



# NOTES FROM FIORDLAND DIARY

by Misha Hoichman

**T**his is a land of mountains with rain-forest-covered slopes. The sea stabs the land in long fiords and bays, carved by the glaciers. It

is inhabited by many creatures but none of them is human. The silence inside is disturbed by the numerous waterfalls, birds' screams and huge swells that travel undisturbed from as far as eight thousand miles away to break on the shores of this land. The orchestra of sounds is commonly shadowed by the scream of the fierce winds. The sailors call these latitudes 'the roaring forties'. Named Fiordland, this land is located on the southwest of New Zealand.

My last big kayaking expedition was with Alon Ohad, my expedition partner who also circumnavigated Tasmania with me in 2005 and Ireland in 2006. Sharing your experience with a close friend can be a great relief, especially in tough conditions. Alon is a great kayaker and, no less important, a good person with plenty of good humour.

However, this time I went solo. I cannot laugh at my own jokes, but I can sing songs and have a good long chat with myself. While surrounded by friends, neighbours and co-workers in my usual life I realise how much I miss talking to myself when I am far away from everyone. I can stop paddling without uttering a word, lie on my back and stare at the endless skies. I can

dream while I'm pushing the paddle; I can think; I can fully breathe nature and life. No strange sounds disturb the flow of my thoughts. I am alone.

"I am concerned about the weather conditions. They are very bad; you should be cancelling your journey as our winter has arrived. It is not advisable for you to do this now. It will be a very high risk, and your family comes first."

This short e-mail hit my mail box on 2nd March, one day before my planned departure. It came from Meri Leask, the legendary operator of Bluff Fishermen Radio in New Zealand ('Good-as-gold Meri', as Chris Duff called her). If there is anyone out there in the sea, Meri knows and worries about them. She contacts ship radios and warns about upcoming storms, she broadcasts weather forecasts and, if needed, she co-ordinates the rescues. Meri knew about my plans to paddle around Fiordland.

I called Meri straight away and we had a long and uneasy conversation. She said the seas were bad and a few storms were on their way to Fiordland. I promised to be extremely careful but she insisted my expedition be cancelled. "Look, Misha, I know these seas very well. Once we start getting this pattern of storms it only gets worse and more unsettled. A yacht near Tasmania reported tremendous seas which are heading to New Zealand. Right now there are no fishing boats in Fiordland. ►

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Opposite: Cape Providence.



If they are not there, neither should you be. You will risk your own life and the life of those who will come to rescue you. You have a family and two kids. They are more important than your expedition. You missed the summer; the best season to paddle around Fiordland is January to February.”

I was quite desperate. I felt myself capable and experienced enough to safely do the trip. I'd been planning it for a few months. Everything was set and ready: food for 30 days, nautical charts and gear including my 3-piece NDK Explorer that was transported especially from Israel. Should I cancel it all now? Should I rather neglect Meri's experience and go anyway? Would it be irresponsible, selfish?

At the end of our conversation Meri suggested that I call Stanley Mulvaney – the chairperson of Southland Sea Kayaking Network. I knew my chances of convincing Stanley were low, but I had nothing to lose so called him. We arranged to meet that evening. I went with the nautical charts and the homework done to prove that I knew what I was doing. Stanley is not only a very experienced kayaker and a professional climber, but also a charming person. I

presented my plan day-by-day, including the landings, crossings and back-up plans. An hour later we shook hands. Stanley and his wife Belinda blessed me for the upcoming journey and promised to soften Meri Leask. “I am sure you can do the trip safely, just don't rush”, said Stanley.

#### Day 1: 3rd March

I forgot to take a pen with me, and so scratched in the notebook using a small screwdriver. The result is a clean, white page with a tiny embossment that is readable when lit from the side. I couldn't scratch that way for long, as my fingers became tired and sore very quickly.

After a few hours of paddling, the forecast 15 knots SE already exceeded 25 knots. The seas built up quickly and the crests of the big waves started to break. I still felt comfortable although I was worried that the wind would continue to increase. The closest place for landing was 34 nautical miles away. All around were cliffs and reefs, against which the fat swell was exploding. The wind picked up and exceeded 30 knots in the afternoon. As the waves were racing, my kayak frequently disappeared under a layer of tumbling

water. I often found myself submerged in the wave up to my chest. I felt cold, yet in those seas I couldn't stop and open my day hatch in order to put my dry top on. After a few hours of paddling in those conditions my cockpit started to fill up with water and my heavy, rudderless, skegless kayak became even harder to turn.

