

A Break in the Routine

by Måns Langert

I have been sea kayaking off and on for about 20 years and consider myself quite experienced. At first I rented kayaks to paddle among the islands of the Stockholm archipelago, mainly in the summertime. Since I bought my own kayak some years ago, I've done a lot more paddling. I paddle year-round now, carrying all the additional safety equipment that the Nordic climate demands. Despite this, an incident last autumn made me seriously reflect on my own judgment and

the safety margin I usually have when I go sea kayaking. I realized that my attitude was a bit too easygoing when it came to safety and risk assessment. I also suffered from overconfidence in my abilities and experience: "It's cool, no worries," I would say. "I've got a lot of experience and all the necessary safety equipment, so let's go!" I did risk assessments, but I never really went into the details. This is the story of a kayaking trip that led me to rethink my approach to paddling.

My friend Jonas and I had planned a weekend trip in the outer Stockholm archipelago in Sweden, in an area called Huvudskär, home to the Huvudskär lighthouse. We have similar kayaking and outdoor experience and paddling this area would be well within our abilities. Weather permitting, we would go east from the island of Ornö out to Huvudskär island and then northeast to a small island called Norsten. If weather conditions were worse than expected,



All photos by the author

Måns and Jonas spent the night at this cabin on the Myggskären islets. When they left, the weather, and their luck, took a turn for the worse.

we would shorten the trip and stay closer to the mainland.

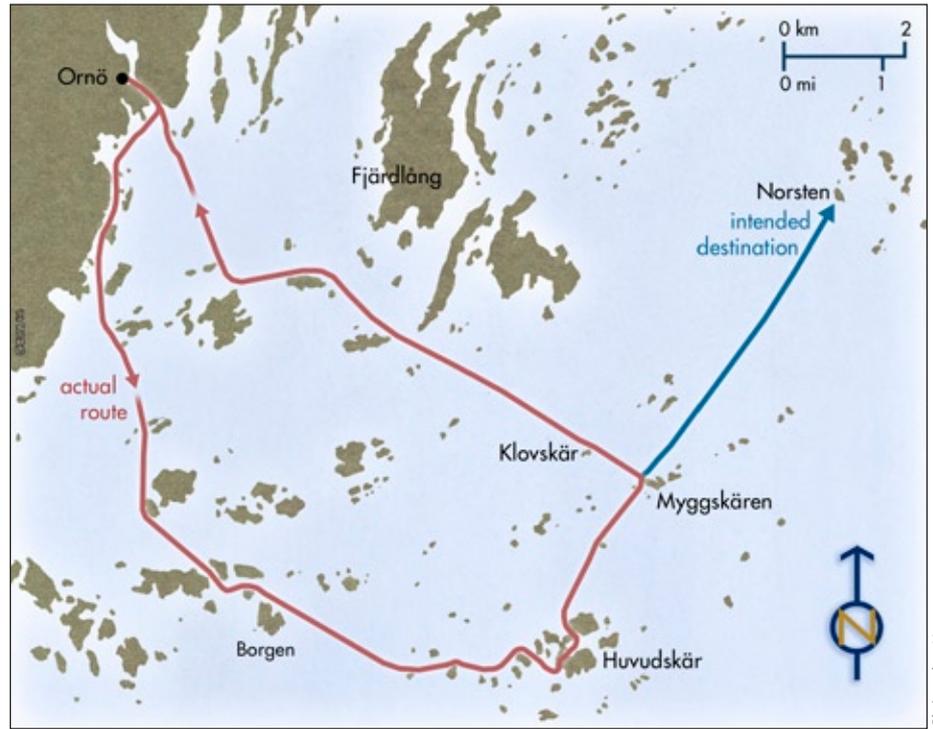
We started on a Friday afternoon. We both wore shorts and sportswear T-shirts as autumn hadn't really started yet, but we had our paddle jackets in the cockpit within reach if needed. The water temperature was still around 64°F (18°C). In this temperature you would rarely see anyone in a wetsuit or a drysuit here at this time of year, unless the weather might turn especially demanding—as it did for us.

