**Paddling to Alderney**

Getting to Alderney with a kayak can be tricky. If conditions are good kayaking across is perhaps the best option, although this is not the place to be attempting your first offshore voyage. You get a little help from the tide on departing from Guernsey. This lets you leave a little earlier (perhaps 0240 HW St Helier) and gives a little extra time if you are running late as you approach Alderney. Paddlers from Jersey tend to go via Sark as the difference in time and distance is not much. Their choice of avoiding Guernsey has nothing to do with the traditional rivalry between the two islands (particularly intense during inter-island football matches when a punch-up used to be part of the event), ideally you want to arrive in the Swinge on the last of the northeast stream (>2000 HW St Helier).

Things speed up once clear of Guernsey. The first time we paddled to Alderney in the 1980s, Steve remarked after 1 hour 30 min paddling that there was still time to turn back. Francisco Ferreiro was already on edge and snapped back: “No, we’ve passed the point of return. You’re going to Alderney whatever you think!” At that point Steve fell silent and just stared at the Alderney cliffs on the horizon.

Approaching the Swinge the tide streams are fast and complex. Just think of the Swinge as a wide riverrequiring row techniques and you should be fine. If you are late, expect to handrail the coast or try a close inshore route on the south coast to grab any eddies. The first possible take-out in the Swinge is Fort Clonque. I’m beyond it is a storm beach at Suicide Bay. This might be an option if things look nasty along the breakwater, but I’d rather take out at Fort Clonque. Waves are crashing over the breakwater, things are going to be pretty wild and you have to choose between the inshore or offshore tide races in the Swinge while aiming to make the break-out into Braye Bay.

If you can get close enough at the breakwater, look out for the huge stones high on the wall which mark each year of construction. Built between 1847 and 1864, the breakwater was planned as a base for the British Navy. Two-thirds of the breakwater’s structure lies beneath the sea and requires constant repair. Even after the end of the breakwater was allowed to collapse due to the ferocious winter storms, it remains the longest in the United Kingdom.

Braye Harbour has a small supermarket, restaurants, hotel and an essential bar in which to celebrate or calm your nerves. The island campsite is behind the dunes at Saye Bay where there is a sandy beach. Sibeille Head and the nearby reefs can produce some fast water, so it may be best to paddle to the campsite first before heading off to celebrate. On a couple of trips the desire to grab a bite to eat and a beer has taken precedence, resulting in a bivvy on Braye Beach. My first trip led to a couple of nights stay in an old German bunker near Braye with public toilets and a shower nearby. On another trip we selected a dune bivvy spot. This was ideal and allowed us to head off early next morning to circumnavigate the island, leaving time to have a kia in. On return we found our camp spot washed out – we’d camped in a small channel of a well-blocked stream outlet which unlocked itself about half an hour after we’d left. Had we left it any later, we’d have been awoken by a very smelly deluge of stream water. On subsequent trips to Alderney, we’ve opted for one of the many good small hotels.

**In a river, the flow is influenced by the amount of water moving downstream. The same may be true around Alderney, except that it seems to be approaching weather systems and the lunar cycle which influences the surges of water around the island.**

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**Alderney The Rock in the River**

DEREK HAIRON

Alderney is rarely visited by sea kayakers: a quick glance at a chart quickly flags this up as a paddle which is in a different league. This is a big offshore trip where you will find yourself paddling in 7 knot plus tide streams, overfalls, eddies and ocean swell. The famous race of Alderney is well known by sailors, but it’s the Swinge where the action really takes place: here the water really flows downhill. Plus tide streams, overfalls, eddies and ocean swell. The famous race of Alderney is well known by paddlers, but it’s the Swinge where the action really takes place: here the water really flows downhill.

**History**

Alderney is not a new kayaking destination. In 1830 the Jersey Loyalist newspaper wrote about Mr Canham from London who had canoed from Cherbourg to Alderney and planned to continue his journey to Jersey. I’ve not found any information to suggest he reached Jersey.

