

Classic UK PADDLING DESTINATIONS

Jersey

WORDS AND PICTURES: KEVIN MANSELL



IT WAS VICTOR HUGO WHO DESCRIBED THE CHANNEL ISLANDS AS ‘PIECES OF FRANCE FALLEN INTO THE SEA AND GATHERED BY ENGLAND’. IN MANY WAYS THIS IS A CONCISE DESCRIPTION OF THE ISLANDS, FRENCH IN FEEL BUT CLEARLY ENGLISH IN ALLEGIANCE. THIS ARCHIPELAGO, NESTLING BETWEEN THE NORMANDY AND BRITTANY PENINSULAS, CONSISTS OF A NUMBER OF ISLANDS, OF WHICH JERSEY IS THE LARGEST...

For the sea kayaker who is interested in a wilderness experience the geographical statistics in relation to Jersey make frightening reading. 85,000 residents in 45 square miles equates to a population density which is equivalent to many urban areas in the world, but sea kayaking allows access to environments where there are few other people and in reasonably challenging water conditions.

The island consists of a range of environments. The exposed reefs off the southeast corner contrasting with the dramatic granite cliffs of the northwest, which are exposed to the full force of the Atlantic. It is not only the physical landscape, which provides a backdrop to the paddling. There are historical sites dating back nearly 150,000 years close to the waters edge plus numerous more recent features. Include a tidal range of nearly 40 feet on the largest spring tides and it is clear that sea kayaking in Jersey is an activity of contrasts.

Paddling Jersey for the first time then Greve de Lecq is a good starting point, offering a number of contrasting options. The largest concentration of caves on the island are close to Greve de Lecq, particularly heading in an easterly direction. It is best to choose a day when there is no swell and then it is possible to explore the inner recesses of the deepest caverns. Leaving from the beach at Greve de Lecq there are a number of gullies on the eastern side of the bay, one of which leads to cave which tunnels right through the headland. It is only possible to pass through on foot but if time allows it is well worth landing

and exploring this feature. On the first rocky point there is a beautiful rock pool, which it is possible to jump into at low water, generations of Jersey cliff jumpers have cut their teeth in this idyllic setting. The Octopus Pool is a must see feature.

Continuing east there are numerous caves and inlets waiting to be explored. Ile Agois is one of the largest features and on the summit there is evidence of a 5th Century Christian settlement, in the form of the remains of a number of small huts. Climbing to the summit though is really only feasible during the winter

months, at other times of the year there is far too much vegetation.

In Greve de Lecq Bay, which stretches from Sorel in the east to Plemont in the west there is a diverse birdlife. Puffins are right on the limit of their geographical range but each year a few pairs return to these cliffs, their arrival in April eagerly waited by locals. Razorbills are the only other auks which breed here but in the winter months there are likely to be guillemots on the sea. Fulmars are the most common sea birds, breeding for the first time in 1975 they have now colonised most of the north coast, the



population being measured in hundreds. Their inquisitive circling flight around kayaks is one of the pleasures of paddling in this area. Ravens may be seen soaring on the thermals coming off the cliffs and for the last few years' peregrines have nested in the area; a welcome return for a bird, which had previously last bred here in the 1950's. Just heading slightly offshore a steady stream of gannets is normally encountered, heading to and from their breeding colonies, either Alderney to the north or Sept Ile off the north Brittany coast, to the south.

Heading west from Greve de Lecq, the stretch of coast is possibly the finest on the island. Caves and inlets lead to Plemont headland, which is where things can start to get interesting. A significant tidal race develops on the eastern side of the point and then sets offshore, heading towards Sark, which is frequently visible 12 miles to the north. This would not be a good place to take a swim. The situation is further complicated by the frequent Atlantic swell, which unleashes its power on the reefs off the western side of the headland. On a calm August evening it is difficult to imagine the maelstrom, which is unleashed by the winter storms.

