

## **Moods – Just a Perfect Day (Keith Morris –1997. Originally published in UK “Canoeist” magazine )**

*We gently stepped ashore in the dusk, not wishing to break the spell. We shook hands, wanting to acknowledge a special shared experience, but felt a bit awkward because blokes don't really do that sort of thing. Looking back now, months later, I've concluded that I have not before enjoyed such a complete day of canoeing.*

To wake early to the sight of a lone seal nosing into the inlet where the canoes were drawn up above the high tide mark was a promising start. Soon the sun was gathering strength and providing enough warmth to keep the midges away, as we potted around having breakfast and breaking camp. Carrying the boats back down to the water to finish packing was accepted as part of the ritual labour of the trip and was soon forgotten during the short paddle across to the small fishing village. Fresh coffee and a second breakfast was something we felt we deserved, given that the chance of actually getting this far was entirely reliant on reasonable weather. With cards posted to partners and nursing full water containers, we wandered back to the canoes, just managing to catch the boats before they drifted away across the harbour, having been refloated by the rising tide sooner than we anticipated.

Setting sail, more in hope than expectation given the near calm conditions, we paddled out across the harbour and set our course for the distant mouth of a loch, picking up a little more breeze as we cleared the lee of the headland. A pleasant reach gradually became an exciting, rolling, lurching sleigh ride, so before reaching the half way point of this most exposed leg of our week's route, all four canoes hove to, some lying to a drogue, and reefed down to a more manageable size of sail. Continuing on past wave-washed skerries, a track now parallel to the shore brought us through a narrowish entrance and into more sheltered seclusion. Moving through ever-changing views, the channel narrowed and shallowed so much that, until the last moment, it was uncertain whether there was a way through the rocks to the open water beyond. Brushing the rafts of seaweed with our canoes and lifting our leeboards to avoid grounding, we burst through, faces jubilant for exploiting the diverse capabilities of a sailing canoe.

More sheltered skerries with basking seal toppings slipped by. An acceptable lunch spot evolved into an equally acceptable camping spot, following a sun-warmed afternoon snooze. The long daylight hours tempted us back on to the water for an evening cruise around the nearby islands, in light boats unencumbered with camping gear. An otter slipped silently into the weedy margins of the rocky channel, as we ghosted back to our campsite on the last of the day's dying breeze.

But the magic was not yet over for two of us. After a warming mug of chocolate and a moment's contemplation, we removed the sailing rigs and pushed our canoes back on to the water to explore, under paddle, the inner part of the sea loch that was hidden by a constriction only a few yards wide. By now the water was still and unruffled, but even in the failing light revealing its natural treasures. Kelp and seashells on the bottom were clearly visible, even though the water was probably fifteen feet deep. Only the rhythmical dip and drip of our paddles, together with the faint rippling of the canoe stems, leading us to the loch's inner lair, punctuated our world. Creeping close to the channel's rocky margin, to cheat the last of the ebbing tide, we were surrounded by about twenty seals, peering curiously at us. They followed along, swimming around and beneath us, reappearing on all sides, almost escorting us, ready to share this bit of their marine world as we paddled on, penetrating both the gathering gloom and this intimate inner loch.

As the light and colours faded, it was time to head back. Low tide had passed and the first, barely perceptible, flow of the flood required a little extra effort to make good progress, especially through the narrows. But we did not mind the delay. We cherished the peace and beauty of the place and the moment. We landed and shook hands, awkwardly. While we gazed around trying to fix the magical image in our memory, the midges found us. We carried the canoes up to the tents, crawled in and fell asleep, content with our lot.