

Chesapeake Paddler



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Delaware Bay Crossing

by Rick Wiebush

As part of a two-day Open Water Skills class for Cross Currents Sea Kayaking, seven people paddled from Cape Henlopen, DE, to Cape May, NJ, on July 7. It's approximately a 15 NM trip from the Lewes public beach (our put-in) to the Cape May Ferry Terminal. The crossing itself is about 10 NM. Tom Noffsinger and I were leading the group, all of whom were CPA members (Paula Hubbard, Maywin Liu, Mike Ward, Mike Thomas and John O'Hara).

In addition to the pure satisfaction of doing a crossing of that length, there were several things that stood out:

Out of Sight—This was the first time doing this crossing that—for much of the crossing—we couldn't see Cape May at all. That meant we had to rely solely on our compass bearing for about three or four miles. We had set the bearing to account for a flooding 2 knot current, so we were aiming for a point about 3.5 NM east of Cape May Point (which was our initial destination on the NJ side). Not being able to see land was a little unnerving because several of us had the sense that we were heading for France instead of Cape May. But the calculations worked out perfectly. Mike Thomas subsequently looked at our GPS track and it showed a perfectly straight line between Cape Henlopen and Cape May Point.

Hot, Hot Hot—The heat index for the day reached about 110. It didn't really feel that bad out on the water, but we nonetheless had to constantly keep ourselves wet either by splashing, dumping water-filled hats onto our heads, or just rolling. And most of us drank more water than we ever have during the course of a day's paddle.

Lots of Current—I was really pleased with myself for getting the timings right so that we hit the shoals on the NJ side and the Cape May channel right around slack tide (sound of one hand patting self on back). But I totally forgot—or didn't know in the first place—

how quickly things start to get a little hairy right there at the point almost as soon as the ebb starts. We were less than a half mile from shore and maybe a half hour into the ebb and already the current was strong enough to create standing waves. This was a pretty strong group so the waves didn't create any real problems, but the battle/slog to get around the corner was something we didn't need after already doing 12 NM in 100+ degree heat. It sapped all of us. And it was something I should have been aware of ahead of time (sound of one hand slapping forehead).

Dolphin—The dolphin show in the Cape May Channel was neat. There was a group of about 10 dolphin feeding in the channel as we came through. We stopped to watch for about 15 minutes and a couple of them got very interested in us. They came within a few feet of some of the boats for a closer look. One of them took his/her head out of the water and looked Mike Ward right in the face!

The Ferry—The ferry ride back to Lewes was a bonus. What a pleasure it is after doing that crossing to just sit back in the shade, letting the breeze cool you off, sipping on a coke (or whatever) and surveying the seascape knowing you had just come across these same waters in a little boat. What a great way to end the day!



Ferry photo by Tom Noffsinger



Dolphin in Cape May Channel photo by Maywin Liu

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That it only cost us \$10 per person (no fee for the kayaks) was an additional bonus.

This is a really great trip for intermediate and above paddlers and I highly recommend it. However, the currents need to be taken carefully into account and you have to know that you are going to have pretty good weather for the crossing. The Bay can get pretty nuts if there are fairly strong winds and/or big swell rolling through. Obviously the potential for t-storms has to be considered as well. There aren't any bailout points. We in fact had originally planned to do the crossing on Sunday, but on Friday night decided to switch it to Saturday due to the increased probability of thunderstorms for Sunday.

There is a short video here: <http://www.facebook.com/crosscurrentskayaking>



No land in sight, Paula and Rick photo by Tom Noffsinger

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Alan Mapes