The headland where I was supposed to land had two beaches – one heading west and the other east. The former would mean exposure to the breaking 2.5m ocean swell. The latter would mean surfing the 3m wind waves in what resembled a rock garden. It was like a Russian fairy tale: turn left and you lose your horse, turn right and you lose your money, keep straight and you lose your life.

I finally decided to land with the wind waves as landing with the swell had an additional risk of being stuck on the beach for a few days. I didn't feel fear, although unpleasant thoughts rushed into my head. I acted rationally and calmly.

My beach was covered with the foam of the breaking waves. I could hardly see the optimal gateway. I decided to get closer to ►



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Clockwise from top left opposite: Milford Sound - my final destination. Black sand dunes of Coal Bay. Fur seals at Green Islets. Camping at Thompson Sound. The swell explodes at the submerged reef near Long Point.



IT WAS SO BEAUTIFUL; THERE WERE TWO HUGE ROCKS WITH BIG HOLES. THROUGH THOSE HOLES I COULD SEE THE SKIES AND THE RUSHING SEAS. MY ONLY NEIGHBOURS WERE A COUPLE OF SMELLY FUR SEALS WHO LIVED NEARBY. I HOPED NOT TO DISTURB THEM TOO MUCH, AND PLANNED TO BE ON MY WAY THE NEXT DAY.

Above and opposite: Green Islets.



a group of bigger rocks where eventually I found a reasonably protected passage. It was extremely hard to manoeuvre the heavy, partially flooded kayak in force 7 wind and messy seas.

When my kayak finally hit the shore I was so exhausted that I collapsed on the sand and lay there for an hour until I regained my energy. Nevertheless, my spirits were high. I was satisfied with how I had faced the seas, especially mentally. It seems that the experience slowly pushes away the natural fear.

It was so beautiful; there were two huge rocks with big holes. Through those holes I could see the skies and the rushing seas. My only neighbours were a couple of smelly fur seals who lived nearby. I hoped not to disturb them too much, and planned to be on my way the next day.

#### **Day 2: 4th March**

The morning paddle was tough: I paddled 12 miles against a 20-knot wind and flooding current. Sometimes it didn't look like I was making any progress at all. Towards the end my speed dropped to 1 knot. I was paddling as hard as I could because I had spotted a line of clouds approaching from the southwest. After 5.5 hours I finally passed Puseyur Point and landed.

While paddling, I asked myself: why are you doing this? I do it for the sensation that fills me at the end of the paddling. That is when I find the perfect harmony and peace in my life. Moreover, there are some amazing moments of happiness that occur during the paddle. Although they are short compared to the frequent tiredness and sometimes even physical pain, these moments are so powerful that they are certainly worth the payment.

#### **Day 5: 7th March**

The north-westerly winds of 40 knots which had begun the previous day were still blowing hard. Finally, at 2 pm, a sudden shift happened. The pouring rain and the gusts died sharply and the grey blanket of low stormy clouds was gone. The heavens were rapidly occupied with big curly sheep walking slowly to the east in the blue meadows.

On my way out I paddled a few kilometres around Cape Providence. The seas were mighty. It felt like being in a pot of boiling soup. Each bubble was the size of a modest house. The traditional SW swell was hitting the swell coming from the NW. They rushed into the cliffs of the cape together and were reflected back. The shelf was shallow and numerous submerged reefs were scattered around. Wild waves

were swinging as if drunk. I felt like a tiny piece of woodchip in the hands of furious nature. I held my breath when the tops of the swells collapsed and white foam rolled on top of the water hill. Some of the foam occasionally hit me. Once again, I was surprised to see how well my kayak handled these conditions. Had I sailed in a bigger vessel, I would have been in trouble.

On that day I landed at midnight; luckily it was in the fiord. When I reached the planned landing spot at 8.45 pm, just as the sun was setting, I found a small beach covered with big stones washed by a stream. I was forced to paddle another 4 hours in complete darkness until I finally reached a suitable place for landing.