We had planned a three-day trip and packed gear and supplies for an additional day or two, in case of bad weather, or if we got stuck somewhere. In this beautiful and somewhat remote area where you see hardly any boats at this late time of the summer season, we planned to combine nice kayaking with good food; for dinner we planned three-course menus with wine and an ale or two. We also carried about three liters of fresh water each—the Baltic sea is not as salty as the big seas, but salty enough to be undrinkable. We also carried sea charts covering the area, compasses (both deck and hand-held), a GPS, a bilge pump, floats, a towline, binoculars, cell phones and all the necessary camping equipment, such as a tent, sleeping bags and camp stoves. And of course everything was packed in dry bags.

The weather was fine with moderate winds and a weather report stating conditions would remain that way. We paddled southeastward for about two hours to the small island of Borgen, where we put up the tent and camped for the night. Thanks to the inflatable sleeping mats, we slept like kings on the hard rock.

We never discussed the option of remaining where we were, even if we had both considered this separately. We had a deadline to meet, catching the ferry back to the mainland to get back to work on time.

On Saturday we still had fine weather conditions when we headed out to Huvudskär island, even if the five-foot swells gave us an uneasy, anxious feeling in our bellies from time to time. We reached Huvudskär at noon and stayed there for a lunch break before we continued north toward the tiny group of islets



called Myggskären. Our plan was to go ashore and have a break before we headed on to Norsten island, farther north, but Myggskären was just irresistible. There were two small cabins on the beautifully carved rocks, in lee from the wind and the sun descending in front of our eyes. How could we leave this place? So we didn't. Instead, we put our sleeping bags in one of the cabins. Even with inflatable mats, a bed is still a bed. The cabins are open to the public and put up by Skärgårdsstiftelsen (the Archipelago Foundation) for kayakers and yachtsmen in the summer, and ice skaters and skiers in the winter, to be used for occasional overnights. We explored the islets and then had some dinner and wine while we enjoyed the sunset. Another pair of kayakers came ashore for the night and stayed in the second cabin. Before going to bed, we checked the weather forecast. It remained unchanged with moderate winds at 14-16 miles per hour, coming from the southwest.

The next morning it became clear that the forecast had been wrong. We awoke to strong winds cutting through the cabin; when we were doing the dishes after breakfast, plastic plates and the cutting boards were torn out of our hands by the strong wind. Heavy rain altered the scene from the day before even more dramatically. The

forecast now stated that winds would come from the southwest at about 25 miles per hour. We were going straight west so it would be very heavy paddling indeed. We planned to take the shortest route that we could and paddle in lee of islands whenever possible. We never discussed the option of remaining where we were, even if we had both considered this separately. We had a deadline to meet, catching the ferry back to the mainland to get back to work on time.

We left Myggskären and headed toward Klovsjär, a rocky islet about a mile and a half away in open water. We could rest there if needed. That's what we thought, anyway. We shared our route plans with the other couple of kayakers and took off. It was fun kayaking on the roller-coaster sea with waves constantly stinging our faces. Even if it was a bit scary too, we were having a really good time. Then my rudder broke. My right pedal just vanished. All of a sudden the fun was gone, and if the paddling was heavy and slow before, it was nothing compared to how it was going to be from here on out. My new objective was to reach Klovsjär at all costs and land there to fix the rudder. I shouted over to Jonas, "My rudder has broken!" But in the strong wind he thought I said there was something wrong with his rudder, as it had given him some trouble earlier. Since he couldn't find anything wrong with it he just kept on paddling. I struggled to keep my kayak on course but I found it nearly impossible in the strong wind. My kayak kept turning to the left into the wind and the only thing I could do was paddle solely



This narrow gap in the rocks at Klovsjär was the only place to get ashore to fix Måns' broken rudder.

on the upwind side. The distance between Jonas and me grew. I had previously practiced using my kayak with its rudder retracted, controlling it with steering strokes and by edging it, but in these conditions it was not possible: I didn't dare edge it as I needed all my focus to just keep my balance in the high waves.

When I finally reached Klovsjär, I was weary but managed to rejoin Jonas. I told him about my rudder and that we had to get ashore to get it repaired. We started looking for a suitable landing spot but

got separated a second time. The lack of communication between us resulted in us paddling in the same direction around the islet with increasing distance between us, instead of in opposite directions where we would have met halfway. I lost sight of Jonas and he thought we would meet halfway around the islet. I couldn't keep up with his speed and he didn't realize I was behind him. I called for him and whistled, using two fingers. Even if I could whistle very, very loud with my fingers, it would have made more sense to use the whistle I

keep in my PFD for occasions like this, but for some reason, I didn't. I whistled with my fingers, meaning I had to let go of my paddle for a moment. Using the whistle in my PFD would have let me whistle loud while keeping my hands on the paddle, for balance and momentum. Looking back it seems strange I didn't use the whistle I brought for situations like this.

