

# Downwind to NORTH ROCK

## Bermuda bump running

Words: Simon Winkley  
Pics: Simon Winkley, Chris Brown

North Rock sits at the northern limit of a huge extinct volcano that ceased to be active around 33 million years ago and it caught my attention last year in the initial planning phase of my fourth trip to Bermuda.

It is marked by an iconic navigational beacon, which rises magnificently from the sea below. Today the volcano's caldera is encircled by coral reef to the north and west with a 138 large and small islands to the South and East that make up Bermuda itself. The next landfall to the North is Nova Scotia – 1,000 miles away – or head west 560 miles to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

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I would be working with Royal Bermuda Yacht Club (RBYC) – training the instructor team that run their Sailing Academy – a Royal Yachting Association Training Centre based in the capital Hamilton. My journey to Bermuda was punctuated with a work-related stopover in the British Virgin Islands and, after a total of six flights – including an eight-seater from Tortola to Puerto Rico - I arrived with my SUP kit in tact.

My 23kg hold bag was the SUP bag itself and carried an inflatable Starboard Racer 12'6, three-piece composite paddle, pump plus two-weeks of clothing and other stuff. Such modern SUP kit and the new style of custom travel bags have recently opened up incredible possibilities for adventure afloat.

A few months before the trip I contacted Jay Riihiluoma, proprietor of Upwind Sports windsurfing school, and suggested to him that we might get together to paddle to North Rock and he liked the idea. Working with the few spare days I had scheduled into my coaching programme we opted for Thursday July 28th, with a forecast of Force 3 from the south. Jay and his son Peter collected me from RBYC by boat and we arrived at Spanish Point at 0900 with plenty of water and a supply of locally baked Barn Bars to keep us powered-up.

Spanish Point is a small outcrop of land reaching out into the Great Sound and is said to be named after early Spanish settlers who ran their ship aground in the

1500s. We set out and rounded the wrecked hulk of what used to be the second largest floating dock in the world. Constructed in 1866 it was towed from London to Bermuda where it served the Royal Navy until 1906. A gale drove it onto the reef two years later and there it remains, fascinating in its rust-ugliness, despite several abortive attempts to remove it.

A gentle breeze followed us for about two miles as the sky behind us darkened with rain. The rain diverted around us as we paddled north yet caused the wind to back and increase to a Force 4-5 square onto our boards from the east. Luckily the wind soon eased and steadily veered behind us again.



# We crossed the South Channel shipping lane to paddle

over great beds of coral reef which lay deep enough to avoid being touched by our boards or paddles. Turtles surfaced from time to time, flapping briefly before plunging like stones at the sense of our approach. Our support boat driver and photographer, Chris Brown, patiently navigated the boat through the larger gaps in the reef.

After crossing the North Channel the sea state became somewhat irregular and challenging at times and the practice I had put in every evening that week around the choppy waters of Hamilton Harbour came good.

After three hours and 50 minutes of steady paddling we arrived at the beacon where the ocean on the outside plunges to a depth of 800m. A southerly swell broke over the rocks to meet our wind-swell head on. As we paddled around the rock, dwarfed by the scale of the beacon, this turbulent water state threw us off our boards several times despite having kept our feet firmly planted since the start.

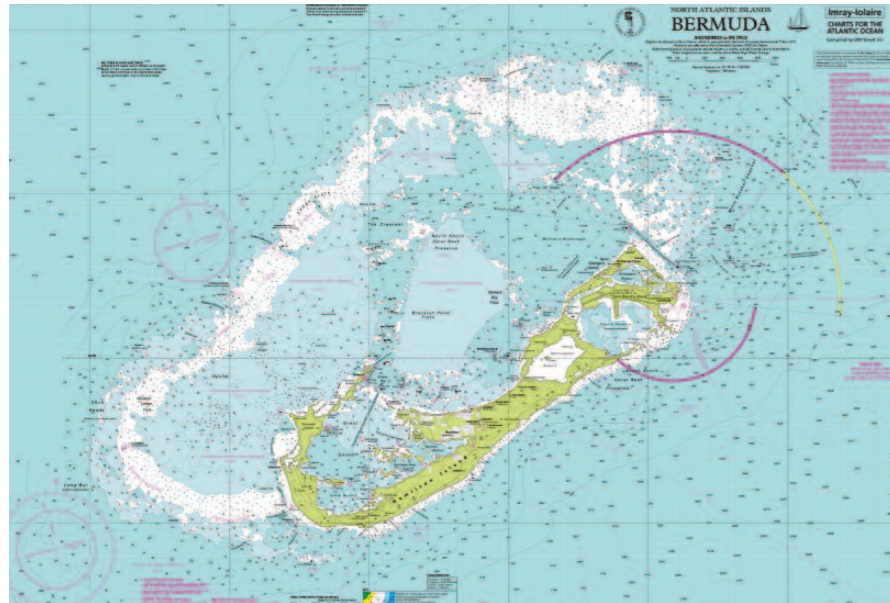
My ambition had been to climb onto the beacon yet the waves heaving around the base looked defiant, almost denying access to the 20ft skinny metal ladder projecting upwards. Sitting on the board for the final few metres of the approach I paddled in, slamming several times into the ladder. At the critical moment I left the board in the sea and quickly climbed up until my leash pulled tight.

°I stretched up to lay the paddle on the ledge and hauled the board up as the waves elbowed the nose around and the wind sent the board into a rapid spin. Once upon the ledge a quick check showed the board, fin and the nose-mounted GoPro to be unharmed.

Standing up there was better than I had imagined with panoramic views of Bermuda on one side, the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean on the other and pure blue sky all around. I recalled the beguiling stories conveyed to me by Bermudian Historian Paul Doughty about the great number of ships that have floundered on this reef since Juan de Bermudes discovered the island in 1505.



# Everyone talks about the Bermuda Triangle yet,



unromantically, loss of ships at sea caused by the supernatural remains merely a myth. In the early days of discovery and trade to the Americas, however, Bermuda's latitude made it a natural turning point for ships to turn east to return to Europe. In the cases where navigation was wayward a terrible price was paid as ships laden with precious commodities met their end upon the unforgiving reef.

Paddling a SUP in this way perfectly blends physical, historical and surf elements. If you are planning an overseas work trip close to the sea then why not factor in a couple of free days? Pick up a chart, check an inflatable SUP with a three-piece paddle onto the plane, hook up with some cool people and see where it can take you!

Simon Winkley is supported by Starboard SUP and Bray Lake Watersports. Thanks to Paul Doughty (Archivist and Historian at RBYC). Imray Chart E5 used with the kind permission of the publishers.