#### **Day 6: 8th March**

North-westerly winds of 45 knots raged outside, yet my tent was warm and well protected. On the mesh there were thousands of unwanted little guests: sand flies. It felt like they had fallen in love with the taste of my blood. Lying behind the mesh windows creates the illusion of safety, but I knew that at some point I'd be forced to leave the tent. Regardless of how fast I could do it, dozens of sand flies managed to sneak into my shelter. That day, I lay in my tent and counted sand flies. Did I miss my computer job? Maybe. ►

The experiment began the first time I was forced to leave the tent to pee. Upon my return, I greeted each of my guests personally by smashing them against the tent wall or against my own skin. I counted the victims, but stopped when I reached 97. Thankfully, they disappear at night and don't fly after kayaks.

#### Day 7: 9th March

How terrible it was to wake in the morning inside a warm, cosy sleeping bag still filled with dreams and realise that I had to hurry, leave the dry tent, go out into the rain and misery, start packing gear and get into wet, stinking paddling clothes – with a black cloud of sandy friends around me. At least I made them happy.

That day, I finally met someone: a ship of divers exploring Dusky Sound. I didn't feel like I had missed people but, after seven days of tension, surrounded by storms, alone without spotting a single human being or a fishing boat (Meri Leask was right), I was glad to have a chat with the captain. I paddled away and the ship disappeared, but their presence softened the grey skies and warmed the gale wind.

#### Day 8: 10th March

I landed in Coal Bay, having made just 9 nautical miles progress from my last camp. The headwind from the northwest reached 25 knots and was supposed to peak at 50 knots that night. My bay's entrance was to the northwest, i.e. I would be exposed to the full power of the storm. There were no trees or anything else to protect my tent from the wind, yet there was plenty of driftwood of all sizes and shapes. I had the whole day to build my trenches against nature's upcoming offence. I used half-metre wooden pegs, fastened all the guy lines and placed the kayak in front of the tent to break the gusts of the wind. It should have been sufficient. After all, my excellent Hilleberg tent had already been tested several times by force 8 winds. I went to bed a bit excited – I wanted to see what the storm felt like.

At 3 am I was woken by the screaming wind. I lit my torch and saw my whole tent flattened. The poles were about to break. The two doors were half-opened; the wind was breaking into the vestibules and violently shaking the whole tent. I zipped the doors but gradually they were opened

again by the wind. I realised that I needed to get out and check the guy lines and the pegs. The rain was whipping – or probably it was the sea foam ripped by the storm. I decided to stay in the tent until the gusts eased a little, and tried to support the tent from inside. The load was too heavy for my hands, so I lay on my back and used my legs to push the poles out. I covered myself with the sleeping bag and waited. If my shelter was swept away by the storm – I would be lost.

One-and-a-half hours passed. Every 10 minutes I had a quick break to zip the doors closed again before returning to support the poles. The violent gusts eased little by little. It was time to leave the tent and check the pegs. There was no sense in putting on rain clothes: in that storm they would be wet in a few seconds. My bare skin would dry faster. I took all my clothes off and sneaked out.

The weak torch hardly lit the nearby objects. Black sand mixed with sea spray hit my body. I covered my eyes with my hand and rushed to check the tent. Some of the wooden sticks were blown away and parts of the guy lines had been released. Miraculously, the tent was still standing although only supported by a single remaining peg and two guy lines.

I found a stone and a few new sticks to replace the old ones and started to hammer them in. Meanwhile, I began to feel the first signs of hypothermia. My naked body was shaking uncontrollably; my fingers refused to untie the last knot of the guy line. Finally, I returned to the tent. I felt freezing cold even after putting all my clothes on and wrapping the sleeping bag around me – but my tent now stood relatively firm. With shaking hands I stuffed a hefty handful of cookies and chocolate into my mouth and, little by little, I warmed up. Exhausted I fell asleep, waking up every hour or so to zip back the vestibules.

The wind finally dropped to a bearable 30 knots in the morning. The storm was over. I dived into a dreamless void and opened my eyes when my watch showed 11 am. The sticker on my Lendal paddle turned white during the night, polished by the sand.