Plemont Beach is possibly the best low water surfing beach on the island, but to make the most out of the next stretch of coast we want the sea to be flat. Granite cliffs rise vertically out of the water and there is a real sense that this a committing section to paddle. Grosnez headland, with its lighthouse perched high on the cliffs, marks the northwest corner of the



island. There are numerous coastal features to explore; unfortunately sea conditions normally preclude too close an inspection, so if you are in this area and it is calm take full advantage of the possibilities. It will be a memorable day.

From Grosnez as far as L'Etacq granite cliffs soar out of the water, in places several hundred feet high, but this is also a region where it is possible to experience the history of the island. A large German bunker is clearly visible from the sea and just to the south at the base of the cliff there are a number of guns, which were thrown over the cliff edge by the liberating forces in 1945. At low water it is possible to exit the kayaks and climb over them.

Slightly further south again is a huge sea stack, formed when the sea level was much higher than it is at present. Known as the Pinacle, the remains of the islands only known Roman building is visible on the coll between the stack and the main cliff. Although it is a spectacular feature from the land its full impact is only really seen when on the water. If you are feeling in an adventurous mood a cave system runs underneath the feature. It is entered via the gully to the south of the Pinacle, with the exit being on the north side.

A couple of hundred metres further south is a small bay, Le Pulec, but it is better known as "Stinky Bay" as a consequence of the large amount of sea weed which is washed ashore here. In earlier times the sea weed, known locally as vrac was harvested by the local farmers and used as a fertiliser on the fields. The slipway, in common with many on the island, has offset cobble stones so that horses were able to gain purchase as they hauled the vrac filled carts off the beach. If there has been a period of northwesterly winds and the vrac is piled into the bay this is not a good place to land. It is better to thread your way through the gullies which dissect the wave cut platform to the west and land on the sandy beach just to the south of the obvious German bunker.

This small bay also marks the junction between the resistant granite and the older, more easily eroded, Brioverian Shale. The consequence is that the nature of the coast changes, the granite cliffs drop away and the broad sweep of St Ouens Bay is revealed. The nearest land to the west is Newfoundland, so it is not surprising that this is the main surfing beach off the island. Surfing in all its forms is popular on the island, so if kayak surfing care

needs to be taken to avoid potential conflict with other water users.

When paddling from Greve de Lecq a reef of rocks are visible just over two miles to the north. Marked on charts as Pierres de Lecq there are more commonly known by their local name, the Paternosters. The Baliwick of Jersey consists of the main island of Jersey and number of offshore reefs, including the Paternosters, the Diriouilles, Ecrehous and Minquiers. The Paternosters are the closest to the island and are frequently visited by Jersey paddlers. As the furthest west, they are the most exposed to the Atlantic swell and so it isn't always possible to land. A few fishermen from Greve de Lecq place their lobster pots in the vicinity of the Paternosters but you are unlikely to encounter any other humans on the reef.

Further to the east lie the Ecrehous and a day trip to this reef must rank as one of the finest one day paddles in the British Isles. Just over five miles northeast from Jersey, this rocky archipelago is a real treasure. For a first visit it is best to cross on a Neap tide, on Springs there are crosscurrents of 5 knots and some significant areas of overfalls. A thorough understanding of navigation and confidence in the ability of your fellow paddlers is a must. In common with the Minquiers, sovereignty of the reef was settled in favour of Jersey in 1953 at the European Court in The Hague. Prior to that time the French had disputed ownership of the area, more recently feelings were heightened in 1993, when fishermen from Normandy hauled down the Union Jack from the flagpole on Marmotiere and raised the tricolour.

At high water the small houses on Marmotiere seem to be huddling together for safety from the elements, but as the tide drops a maze of channels, pools and rocks is revealed. This is an absolute paradise for the kayaker, but the attraction is also the same for numerous other water users and so it can feel distinctly crowded on a calm summer weekend. On several occasions I have seen over 70 boats moored or at anchor in the vicinity of Marmotiere. That said, it is still a stunning destination. If the opportunity arises to visit in the winter months it is likely that you will have the reef to yourself. The Ecrehous is a place to savour at all times of the year, its moods changing with the seasons. A visit never fails to disappoint.

The area is also a haven for wildlife and one can never be sure what will be encountered.



