

# ATLANTIC

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## Coastal Kayaker



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## Circumnavigating Manhattan



**Subway**



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## **DON'T BE LATE FOR HELL GATE**

**Dave Manzo and Jerry Wylie**

Our lunch stop was surreal. We pulled our kayaks up on a small sandy beach --near what looked like a butchered whale-- to wait for the area's treacherous currents to slack. No, this wasn't Alaska or Greenland. We were in Queens looking across the East River at the skyline of New York City, and the "whale" was a piece of art at an outdoor sculpture park.

We were enjoying what more and more sea kayakers have discovered: the urban adventure of New York City's waterways. Eleven of us combined our passions for kayaking and our love of cities, along with a few hours of Internet searches and a handful of conversations with paddlers who had done this before, to plan a one-day, 30-mile circumnavigation of Manhattan.

What did we learn from previous urban paddlers? "The tides, the tides, please pay attention to the tides." "There is a reason they call it Hell Gate" and "Your hours in the kayak are like a long family drive, a very long family drive."

With our NYC Parks Department launch permits (\$15 each!) and a detailed float plan --including GPS waypoints, tide and current effects, emergency contact information, and historic and recent photos of the NYC waterways-- we launched from the New York City Downtown Boathouse on Pier 40, on the Hudson River at 8 am on Saturday, September 19, 2009. Our weather was sunny, 70 degrees, with a 10 mph NW wind.

Almost to the day (September 12, 1609), four hundred years earlier, Henry Hudson first sailed into NY Harbor and spotted Manhattan. Then, the island had more than 66 miles of streams. It was a wilderness of hickory, chestnut and oak trees, as well as salt marshes and plains filled with beaver, elk and black bear. The Lenape Indians who lived here called it "Mannahatta" for "island of many hills."

The key to our success was prudent planning, strong communication, camaraderie and humor. With his careful use of the Eldridge Tide and Pilot Book, our chief navigator, Pete Rollins, plotted our counterclockwise journey around arriving at Hell Gate for slack tide at 11:08 AM.

The first hour of our trip was the toughest. From Pier 40 around the Battery, a distance of just over 2 miles, we bounced in confused water. With wind and water moving strongly against each other, coupled with boat traffic (watch out for the Staten Island Ferry!) we moved at about 2.5 mph. Paddling in the shadow of lower Manhattan's towers, we were inspired by Lady Liberty's gold-clad torch set ablaze in the early morning light just 2 miles to the southwest.

As soon as we hit the East River, with its magnificent Brooklyn Bridge, the current was

with us, and the waters calmed immediately. It was like stepping onto an escalator. We moved quickly past the Brooklyn, Manhattan and Williamsburg Bridges, admiring these engineering marvels of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Brooklyn Bridge opened to great fanfare in May 1883 and was the longest suspension bridge in the world and the tallest structure in the Western Hemisphere. The Manhattan Bridge assumed the title of world's longest suspension bridge when it was completed 20 years later.

With the Manhattan skyline to our left and Brooklyn and soon there after Queens to our right, we safely navigated the East River. Our goal was to reach the small sand beach of Hallet's Cove - for a brief stop prior to entering Hell Gate at slack tide. Hallet's Cove, although quite small had everything we needed, a place to stretch, eat and rehydrate, a nearby public restroom and, as an added attraction, the Socrates Sculpture Park. The park, according to their website, "is the only site in the New York Metropolitan area specifically dedicated to providing artists with opportunities to create and exhibit large-scale work in ...an urban environment." Our favorite piece was a fake NYC subway entrance.

Hell Gate is the middle of some pretty complicated plumbing connecting three major waterways: the East River, Long Island Sound, and the Hudson River (through the Harlem River). If we had misjudged the timing, we could have faced rough water and currents over 5 mph. However, crossing Hell Gate to the west of Mill Rock at slack tide, with the exception of a couple of passing barges and tugs, proved uneventful, and we entered the eight-mile long Harlem river. This narrow, gritty little river is spanned by 15 bridges including the oldest (High) and the third oldest bridge in NYC (Macombs Dam). These plus 5 on the East River and one on the Hudson, totaled 21 bridges that we passed beneath that day.

For the baseball fans in the group, we got unique views of both Yankee Stadiums in the Bronx (the old and the new side-by-side), and Coogan's Bluff in Manhattan, where the NY Giants played for more than 40 years. Just before exiting the Harlem River we paddled by Columbia University's famous giant "C", located near the Henry Hudson Bridge and *Spuyten Duyvil* (Dutch for Spinning Devil or Devil's Whirlpool).