After a while, I worried and feared the worst. I stopped paddling and fortunately Jonas turned back, looking for me, and we finally rejoined again. We couldn't find a suitable spot to land. Everywhere around us we saw only steep rocks with huge waves whipped into white spray. We had to get ashore somehow; paddling in open water without the rudder was just not possible. There were no topographical markings on the chart we were using to navigate, so it came as a surprise that the islet was so kayak unfriendly, surrounded by steep rocks. Finally we found a narrow gap, about the length of a kayak, that we used to get ashore, but not without entering the chest-deep water and scratching the kayaks quite badly.

I discovered that it was the rudder-controlling wire that had come off, but there were no missing parts so it was easily fixed. After the rudder was repaired we had lunch and then the ineluctable question arose: How do we get on the water again?

Jonas tried to launch at the same spot where we had landed, but the big waves filled his cockpit before he could enter the kayak, let alone get the spray deck on. We drained the cockpit and tried again, only with the same result as before. We just couldn't keep seawater out of the kayak. A few more frustrating attempts only succeeded in battering his kayak on the rocks. We had to give up before it broke. We started to feel dejected, and we realized we needed to find another spot to launch the kayaks.

A short distance away we found a piece of shore that had a less violent surge, but the rock there was quite steep and the water deep. It wouldn't be possible to enter the kayak from shore; we had to step into the water first and then board the kayak. Jonas is quite tall and for him this seemed the best option. For me the water would have at least reached my chest, so I figured it would be close to impossible for me to enter the kayak without capsizing it. A deep-water reentry just didn't appeal to me with the prevailing weather conditions, not because of the

» LESSONS LEARNED

by Roger Schumann

water temperature, but because of the waves crashing against steep rocks.

Next to the steep rock was a slightly flatter area covered with seaweed. There we could enter our kayaks onshore, push the kayak forward with our hands and slide into the sea. The obvious risk was that when the bow enters the water and the stern is still on the rock, it would be very unstable and likely we would capsize.

We pondered the options for a while and eventually we decided that I would assist Jonas when he entered his kayak in the deep water, and then I would launch from the seaweed. Jonas would assist me if I capsized and had to do a wet exit.

The launch worked out fine for Jonas. He succeeded on his first try with only a small amount of seawater getting into his cockpit. I pulled my kayak as close to the slippery seaweed as possible without sliding in unintentionally, then got in. I pulled the spray deck on and put the paddle in front of me. I waited a few moments for a slightly smaller set of waves. I grabbed my paddle and pushed the kayak forward. As I started to slide toward the water I thought it may actually work, but then I felt the kayak lurch and turn over to the right and a half-second later I was upside down. I knew I'd been in this position hundreds of times before while practicing rolling; I rolled up, soaked to the bone but pumped with adrenaline.

We continued our trip northeast back

to Ornö. It was seven miles with long periods of silence between us as we contemplated what had just happened. The closer to the bigger islands we came, the less windy it got. Our journey back was a pleasant one, with moderate 14-mile-per-hour winds. It took us about two hours to get back to Ornö. We arrived at the ferry port with eleven minutes to spare, and I phoned my wife as if everything was OK.

Why didn't we consider not paddling at all when we saw the wild sea at Myggskären? Why didn't we stay closer together while paddling? Why didn't we put up the tent at Klovsjär and wait for better weather? We had just recently learned that our margins were too small, but even then we never considered postponing the paddling for a few hours or until the next day. Why didn't we communicate? We certainly could have done things differently and kept better margins. Most important, we shouldn't have been kayaking at all in the challenging weather conditions. If things had taken a turn for the worse, an assisted rescue would be close to impossible to perform, especially after hours of exhausting paddling.

Måns Langert is married and is the dad to two children, living in Stockholm, Sweden. He spends a great deal of his time outdoors, in his kayak, on skis or on long-distance touring skates. In recent years he has taken up winter kayaking. He also has his own skin-on-frame kayak and a few Greenland paddles.

