first place with my 2 times DW partner Henry Hendron and his twin brother, Richard. As fellow Richmond Canoe Club paddlers, we figured joint first would be ok.

Six days and 2 hours. 1 and a half days quicker than it was felt feasible and with Darren and Earl from Wokingham CC 4 hours behind in 3rd, all the podium places fell not only to Sea Kayaks, but to British ones too.

We were pretty pleased about that.