As we began the final portion of our trip, the current that was pushing us north in the Harlem River strengthened and shifted to the south as we joined with the Hudson. Immediately upon entering the expansive Hudson River we stopped at Inwood Park, having covered two-thirds of our trip. Although officially closed and littered with beach glass, the small park was full of picnickers and fishermen and proved a welcome rest stop.

Leaving Inwood Park, our eyes were fixed on the magnificent George Washington Bridge. But as we approached we saw, directly under the bridge, the Little Red Lighthouse on Jeffrey's Hook made famous by the 1942 children's book *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge*. Knowing we were on the home stretch, we relaxed and enjoyed Manhattan's stunning west side in the mellow afternoon light.

Notable sights along the Hudson included the Cloisters, Riverside Park, and the famous WWII aircraft carrier Intrepid, submarine Growler and the supersonic Concorde jetliner at the Sea, Air and Space Museum.

We returned to Pier 40, 7 hours and 40 minutes after we departed. We had paddled 30.2 miles and rested twice, at Hallet's Cove for 43 minutes and at Inwood Park for 33 minutes. Although we were not racing, but rather enjoying the sights, with the help of the currents our moving average was still 4.72 mph. The fastest leg was the final 10 miles down the Hudson from Inwood Park where we averaged 6.65 mph with a top speed of 11.1 mph. (Gotta love that Hudson River current!)

We weren't the first or the fastest kayakers to paddle around Manhattan, but we may have had the most fun of any group. What *is* clear is that interest in sea kayaking in New York City is strong and growing. We saw another group from one of the city's two kayak companies also doing a circumnavigation, and not one but *two* kayak races were scheduled the next day...one going in each direction. Also, while resting at Hallet's Cove, we were invited by a local to return next year when they hoped to have kayaks and facilities available through a grant.

But the most impressive display of urban kayaking was at the Pier 40 Boathouse. When we returned at 4:30pm the place was filled with people taking advantage of their *free* kayak program. Dozens were waiting patiently on the dock for their turn in a boat while many were paddling. Some were even receiving one-on-one instruction. It was an amazing scene. The dock was so crowded that we had to wait 15 minutes to get our boats out of the water, but it was worthwhile just watching people enjoying themselves.

Who knows...perhaps the "Island of Many Hills" will become the "Island of Many Kayakers" who regularly challenge Hell Gate and the Devil's Whirlpool.

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Cover shot. Steve North visiting the Socrates Sculpture Garden in Queens, NY, a stop on his circumnavigation of Manhattan Island



## TRIP PLANNER

The **Eldridge Tide and Pilot Book** has tables giving the time and height of high and low tides and the time and strength of the current along the East Coast.

**The New York City Downton Boathouse** on Pier 40 has lockers, a changing room, bathrooms, and free kayaking every weekend from 9AM to 6PM. There is a large parking structure at Pier 40.

**Manhattan Kayak Company** on Pier 66 offers a variety of classes and tours.  
[www.manhattankayak.com](http://www.manhattankayak.com)

**New York Kayak Company** on Pier 40 also offers classes and tours (closed Mondays). [www.nykayak.com](http://www.nykayak.com)

Our float plan is available in the library at [www.ctcoastalkayaking.com](http://www.ctcoastalkayaking.com)

More trip photographs can be viewed on PhotoBucket as “Manhattan Sept 19” and “Manhattan Sept 19B” of the “CTKayaker” album.



Lunch stop on the Queens River.



If we hadn't turned the kayaks over on the car they wouldn't have fit into this parking garage.



The massive George Washington Bridge, with its famous Little Red Lighthouse, was the last of our 21 bridges.



The aircraft carrier Intrepid, centerpiece of the Sea, Air and Space Museum on the Hudson River, was the last major attraction on our 30-mile trip.



The Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges and the lower Manhattan skyline.



Home to Columbia University's rowing team, the northern end of Manhattan Island is also popular with "C" kayakers.



When we returned to our starting point at 4:30pm, the free kayak program at Pier 40's Boathouse was in full swing.



Sue inspecting an odd piece of art at the sculpture garden.



The stately Brooklyn Bridge, once the largest structure in the Western Hemisphere, was the first and foremost of the 21 bridges we passed beneath.



Julia's homemade pickled "Dirty McCurdy's Stinky Eggs", in a liquid suspiciously similar to river water.



The Triborough Bridge is one of 12 along the 8-mile long Harlem River.



As we turned north into the East River, the incoming tide swept us past a sun-drenched lower Manhattan cityscape dominated by the Empire State Building.