Anyone who is fascinated by military fortifications will be amazed at just how well defended the island was throughout history. Alderney has been called the ‘Key to the Channel’. Numerous British fortifications were built during the 19th century, but whether they were of any use is debatable. Gladstone wrote the defences were “a monument of human folly, useless to us … but perhaps not absolutely useless to a possible enemy …”. A consequence of this building frenzy is that the island has something of an English feel.

As the Nazis approached in 1940 the entire population except for seven were hastily evacuated to England. Domestic cats were shot and large-value items buried or hidden. This is reported to have led to something like a giant treasure hunt taking place after the war. The Nazis set about making Alderney an impregnable fortress rivalled with businesses and gun emplacements built by the Organisation Todt (German non-combatant civil construction organisation) and forced labour. Four concentration camps were constructed where arbitrary beatings were a daily occurrence and nationals were barely enough to support life. The local campsite is located near the site of one camp. Although a war crimes case was prepared against the former commander of the Kriminalverwaltung and filling concentration camps, he never stood trial.

Today the island has a population of 2400 and a surprisingly wide range of cafes, restaurants and bars. There is a vibrant and lively nightlife, especially in the summer. Look out for ‘bunker parties’ (informal dance music events in abandoned bunkers) and more organised events during Alderney Week at the Corporation Quarry (quarry parties). Friends who paddled up for the solar eclipse speak in awe about what they can remember from the bunker party they attended.

**An impregnable fortress**

During the Nazi occupation the Channel Islands were more heavily battered than any other coastal region, for outweighing the strategic importance of the islands to the Nazi war effort. Almost 41% of the entire Atlantic Wall defences were constructed in the Channel Islands. By 1944 an incredible 244,000 cubic metres had been excavated compared to 255,000 cubic metres for the entire Atlantic Wall. The Channel Islands occupied by the Germans were partly because he had captured the oldest possessions of the British Crown and, by occupying British territory, Hitler thought he had begun the break-up of the British Empire. Hitler ordered that plans for the large, and long-lasting, German occupation of the islands must be sent to him for approval and both Hitler and his officials paid more attention to the Channel Islands. By 1943, 42,800 Germans were based in the Channel Islands (equivalent to two-thirds of the civilian population).
Blue Stone beach lives up to its name: it is a storm beach full of large well-rounded rocks with a faint path down to the beach. There are caves and sea arches around La Tchue Bay so it is worth taking time to explore these, but watch out if there is any swell about.

Other tips and variations

Burhou is a challenging option even if the weather is very good and you are confident you have got the timings right. The island is a puffin breeding site and Alderney Tides recommends you watch silently from your kayak for at least 20 minutes so they get used to and may come quite close.

Blue Stone Paddles

Brincheata Rocks are tricky if there is a southerly stream, but once around them you can track in close to the coast. The ruined Fort de l’Etac is reminiscent of a Venetian fort. Corbiétes and Saye Bay are sandy beaches, which can produce surf and provide options to get offbeat on rough days. Rounding Bèlette Head you take back into Braye Bay.

Prepare yourself for a headwind, as the tidal streams around Alderney can be tricky spots to visit, as the tide stream is not the same as it is offshore. In reality, the streams barely pause for a minute before changing direction and it is rare for the water to be calm at the Casquets. Victor Hugo, who lived in both Jersey and Guernsey, wrote “To be wrecked on the Casquets is to die cut into ribbons ....” The Casquets were the site of the worst shipping disaster in the Channel Islands on 30th March 1899 when the SS Stella, travelling at 18 knots in thick fog, collided with the Casquets, 77 died. The causeway covers so it is possible to nip between the ledges, but watch out if there is any swell about.

Alderney Tides

To be wrecked on the island.

Deakin, the manager/warden, has kayaking

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Prepare yourself for a headache, as the tidal streams around Alderney are very complex. Though Alderney is small it gets a separate entry in the tidal stream atlas due to the complexity of the currents.

