

Kayaking The Pangalanes Canal - Madagascar



We like to think of ourselves as annual adventurers. Each year, as an antidote to rather sedentary office jobs, a group of us set ourselves a challenge that usually involves one or more mountains. This year however it was decided that a change was in order. Over the past 4-5 years our merry band has consisted of a core 3 guys, Damo (the leader), Jon (the muscles) and me. In addition we have been blessed with the occasional presence of a brave or perhaps fool hardy lady called Sarah. So, in the time-honored way, the 4 of us convened down the local pub armed with laptops, maps and the usual unrealistic optimism in our own abilities and fitness.

After the first few pints we had narrowed the destination to Madagascar (perhaps in tribute to film and perhaps because none of knew exactly where it was). The question remained as to what to actually do there. We needed a challenge, one that would push us physically and preferably one that hadn't been done before. Online guidebooks were consulted and after

a couple more pints our attention was drawn to the Pangalanes Canal, a waterway running 650km down the east coast of Madagascar. Then, on discovering in the Brandt Guide Book that they had "never heard of anyone taking their own Kayak or canoe down the canal" our fates were sealed and planning began in earnest.

Our first issue was the kayaks themselves. No one in our party had been in one since they were a child and even then a day at Center Parcs hardly made them an expert. We clearly needed to some serious research and preferably some help from someone who actually knew what they were talking about. It soon became clear that, unless we fancied tackling the local wooden dug out canoes, renting was not an option. The alternative therefore was to bring our own, making inflatables the obvious choice.

Certainly we needed something compact that would be easy to transport. But more than that we needed

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something stable (given our novice status), high in performance (given our lack of fitness) and durable (given the fact that Nile Crocodiles were once endemic in the area!).

It was at this point that we discovered the **Advanced Elements** range but more importantly we tracked down Nick Pipe at Vortex (the only UK distributor). While all of the user reviews that we had read had been positive it was his honest and straightforward advice that sealed the deal and our minds were made up. Our choice was ratified by the fortuitous discovery that Wilks, a mutual friend, already owned a single **Advanced Elements** Kayak. Although he had ventured no further than the Kennet and Avon Canal (using his kayak as occasional transportation to his local pub) this automatically made him (behind Nick) the authority on all things nautical and the go to person for all kayaking questions. And, as if destined by fate, when Sarah withdrew from the trip Wilks stepped in. After some debate over the merits of singles over tan-

dems we settled on two convertible AdvanceFrame kayaks for the 4 of us.

While news on the kayaks was positive all was not going well elsewhere. We soon discovered that information on the Pangalanes Canal was worryingly minimal and maps of any detail appeared to be limited to the French naval authorities to which we had no access. Our research had shown that the Canal is in reality a string of rivers and lakes connected by artificial canals to form a single waterway originally constructed to enable the transportation of goods to the main trading port of Tamatave (or Toamasina), because shipping on the Indian Ocean was too dangerous. Today, while silted over in places, the canal still remains an important part of daily life providing the main source of trade, transport and travel.

Rehabilitated in the late 1980s, the canal appeared to be navigable for a stretch of about 430km south from Tamatave. Basic maps suggested a straightforward

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course but Google Earth showed a very different story. In places 20m wide while in others over 2km with a myriad of coves inlets and dead-ends. Clearly hand held navigation was going to be essential.

With Tamatave earmarked as our best starting point we needed only to establish a realistic destination. Wilks in his capacity as nautical expert, informed us (entirely incorrectly as it turned out!) that the winds and current would be in our favour and that 5 days of kayaking should comfortably see us 150km south of Tamatave.

As we were to discover much of the Pangalanes Canal is separated from the sea by a narrow strip of sand or forest while elsewhere there is a seemingly endless jungle thick with ravenala fans, pandanus, eucalyptus, raffia and "elephant ears".

With basic tourism developing in some pockets along the canal (particularly further south) we figured we

could mix jungle camping with occasional stays in lodges. This we felt would enable us to restock with food and water thereby lessening the loads we would need to carry.

With kayaks bought, route planned and kit ordered all appeared to be going well. That was until Wilks broke his arm thereby ruling himself out of the trip (at least in terms of kayaking). With no time to find a replacement Nick Pipe was again brilliant agreeing for us to return one of the kayaks at no cost, our decision being to retain one tandem and take Wilks' single as well.

It took us two and a half days of solid travelling from the UK before we eventually found ourselves on the banks of the canal. We had taken the precaution of heading a short way out of town but a hoard of interested locals soon gathered to watch the fun.

We were of course familiar with the inflation process but given work pressures in the period before depar-

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ture we had not had time to practice loading our kit. Unsurprisingly this proved to be a real challenge and we ended up with kayaks stacked so high that it was virtually impossible to see ahead as we paddled. A little creative packing a later on seemed to resolve this and vision and stability was restored.

And so to the important stuff – how did the kayaks actually perform?

We had needed boats that would be simple, durable, stable, comfortable and easy to transport and the AdvanceFrame kayaks certainly did the job.

Practice paddles had soon showed that the kayaks were very easy to assemble and launch – a simple unfold, inflate, and attach process lasting less than 15mins from start to finish. They might be a bit heavy to lug around over long journeys but with the purpose built backpacks we never had a problem moving them around. Despite the volume of kit we were carrying

once loaded properly the boats were remarkably stable. Deck spaces on top allowed for three large bags on the convertible and two on the single thereby ensuring that we had enough kit to travel unassisted for several days with no real difficulties.

We invested in a Dropstitch floor for both Kayaks and this certainly improved buoyancy and speed in the water. Despite being largely landlocked conditions on the Canal proved to be unpredictable and often challenging. The swell created virtual sea conditions and despite the use of spray decks waves frequently breached the kayaks. Strong winds and counter currents added to our difficulties but despite this the kayaks performed admirably.

That said we did however have some problems with tracking, particularly with the convertible. This may have been due to uneven distribution of kit but particularly in windy conditions excessive zigzagging did become irritating at times. From a comfort point of

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view there was little to complain about. Okay space was tight and leg cramp was an occasional problem but since we were kayaking for up to eight hours a day we could hardly complain. Certainly the folding seats were remarkably comfortable (particularly the one we purchased with additional inflatable lumbar support). From a durability point of view we couldn't have been happier. Regularly we had to drag the fully laden boats across rough beaches and jungle floors as well as navigate through vast fields of submerged and semi submerged spear-like fishing posts. Despite this heavy-duty use we did not experience a single tear, even to the outer lining.

As for the Convertible kayak – it's obviously designed for tandem or solo use – you just switch over the spray deck. In practice we only used it as a tandem and frankly if we'd wanted to paddle solo we would have bought individual solo kayaks. That said if you are looking for flexibility and you are comfortable han-

dling the extra length of the tandem by yourself then it makes a smart choice.

So in conclusion if you're looking for a kayak that is easy to transport, durable, efficient and comfortable then you'll struggle to find better option than the **Advance Elements** AdvanceFrame.