It can be easy to overlook the subtle lessons offered by this sort of non-accident report. It involved no epic swims, no helicopter rescue, no hypothermic paddlers being rushed to the hospital in the nick of time with core temps in the mid-80s. Just two fairly experienced paddling buddies out for a mild misadventure in, what were for them, marginal conditions. Sure, a broken rudder and some rough seas made their day a little more exciting than expected, but, hey, after all was said and done, they didn't even miss their ferry. Had Måns' rudder not broken, it is likely this cautionary tale would never have gotten much beyond Stockholm, just another business-as-usual paddling adventure for our intrepid Swedish pair. It's the sort of thing a basketball player might refer to as a case of "No harm, no foul."

So it is an encouraging sign that these particular paddling buddies chose not to ignore the not so obvious. Just because nothing much happened doesn't mean there is nothing much to learn. Their story suggests the all-too-common type of "ticking time bomb" pattern of paddling behavior—relying as much on skills as blind luck—which often precedes the more typical helicopter/hypothermia/hospital incidents that get reported in these pages. So by noting some of the "little yellow flags" that popped up in the course of their tale, perhaps others might be able to avoid any big red ones.



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The seas were calm when Måns and Jonas reached Myggskären, but the wind and waves built up overnight, and the trip back to the mainland would not be so easy.

It is easy to jump to the obvious, blanket solution of “We should have just stayed ashore.” Sure, these particular paddlers on that particular day should have stayed put if not on the first island, then certainly on the second. But I think the more interesting and nuanced lessons flow along the following lines: Assuming you are adventurous paddlers who are developing the skills to paddle in conditions that begin to test the limits of your abilities, what steps could you take to make it safer? Put another way—what are some of the things that more skilled paddlers typically do to prepare for similar situations?

LESSON 1: LEARN TO TURN

One question such paddlers might ask themselves before deciding to push their envelope is, “Am I rudder dependent in these conditions?” In other words, are you choosing to paddle in conditions where your life could be dangling by the last thin strand of a frayed rudder cable?

“All of a sudden the fun was gone,” Måns realizes when his rudder breaks. If you tend to use your rudder regularly when paddling and have become rudder dependent, learn to maneuver without it. Practice paddling rudderless for short periods—especially in rougher conditions—so if your rudder ever does break, its loss will be more of a hassle than a hazard. I typically encourage my rudder-dependent students to spend at least five minutes every hour paddling with their rudders up. I often find they start forgetting to put

them back down and end up paddling much longer without them. Although Måns mentions that he’d practiced some rudderless paddling, he apparently had little experience doing so in the sort of conditions they encountered that day.

This is part of a larger safety maxim—Don’t head out into conditions rougher than you’ve practiced rescues in—so most importantly, develop the skills to maneuver sans rudder to a partner’s bow as you would for a T-rescue. If your assessment of the conditions is as Måns’ was that, “An assisted rescue would be close to impossible to perform” under those conditions, then you might want to reconsider your plan to launch. Let your ability to handle a boat without a functioning rudder and to perform rescues inform your decision whether or not to leave shore. To test this, Måns and Jonas could have launched from their original camp at Myggskären, rudders up, and practiced maneuvering to one another’s bows to see how difficult that might be before committing themselves to any crossing.

It is particularly important practice maneuvering quickly to a kayak that is behind you, so you know if you have the skills to turn around in conditions, if necessary, and reach your partner for an assisted rescue.

LESSON 2: BUDDIES STICK TOGETHER

“The distance between Jonas and me grew,” reports Måns soon after his rudder troubles. Scuba divers have a saying—

Same day, same ocean—sardonically referring to dive buddies who don’t stick together. Just paddling the same body of water together does little to enhance each other’s safety if you’re not paddling close enough to your partner to provide any assistance or, as in this case, to even realize that there is a problem. Buddies can cultivate the habit of paddling within a few boat lengths of one another as a maneuvering exercise (try it without rudders, too, of course), especially in rougher conditions. In general, the goal is for groups to stay within easy voice range and to use whistle signals simply to get each other’s attention if they stray beyond voice range. I find that fancy, coded whistle signals typically get lost on the wind (Was that one long and two short or two long?), so I only use one. If you hear a whistle blow it means, “Get over here, pronto! We need to talk.”