#### Day 9: 11th March

This was yet another day off due to bad

weather. I love these days: I read, walk, think and listen to music on my MP3 player. Being completely alone, surrounded by restless seas and nature, my senses sharpen. I understand music much better. It's my favourite Bach "The Well Tempered Clavier" with the beautiful performance of Sviatoslav Richter - an old recording, mono, made by the Soviet "Melodia" company. The sound quality is not on par with today's standards: I can clearly hear background noises. I imagine an old Moscow apartment, with high ceilings and unusually thick walls, a room with a big window and a light coming through and flooding the interior. A grand piano stands in the middle. Richter is playing Bach. Each pair of prelude and fugue describes one human's life. Some are happy and shining till the very end, others are tragic, struggling through and relieved only at the last chord. Outside, the city streets are wet from the melting snow, the trees are still naked but bullfinches occupy the branches and loudly celebrate the final victory of spring over winter.

#### Day 10: 12th March

I left Coal Bay after a days break. It was quite tricky to get through the surf; although the waves didn't look high from the shore, they posed some challenges as I made my way through them. I needed to carefully time the waves: race, stop and retreat whenever needed until I finally was in the safe zone.

Out in the sea the fat south-westerly 4m swell combined with the 2m wind waves gave me a wonderful ride to Doubtful Sound. Here I had two choices: either continue paddling forwards or turn into the fiord and paddle the east part of Secretary Island. The latter plan promised beautiful views but added about 14 nautical miles to the trip. It also meant that I would no longer be pushed by the waves but instead would have to struggle against the ebb current. One voice pushed me forward, but the other had no mercy: "Why did you start this trip? Not for the sake of paddling from point A to point B." This voice finally prevailed and I turned my kayak to the east.

The penalty was immediate and clear: my progress dropped from 5 knots to less than 2. However, the more I travelled into the sound, the more overwhelmed I was by nature. Numerous waterfalls of ►



Above: Stirling Falls, Milford Sound.



all imaginable sizes and shapes greeted me. Some of them roared while others were tender and shy, cautiously carrying their waters between the rocks and the bush to the sea. It was a festival of sounds accompanied by the rays of the sun.

**Day 11: 13th March**

Unfortunately, the beach where I had landed the previous night was short, covered with boulders and full of sand flies. Hopping between numerous obstacles with a thermos of porridge, I could not sustain a sufficient pace to escape my chasers. After 50m of half-dancing, half-rock climbing, I reached a wall of cliffs where I was forced to turn back. That morning I discovered what sand flies taste like: salty! They dived into the porridge, attacked my mouth, my nostrils and eyes; the rest of my body was covered with a thick layer of Deet in which they found their death. I was relieved only with the first strokes of the paddle.

The more I paddled that day the less I believed my eyes: the ocean was calm! The combination of an easy rolling moderate swell with the weak, friendly tail wind seemed surreal. Either I was extremely lucky or I was far enough from the roughest part of NZ. The fishermen say the scariest seas are between Puseyur Point and

Breaksea Sound. I was already 40 nm away from the latter, escaping the infamous area further to the northeast. I could finally paddle close enough to the shore without risk of being smashed against the cliffs. There were still respectful sets of waves that required me to stay tuned and keep a safe distance of 20–30m from the cliffs. But what's 20m compared to the few kilometres that I was forced to keep between me and the cliffs on previous days?

I call the days like that 'mileage' days. Although I say I love exploring and hate long, monotonous, point-to-point paddling in tranquil seas, I was grateful for a calm day.

**Day 12: 14th March**

The coastline was flowing past my kayak. The seas were even calmer than the day before. The skies were clear; not a single cloud shaded the intense sun. I felt hot in my dry top. I still enjoyed the weather but unmistakable signs of heterodoxy started to appear: I felt bored. Although I was thankful for another good and calm day on the water with no struggle and fear, I also wished the gods of the ocean would reveal again the beauty of the raging seas. We would play the risky but exciting game of cat and mouse; nature would hopefully

show me mercy. I felt like the Hebrews who were not allowed to call the sacred name of the powerful God. And there I was, inviting the mighty ocean to dinner while trembling as the possibility that he might come.

At 2 am the sea breeze reached 30 knots and I became nervous. An hour later I was once more left with clear skies. The entrance to Milford Sound, my final destination, welcomed me. I could finish my trip that day by paddling to the end of the fiord, but I wanted to see its magnificence with fresh eyes. I pulled out to shore.

The next day was one of peaceful paddling along the fiord, marking my return to family and civilisation. There was just one wish left: to return once again to those magical places. ■

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Above: Two Thumb Bay.