

Gray, Bernie

Despite cutting kayak trip short, Bernie Gray still talking success

By Bill Hunt *Intell* p. 8

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Kayaker Bernie Gray may not have reached his goal of paddling from Key West, Fl. to Vancouver via the Panama Canal, but he still considers his most recent trip to be a success.

Gray, of Rossmore, made headlines last year when he kayaked from Belleville to Key West through the Intracoastal Waterway.

In January, 1999 he travelled back to Key West to attempt a kayaking trip from the Keys to Cuba, through the Panama Canal and up the west coast of the U.S. to Vancouver. He had hoped to arrive shortly after the new year, and pegged the journey his Millennium trip.

Unfortunately this excursion was plagued by bad weather and a

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Water: '...a very

costly mistress'

scary accident that left him bobbing in the ocean for several hours while clinging to his overturned kayak.

The trip began near the end of January after Gray drove to the Keys and plunked his kayak into the eastern limits of the Gulf of Mexico. He had 80 miles to travel before reaching Cuba but as Ernest Hemingway wrote, says Gray, "there's a lot of water between Cuba and Key West." He expected to make the journey in a day and a half, but several bags of drinking water he was carrying ruptured and the kayak capsized.

"To make a long story short," says Gray "the boat went over and I was floating around in the Gulf for a couple hours."

The water in the kayak prevented him from righting it but he managed to get the VHF radio working and send a mayday signal. But because kayaks are so small and close to the water, the signal wouldn't travel far and Gray was virtually invisible to any vessel that wasn't close.

Sharks were also a very real concern because the Gulf is known for them.

Furthermore, he was floating into the abyss that is the Gulf

rather than toward Cuba.

Finally his bad luck broke and a sailboat heard his distress signal. Realizing it had to be coming from nearby, someone climbed the mast and scoured the area, sighting Gray and his overturned kayak. He returned to Key West and set off again, making it about 20 miles further than the first time, but the weather became rough and, admitting



Bernie Gray

he was "a little gun shy" after being dumped, turned back.

So Gray changed his plans and decided to travel up the west coast of Florida to Texas.

"I saw lots of dolphins and alligators," he says. Of the alligators, he notes, "with kayaks you're on the same level as they are and you're in their territory." He disputes the perception that alligators are docile.

"There was a lot of hairy times but I saw a lot of good things." Among them were manatees,

eagles, sting rays, various fish and lots of "gorgeous birds."

He also met creatures of the human kind, including a "bag-man" who lives on a boat and paddles all over the U.S.

He spent a couple nights on a desert island in the Gulf and paddled up the famous Suwannee River.

When he reached Pensacola, Fla. on the border with Alabama, he was so dehydrated from battling strong winds he decided that his trip was over.

While Gray didn't reach his objective the experience was still worth it.

"It was a fantastic trip even though it wasn't what I wanted to accomplish," he says.

For the man who joined the merchant navy at 16 and has always loved the water, the trip reminded him of an unquestionable truth. "Water, it looks so good but it's so dangerous. It's a very costly mistress."

Gray quit his job as an advertising salesman at CJBQ to make the excursion and is currently looking for work.

Despite that and his brush with death, he hasn't any regrets. "It's something I'm glad I did."