

Kayaker
Travel

Picture: CURIOUS: Labu villagers of Central Province crowd around the kayak when Andrew called in for water and fruits in May.

Way up north in a sea kayak

By BARNEY ORERE

Tasmanian – born, Andrew Hughes, 30, recently achieved a rare feat circumnavigating PNG mainland from Port Moresby in the south to Vanimo in the north. Andrew, a teacher, believes adventure is an opportunity to express honesty and strength of character. His main interests are in human-powered walking, riding and paddling and sharing those through magazine articles and now through teaching as a way of sharing that idea. Andrew initially came to PNG to kayak up the Fly River. But things went wrong from the day he arrived. BARNEY ORERE picks up the story.

ANDREW'S nightmare began when he arrived in PNG on April 30 and flew straight to Kiunga, only to find his kayak had not been delivered. After waiting two weeks in Kiunga, he flew back to Moresby, got back his kayak from the shipping company and headed east instead, to Alotau. "To be honest with you, the Fly river was flooded and it would have been a frightening prospect. Anyway, that'll wait for another day," Andrew said. His kayak journey began in Port Moresby on May 13, straight into the south-easterly the Motuan people call laurabada. If you separate the words laurabada, you get lau (I) ura (like) bada (very much). Prevalent after Easter, this wind helped the Motuans of long ago reach the Gulf of Papua in their lagatoi with giant crab-claw sails, to trade clay pots for sago in preparation for the dry months when food was short. For Andrew Hughes, it was hardly congenial as he plunged headlong into the laurabada.

The laurabada dealt an unexpected blow when Andrew succumbed to an infection in his knee as he got to Suau. "I thought it was a spider bite and it went from a boil-type situation into up and down the side of my leg; it was cellulitis and I was at a very remote area," he recalled. "They had a dinghy but no fuel for the dinghy. I needed to get out of there and I realised I was in serious trouble with my temperature rising; unable to move due to pain and swelling." Andrew used his satellite phone to call his expedition coordinator in Australia who organised a boat from Alotau to come down 150kms to his rescue at Isududu village. "It was 3:30 in the afternoon and there were a few stages when I thought I was going to become unconscious. My mind was starting to wander; becoming forgetful, things were beginning to slow down, my temperature was continuing to increase and my heart rate was 150-160; extremely high most of the day."

The rescue boat had painkillers and antibiotics to help Andrew while they rushed him to the Alotau General Hospital. There were questions on his mind; should he get back to Australia? Andrew's sister-in-law, a surgeon in Cairns had suggested that he flew straight back for a surgery to remove the puss in his infected leg. But the doctors in Alotau assured him that everything would be fine. Said Andrew: "I completely trusted

them and I went into a very clean and professional hospital environment; got my leg cleaned up and recovered perfectly well.”

Andrew stayed five days at the hospital and a further 10 in a guest house to fully recuperate. On June 12 he continued up to East Cape and from there conditions changed. Instead of the south-east against him, the south-east prevailing wind was behind him so he decided to build a small sail. “Because of my injury I wanted to get to Vanimo; I wanted to finish fast,” (chuckle). “The injury reminded me that I was in a different place; I didn’t really know how things worked and when things went wrong it was frightening.” Your writer understands what Andrew is saying and urges the reader to read those last two lines again to pick up the importance of the message. “So if it wasn’t for the villagers who were so caring and generous with their time; if it wasn’t for the quick action of the Alotau Hospital and the boat, then I would have been in big trouble.” Again, your writer urges the reader to appreciate the link between what the adventurer is saying and the involvement of the PNG Tourism Promotion Authority in Andrew’s adventure.

“But just a reminder; that when you are on a big trip you’re in a fairly isolated and tricky situation; I’ve never sailed a sea kayak before but the sail was there to get me there a few days faster. So a local fishermen (angel?) came along and helped me build a sail on a small island and it proved to be one of the most exciting part of the trip. Not understanding sailing very well, not understanding kayak with a sail and what that does to the kayak, meant that I was in for some very fast and dangerous rides across some very open bays (chuckle); strong winds pushing me from one side and the paddle trying to stabilise me on the other. There was one instance at Topura which is before Rabaraba and it is a crossing (bay) of about 40 km and you’re in the middle – you’re 20km from any shore – strong wind came in from the south-east, round about the time of the strong wind warning across all PNG. I didn’t get that message, obviously where I was and I didn’t realise I was in for a rough day. Half way across I got big raindrops and I got 15, 25, 30 knot winds; bang from the back on the side that grabbed the sail before I had anytime to react. And I was going much faster than a sea kayak is designed to go.

