



Paddling

the Bora

a Croatian journey

Words: Simon Winkley

Pics: Clare Edmead and Lee Crump of Clare Edmead Photography (Drone & Večka Tower); Simon Winkley

I'm a big fan of travelling with an iSUP and, in May this year, I couldn't resist a short paddling adventure during a trip to the Paklenica National Park in Zadar County, Croatia. I had just two days available in my schedule and planned a route that took me from the ruins of the 16th century Venetian-built Večka Tower near Starigrad as far south as it's possible to go by water, then back again – a distance of 52km including exploring coastlines and creeks.

The weapon of choice was the Starboard Touring 12'6 x 31" Deluxe and the 2017 model is lighter than ever now that all the glue has been ditched in favour of the heat fusion of materials. The board, three-piece paddle and pump plus all my kit and clothing for five days packed easily into Starboard's new Magic Suitcase and weighed in at 20kg. It rolled effortlessly through the airport and - now that it looks like a suitcase – was checked in without difficulty as a standard hold bag and not as 'sports equipment.'

As I departed Večka Tower the weather was overcast and slightly cooler than normal which, with light winds behind me, made for perfect conditions. A steady paddle for a couple of hours in a SE direction took me to the Novsko Ždrilo strait. This stunning gorge is straddled by two huge bridges - one of which is the 55m high Maslenica Bridge which is renowned for bungee jumping.

After passing through (with no sign of anyone bouncing down!) I took a short rest to eat lunch by the ruins of a large house before crossing a wide body of water called Novigradsko More. Being ahead of schedule I changed course to paddle up to the north shore to where the Zrmanja River meets the bay – passing acres of mussel farm marked by hundreds of coloured buoys. Paddling a few kilometres into this sheer-sided river canyon was the perfect opportunity to investigate the harshly-eroded yet beautifully coloured cliffs dotted with caverns of all sizes.

A long, winding route through the narrow Karinsko Ždrilo waterway took me through gently-rolling scenery of red-tiled houses, hills and trees to the smaller bay of Karinsko More. The 12'6 Deluxe, with the carbon stringer and rails, has incredible stiffness and glide and was a joy to paddle as the day pushed on.

I deliberately decided not to book any accommodation in advance in order to just arrive and see what happens, traveller-style. As I neared the end of the journey the sea was glass and the air was quiet. I approached the first tiny cluster of houses and, as I was deciding where to land, two young men appeared and started play-fighting. Things started to get pretty rowdy and, whilst it seemed like they were having fun, I thought it best to carry on when it became a rock dodging game!

No one was about in the next tiny village so I landed on the beach of the third one and approached some fishermen. They spoke no English and, sadly, I spoke no Croatian or German (their preferred alternative). As they began to understand that I was looking for a room they swelled their chests saying, 'Nicola Putričić!' and gestured to the other side of the bay. They were so insistent, that I thanked them and paddled across to the tiny village of Donji Karin and was greeted by a giant of a man who was indeed Mr. Putrić. He spoke no English either.

Using globally recognized hand gestures I stood in the sea describing what I wanted yet it appeared that he had no rooms. Two ladies appeared. They had no rooms. They made calls on their mobiles and shook their heads. It was 7pm and the horizon was lining up a lovely sunset. Then after a few moments a nod and we were all off walking up the perilously steep hill with Mr. Putrić kindly carrying my paddle and spare water. As we reached the top of the climb a lady arrived and introduced herself in good English as Daniela.

After leaving my board and paddle in Mr. Putrić's garden for the night she took me to her beautiful holiday apartments just a few streets away. By this time I was pretty hungry so she generously drove me to a roadside pizzeria in her car to get the most delicious, freshest pizza I had ever tasted. Villa Daniela was just perfect with a killer balcony view of

the bay. The cost was just 150 Kuna for the room and 35 Kuna for the pizza which is about £20 all in. The locals had been particularly welcoming and expected no tips for their services which pleasantly contrasts other locations where the arrival of a traveller can cause a frantic scramble by the welcome party to make cash and broker deals.

I aimed to leave at 0530 to enjoy flat conditions most of the way back before the forecasted medium winds came in during the afternoon. The Bora – a strong, gusty, katabatic wind from the north that can dominate the Adriatic was forecast to come in the following day yet, when I awoke at 0445 to a storm, I realized with dismay that it had arrived 24 hours early.