Tidal data
Tidal stream atlas NP264; tidal port St Helier; tide range 6.9 m at springs.
HW St Helier: –0455 HW Dover.
HW Alderney: +0045 St Helier.
(All times below are relative to HW St Helier)
At the Swinge off Sauquet Rock (NE of Les Homeaux Florains) a west-going stream begins at –0005 HW and quickly extends along the breakwater at about 4 knots during springs tides. Further out, an east-going stream runs at about 4 knots. Around +0445 HW the east-going stream ceases and a west-going stream is established along the north coast from Sauquet Rock to about 1 NM north of the breakwater and down to Corbet Rock. At +0300 HW the remaining northeast-going stream in the Swinge slackens. The westerly eddy extends across the Swinge. By +0430 HW, the west-going stream is running (although the atlas lists this as flowing at –0240 HW).
In the Alderney Race, the north-going stream starts at –0140 HW. Around +0450 HW, a southwest-going stream is established (maximum 7 knots). This swings more southerly and then southeast until –0240 HW.
On the south coast, in theory the east-going stream runs for about 9 hours (spring tides) and 8 hours (neap tides). Off the Noires Putes, this starts about –0430 HW St Helier. The west-going stream starts about +0255 HW. However, close inshore an easterly eddy operates from about +0450 HW until –0440 HW when the main easterly stream is established. This seems to be generated by the channel between Alderney and the South Banks.

Weather
Any trip to Alderney by kayak requires good weather. Although friends have made the crossing in a northwesterly F4+, the conditions were challenging. One paddler recently spent five days stuck on Alderney. Allow for bad weather and include the option of freighting your kayaks to or from Alderney and flying across. Bear in mind that boats and planes can be delayed due to bad weather, even in summer.

Maps and charts
Alderney land map: Sheet Bailiwick of Guernsey 1:15000/1:10000 States of Guernsey Official Map
Braye Harbour UTM Grid ref 750 082
Around the island: 16 km (8.5 NM); Jersey–Sark 12 NM; Sark–Alderney 19 NM; Alderney–Jersey 30 NM
Admiralty chart 2669 Channel Islands and adjacent coast of France, Alderney chart 60

Additional information
Alderney Coastguard: 01481 822620, channel 16, 74
Guernsey Coastguard: 01481 720085, channel 16, 20
Jersey Coastguard: (01534 447705 transit reports channel 82), channel 16, 82
In French waters: CROSS Jobourg Channel 70
Alderney Tourist Board (www.visitalderney.com) is an excellent source of information, and they publish a useful Sailing to Alderney booklet.
There are shower facilities for visiting yachtsmen at Braye Harbour.
The Alderney Sailing Club has weather forecasts on display.
Mobile phone and mobile data coverage throughout the Channel Islands is excellent, but the networks are not the same as for the UK.
On the inter-island crossings check the Condor High Speed ferry times as you are likely to cross its route.

Camping is at Saye Bay
tel: 01481 822556   camping@alderney.net
A kayak trolley is useful in case you need to move to another spot around the coast.

Getting to / from Alderney
If you decide the paddle to Alderney is too committing or you are short of time or stormbound, Aurigny Airlines operate scheduled flights to Guernsey, Southampton and Jersey via Guernsey. A flight in a Trilander aircraft is a great experience, although it may feel like sitting in a small car. You’ll be guaranteed a window seat and a great view when landing. One of the runways on Alderney is grass so you get a bush-flying experience and can watch the rabbits darting for cover. If you end up sitting next to the pilot, don’t touch any buttons.

Getting the kayaks to and from Alderney is a bit of a hassle and tends to take longer than you’d expect, so allow a day either side. Twice-weekly freight-only services are operated by:
Alderney Shipping Company to Guernsey, Jersey and Poole
www.alderneyshipping.com   tel: 01481 725566   camping@alderney.net
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