Grey seals have become regular in recent years and bottlenose dolphins are frequently seen, but there are also unusual experiences, I shared my sandwiches, on the reef, with snow buntings just two days before Christmas, one year. There is a healthy population of bottlenose dolphins in the Golfe de St Malo and so they could be encountered almost anywhere in local waters.

The largest reef in Jersey waters is the Minquiers, about 12 miles to the south of the island, and is fact the most southerly part of the British Isles. The reef has a notorious reputation amongst the sea faring community because of the large number of treacherous rocks and fast tidal streams. Because of this it is visited less frequently than the Ecrehous so it is a much quieter destination. "The Wreck of Mary Deare" by Hammond Innes was partly concerned with events on "The Minkies" and so is required reading for any sea kayaker who is heading in this direction.

The paddle to the Minquiers is not without

its challenges, not least the frequent fast ferries, which operate between Jersey and the north coast of France. It is advisable to paddle defensively, check the ferry timetables and avoid the shipping lanes. Corbiere is a more sensible departure point than St. Helier as it avoids the main shipping problems and there is slightly more tidal assistance. The Minquiers are a great place to visit on a spring tide; as the tide drops a totally different landscape is revealed - 25 square miles of rocks, sand and tidal pools. This is truly a unique destination.. Maitresse Ile, with a small number of houses, is the only rock, which is large enough to count as an islet. The houses were originally built in the 18th century for the quarrymen who were working on the reef. The granite, which was used to build Fort Regent, came from the Minquiers, but in 1807 the local fishermen were so angry about the continuing work that they threw all the quarry men's tools into the sea. The story goes that the men had already left and were working for the French on Chausey,

an island eight miles to the southeast.

One of the more unique areas to paddle is the southeast corner of the island. As the tide drops a unique littoral zone is exposed. On the larger spring tides the water retreats nearly two miles, exposing an environment, which is possibly not seen elsewhere. The exposed shore is a mixture of sand, mud, shingle, rocks etc. This is an area to explore on the flooding tide. Leave St. Helier just after low water and head east. At first the gullies will be filling slowly and it will be a matter of trial and error to find out which leads are navigable. It is inevitable that there will be a certain amount of back tracking from false leads, but by three hours after low water the tide will be rising at an amazing rate; perhaps three cm vertically every minute for two hours. What seemed an impossible route quickly turns into an easy passage.

There are two offshore towers on the route east, Icho Tower is reached first and is the younger of the two. Built in the early part of the

19th century it was part of the islands defences against the threats from the Napoleonic French military state, whilst the more easterly one, Seymour Tower, was built in the latter years of the 18th century as a consequence of the French invasion of 1781. French troops landed at La Rocque Harbour before marching into St. Helier, and fighting the Battle of Jersey in the Royal Square. The British troops led by Major Pierson won the day and so English remains the language of the island.

Seymour Tower has recently been renovated by the Jersey Heritage Trust and is available for hire, a unique place to stay. It is likely that residents will be sharing the tower with one of the Peregrines, which, frequent this area and strike terror into the range of wading birds that call this area home, particularly during the winter months. The platform at the base of the tower is a great place for a picnic and it is possible to look out over the numerous navigational marks that punctuate the area. They indicate just how hazardous this area



is to most watercraft but for sea kayakers this area is a delight. It is possible to follow the beacons virtually half way to the French coast; an entertaining navigational exercise.

Another consequence of the large tidal range is the speed at which the tides flow in certain areas, particularly off the headlands. There are number of entertaining tidal races, although some are safer than others. Tour de Rozel, on the northeast corner of the island, is one of the most popular with local paddlers. It only works on the flood, the rates picking up quickly after low water. There is a large eddy close to the shore and another behind a small rock about 30 metres offshore, which means that there are several places where paddlers can, depending on their ability, gather their thoughts, their equipment, or their companions.