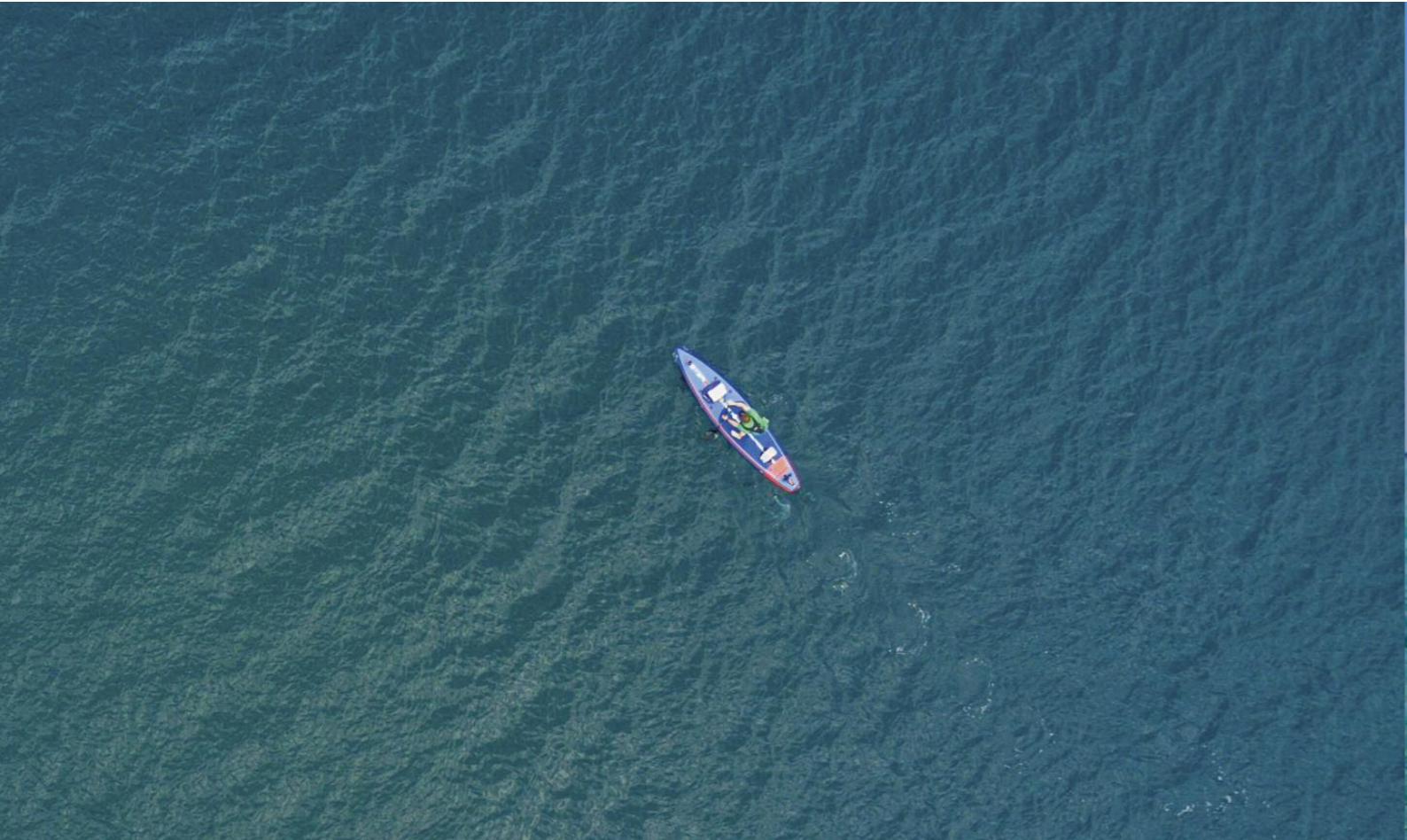
Onshore 50-60 knot winds with heavy rain lashed the village as thunder and lightning raged in the mountains. I bolted the shutters and went back to sleep, checking again at 0600, 0700, 0800. Eventually the storm abated and the sun came out and, after collecting my board and water from Mr. Putrić's house, I set off at 0930 directly into a gusty 30-35 knot headwind despite warnings from the locals that it was foolish to set out.

Paddling in those Force 7-8 conditions is brutal – like paddling against a tide – and all attempts to stand and make headway failed. The only way was to kneel on the board, choke the paddle close to the blade and hit the full-power button with a steady cadence to avoid early fatigue. The air was warm but the water chilly and every kneeling stroke brought cold spray over the board. Small waves dominated the lee shore yet the water flattened out under the mountains. The saving grace was that the enclosed nature of the bays and waterways kept the water state remarkably flat relative to the wind strength.



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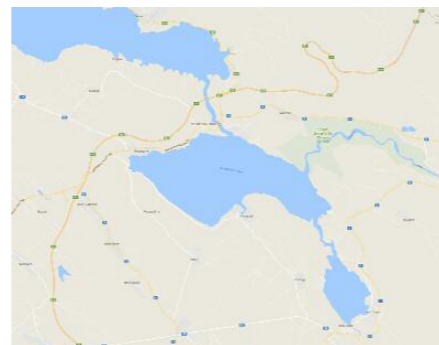




Simon Winkley is supported by Starboard SUP and Bray Lake Watersports. Thanks to Clare Edmead and Lee Crump of Clare Edmead Photography and to Angus Whittaker for local advice and for being on standby as my emergency buddy. Instagram: @simonwinkley

I paddled straight upwind and then across in the lee of the high ground. It took a full hour to beat the wind on the first leg, which would have taken about 10-15 minutes in normal conditions. The paddle across the top of the bay was a strain in the shifty side/headwinds. Getting to the edge of the first bay, however, made the prospect of getting back seem like a reality.

Paddling back through the first waterway provided shelter in places yet, at regular intervals, huge gusts would tear through to force the board up to 100 degrees off course. The wind was just as fierce in the open and exposed Novigradsko More Bay and kneeling again to paddle the long way into the wind then across it was the only way to make progress. By now a solid band



<https://goo.gl/maps/pFJUWoTmS4N2>

of white cloud capped the mountains of the National Park – a firm reminder of the presence of the Bora.

All the open stretches of water were the same and the wind at the top of each one had violent shifts of up to 120 degrees. After nine hours of paddling on day two with a bit of resting on sheltered, remote, rocky beaches I arrived back at the start stoked that I had completed the trip unsupported and without picking up any blisters.

Paddling in this way, with the sheer repetition of paddle strokes, is a great way to focus the mind and body. Paddling the final 26km against/across 15-35 knot winds all day was a challenge I had not intended, yet it paid greater rewards in the end in terms of the overall achievement.

Croatia is simply stunning and this trip took in just one small piece of it. I look forward to returning to discover more of its hidden places by SUP – hopefully next time steering well clear of the Bora!