“I am here on one side with a paddle pushing down hard and holding on, hoping that I did not get the wave the wrong way that’d tip me over because upside down in a sea kayak in 2-3 metre waves breaking crest and water everywhere; I think would have been the end of me. So that was on that day in the balance (chuckle); I was petrified, to be honest with you. And when I washed up on the beach at Cape Vogel; I maintained the bearing and the bearing was land – the closest was 20km away – and that was as close as it got. I landed just short of the point and there were a couple of other outboard dinghies in there also caught by the storm and they had to shelter in a little bay there. So we huddled around a little fire of coconut shells and talked about our experiences in the bay that day, and shared some stories (chuckle); yeah, about the weather and how unpredictable it can be.”

Andrew continued from there up towards Tufi and another big crossing (this would have been Collingwood Bay) about 60 km but on that day the wind was much more gentler. He spent five days at Tufi because his infection flared up and he needed more antibiotics. The health centre did not have the correct sort so they had it flown in from Port Moresby through the Tufi Dive Resort. “The people there were wonderful. It

took me five days to know which way it was gonna go. If it was going to get worse then it was back to Australia. If it was going to get better I was going to continue so after five days, signs were that it was getting better and I'd tootle off again (chuckle), my little sail and my little kayak - and continued. And all through this, every night I'm stopping, I had villages, sometimes on the beach, asking for the pastor or the councillor or the chief and being looked after; like I'm a friend, you know. And the whole time; although I had these kayaking experiences, I also had these village experiences which were very positive.

From Tufi, Andrew went straight to Buna to Deboin, stayed with a family there and then through the islands past Lasanga up Salamaua peninsula. "Solo kayaking and big cities don't mix; they're very difficult to logistically handle a 5 ½ metre kayak in a place you don't know with a lot of people around. And so the small villages were my choice." He skipped Lae and went straight across the Huon Gulf. "The waters in PNG are very clean compared to Australia so I noticed a lack of rubbish. Half way across the Huon Gulf, I was surprised to see a can of coke floating along. Even more surprising was that it was unopened (chuckle) and I opened it and it was fizzy so I had a can of coke half way across Huon Gulf (chuckle), 15km from land; there was a can of coke for lunch (chuckle). Yeah, they're not my sponsors so it is even luckier for them."

6 **Ornate mask, grass skirt – it was unbelievable**

He landed at Bukawa on the far side and continued to Finschaffien. "I was expecting more south-east; I was getting north-west, north-east; it was coming from all around the compass so my sail was sometimes useful and sometimes a pain in the a...because I had to sit it on the deck of the kayak and it'd catch the water slouching over the side. So past Finschaffien through Vitiaz Strait which was a bit rough and I know it's got a reputation for boisterous weather and I don't think I saw the worst of it by a long shot. But it had some very rough water. I headed up to Madang, averaging around 50km a day, waking up at 5:30 and on the water by 6:30 and off water anywhere between 4:30 and 6:30 pm. So between 10 and 12- hour days, 50 km all the way through." Instead of going to Wewak from Madang, Andrew went to Manam, up to Biam, to Wei to Vokio and to Kairuru. "On Vokio, the men from Coyle Island had come for six weeks and were teaching traditional dancing with the mask. I got to see the ornate dress of the grass skirt and the mask, and it was just unbelievable," Andrew said. He headed back for the mainland coast, pushing rapidly to the northern border, coming in near Malol which has heavy shore break, got turned sideways and his sail snapped; two days before he reached Vanimo on August 4th. He was a very relieved man when it was all over.

The main purpose of the journey was, as a teacher and Andrew's website expeditionclass.com documenting the trip daily sending one picture and a short report daily from his lap top computer to the website. It turned out that a lot of students in Australia and adults around the world followed the journey daily and used that engagement to learn about PNG, climate change and other issues around adventure and risk-taking behaviour.

Ends.