There are other tide races around the island, but few of the others are so user friendly. In several places the stream sets offshore which can have unfortunate consequences if an incident occurs. That is not to say they should be avoided - just consider the implications. Belle Hougue, is the next headland to west from Tour de Rozel, and is also the tallest headland on the island. Approaching Belle Hougue from the east there is a small cottage just above the waters edge. Known as Wolf's Lair or Egypt it is leased by the Jersey Canoe Club and was the scene of two important events in the 20th century. It was the site of the only landing by British troops during the Second World War. Operation Hardtack took place on Christmas Day 1943; unfortunately the leader was killed after stepping on a mine. A memorial stone has been placed close to the cottage to commemorate the event.

In October 1963, Alison Mitchell was washed ashore here after spending nearly 20 hours in the water after her motor cruiser was caught in some of the strongest winds ever recorded on the island. She was carried on the tidal streams from somewhere near to Corbiere along the south and east coasts before coming ashore here. She managed to climb up the steep slopes before collapsing on the doorstep of a farm. A real epic of survival at sea, she was the only survivor of the four people on the boat.

Whereas Tour de Rozel works best on the flood, Belle Hougue provides more entertainment on the ebb, particularly if there is a westerly wind. Standing waves can develop close to some small rocks, Les Sambues, resulting in great surfing conditions. The water is deep though and the rougher conditions quickly dissipate, so this is a safe environment in which to enjoy yourself.

My favourite short coastal paddle is along the south coast from St. Brelades to Corbiere, on the southwest corner of the island. During the summer months this stretch of coast is, at times, almost Mediterranean in feel. On the eastern side of the bay one of the headlands contains a cave, La Cotte de St. Brelade, which was inhabited nearly 250,000 years ago. During excavations bones of mammoth and rhinoceros were uncovered plus numerous other artefacts,



including flints. Heading west the small bay of Beauport is reached. This is a great pace to stop for lunch; limited parking at the top of the cliff means the beach never becomes over crowded, even on the warmest summer day.

Beyond Beauport there is very limited access from the land. In a couple places steep paths wind down the cliffs, mainly used by fishermen, but generally it is a quiet section of coast, although there is often a steady stream of yachts and ships offshore. The large catamarans pass quite close along here so keep an eye open for their wash. There are a number of small quarries, one of which supplied some of the stone for part of the Embankment in London. The real treasure though is the lighthouse at Corbiere.

The lighthouse was completed in 1873, for the magnificent sum of £8,000 and was the first one in the British Isles to be built out of concrete. Its light is visible for 18 miles, but during the Second World War it was only lit intermittently by the Germans to guide in their own ships. It was eventually relit for good on the 19th May 1945. The light became automated in 1976 and it is probably the most photographed feature on the Island. A significant race develops on the outside of the lighthouse, particularly if there is any wind against tide and the sea can become particularly confused if there is any swell running.

Jersey has maintained its allegiance to the British Crown since 1204, but for many years the French disputed the sovereignty of the islands and offshore reefs. Due to their geographical position there has always been a strong French influence and this is reflected in the many of the

Islands names. In recent years the economy has diversified away from the traditional farming, fishing and tourism. The Island is now a major financial centre and there is certainly an affluent feel to the community. There has also been a growing awareness of the need to protect the natural environment, which helps to make Jersey such a special place to live and to visit.

Although the high population density may be viewed as a problem, in reality there are still large areas of the island, which are undeveloped. Sea kayaking allows us to access many of these special places in a way that other people can't. Even on the busiest summer days it is possible to quickly find isolation in a superb maritime environment.

This is not a stroke-by-stroke guide to kayaking in Jersey; it is merely an indication of where some of the better paddling may be found. It varies from day to day as the tidal and weather conditions change. What is suitable one day may effectively be a no go area the next. As it is a small island it is virtually always possible to find somewhere to paddle, which is appropriate to the ability level of the group.

The Jersey Canoe Club Sea Kayak Symposium, which has been held every two years from 1992, has proved popular with visiting paddlers from all over the world, increasing the profile of paddling in Jersey. During the intervening periods though the island largely remains outside the main stream of British sea kayaking, visiting kayakers are few and far between. Those kayakers who make the journey are assured of a warm welcome and the opportunity to paddle in the most southerly waters of the British Isles.