Alternately, learning a few of the universal paddle signals used by whitewater boaters (easy to find on an Internet search if you need a visual to go with the descriptions below) can be useful for communicating beyond voice range, or even when you just don’t feel like shouting. Basically a paddle held up vertically means “come to me”; horizontal means “stop”; waved back and forth frantically, “Help!” Pointing your paddle up diagonally to the right or left means to head that direction. Patting the top of your head with your hand means “OK”, and is used as both a question, “Are you OK?”

and an answer, "I'm OK." Of course if seas are rough, your hands might be plenty full just trying to paddle and brace, so you might be lucky to get your whistle in your mouth, let alone wave your paddle around, so any attempts at signaling might turn into the universal bottoms-up signal for "I just capsized."

Therefore, a better alternative is for group members to look around constantly, especially astern, and close up any gaps beyond voice range. Also, when things start getting rough, those who are less challenged by the conditions will be in a much better position to help out if they paddle slightly behind (rather than out in front of, as is typical), those who are struggling with the wind, seas, broken rudders or what have you.

In the situation Måns found himself in, one common solution for steering problems was never mentioned: towing. Generally, when one paddler is having trouble maintaining direction, whether simply because of wind or a broken rudder or both, partners will hook up a towline. If you don't have a towline or haven't practiced using it, get one. Practice. In conditions that are likely to create the need for a tow, don't leave shore without a towline. If it is too rough for your skill set to maneuver to someone's bow to hook up a towline, it's also too rough for you to perform a rescue, so refer back to Lesson 1 and stay ashore.

LESSON 3: KNOW YOUR BAILOUTS

"We headed for a rocky islet where we could rest if needed," asserts Måns, in a famous-last-words-style statement. This one is fairly obvious. It was a mistake to

count on any bailouts they weren't sure of, and having better charts or knowledge of the area needs no further elaboration. On the other hand, they did an excellent job of creative problem solving after the fact, by finding a way to get out onto the rocky islet and fix the rudder.

One way that advanced paddlers expand their bailout options to include less-than-ideal landing sites is by practicing the skill of climbing out on rocks, on purpose, before they need to in an emergency. One way to expand this even further is to practice with a towline. On steep, rocky shorelines it is often possible to jump out of your kayak a few boat lengths from shore, hook your towline to the bow, swim ashore and scramble out on the rocks. Once safely ashore, use your towline to haul your boat in after you (see "No Beach? No Problem," page 40).

LESSON 4: BEWARE OF SUNDAY MORNING FEVER

"We had a deadline to meet," Måns notes, "catching the ferry back to the mainland to get back to work on time." Certainly the heat of Sunday Morning Fever was fueling some of their questionable decision making. This sometimes fatal fever—the pressure of a ferry to catch or a job you're supposed to be at Monday morning—is an all-too-common contributing factor of many accident reports. My simple suggestion? Pretend it's Saturday when making route decisions. If you'd stay ashore on a Saturday, the same conditions aren't any safer because you're supposed to be at work the next day. And wouldn't it be better to call in late again with a simple case of the Kayaker Flu than to risk the possibility of having to call in dead?

SUNDAY MORNING STORY: REVISED EDITION

But I'm envisioning a different scenario for Måns and Jonas next time, one that involves neither staying ashore nor ending up in the hospital or worse. Imagine a slightly wiser and more practiced duo out on Myggskären island next summer in the same conditions. They choose to launch but spend several minutes practicing spinning around to tag each other's bows, rudders still up in the bumpy water, before deciding they feel comfortable enough to commit to the crossing to Klovsjär, an islet they now know they have the skills to clamber out on if necessary. They drop their rudders for some exhilarating wet action paddling on the "roller-coaster sea."

When Måns' rudder breaks, he signals Jonas, only a couple boat lengths away, who quickly attaches his towline. The intrepid duo reach the lee of the rocky islet without incident, then, just for fun, they jump in the water, attach their towlines and scramble ashore, dragging their kayaks in after them as they'd been practicing. They lunch, fix the rudder and paddle the rest of the way to the ferry. Their new story, however—and all the excellent lessons learned—sadly, does not appear in an issue of *Sea Kayaker* magazine. **SK**

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