

## GERMANY TO AUSTRALIA



*Meeting local fishermen near the island of Sumbawa in Indonesia.*

# REFLECTIONS *of a* LONG-DISTANCE PADDLER

**D**istance kayaking. To a weekend paddler, the term might mean ten days of gently floating from campsite to quiet campsite. To someone more ambitious, several weeks or even months of traveling by canoe down one of the world's great rivers might seem more worthy of the term.

For Egon Kuhn, a long trip is measured in years rather than months, and thousands of miles rather than hundreds. In 1953, Kuhn and two friends, Heinz Sekoll and Hans Seefeld, lowered their black folding kayaks into the Danube River at the town of Ulm in Germany. Their destination was Australia—three years and fifteen thousand miles away.

Without hesitation they left their families, friends and well-wishers and paddled away. Their fifteen-foot-long kayaks each weighed twenty-three kilos (fifty-one pounds) and were laden with about fifty kilos (110 pounds) worth of gear and provisions. Two double tents, two sets of cooking equipment, cameras, film, sleeping gear and food were distributed among the three kayakers.

"We had special wooden boxes made to fit exactly inside two of the kayaks," says Kuhn. "They [the boxes] were kept inside waterproof bags, so even if a kayak capsized nothing would be spoiled." Between the three of them, the men had many years of paddling experience; they found that their pared-down list of equipment contained everything they needed and nothing extra.

### YUGOSLAVIA AND GREECE

When the threesome embarked on what is likely the world's longest kayak trip, Europe was still recovering from World War II. Passage through Hungary and Czechoslovakia was prohibited. So, instead of following the Danube, the men traveled overland to the Savinja River in Northern Yugoslavia. Here, they paddled between high reddish-brown cliffs. In Yugoslavia they also traveled on the Sava and the Drava Rivers and eventually reached Belgrade, which was, Kuhn recalls, "a modern city—a communist showpiece."

Although the Danube passes through

*Story by Nicole Tate Stratton • Photos by Egon Kuhn*



*Getting a big send-off on the Kura-su near Erzurum in Turkey.*



*Meeting locals on the Suphrates River*

Belgrade, the men traveled only a short distance along it before folding their kayaks and taking a train to Skopje, a city which was quite "backwards" compared to Belgrade. Collapsing the kayaks for overland travel "worked perfectly!" Kuhn says. "It only took about fifteen minutes to fold all three of the kayaks and pack them away into two bags." In Skopje, the journey continued on the Vardar River.

"The Upper Vardar was some of the toughest traveling we did on the entire trip," Kuhn says. In places, the water was so shallow—two or three inches deep at most—that the men had to drag their kayaks behind them as they scrambled through jumbled piles of boulders. It took nearly three weeks to navigate a relatively short stretch of water—long enough to throw them off schedule and allow their visas to expire. "We couldn't get out of the country in time because of that stretch!" They finally paddled across the border into Greece but didn't realize they had crossed over until Greek border guards began to shoot at them.

The men were returned to Yugoslavia where border police arrested them and promptly threw them in jail. Communist officials interrogated them, determined how much money they were carrying, and took a large chunk of it as a "fine" before releasing the prisoners.

"The river became quite passable after the Greek border," says Kuhn, and the men enjoyed relatively easy paddling until the Vardar spilled out into the Aegean Sea. To help stabilize the kayaks and improve steering capabilities in the ocean, the men attached

aluminum rudders.

Traveling early in the morning to beat the hot Mediterranean sun, they made their way east along the coast. By now, daily routines were well established. Rising early they ate a hearty breakfast prepared by Seefeld. They paddled in the relative cool of the morning and rested during the hottest part of the day. Kuhn documented the trip by keeping diaries and taking most of the photographs. Because he had a knack for languages, he also became the spokesman for the group.

"One of the most valuable things I had was a book I made for communicating with people along the way," he says. The scrapbook contained a collage of photos, newspaper clippings, pictures and words in various languages. These he pointed to and quickly learned the translation of key words and phrases in the local languages. Several times the book made friends of people who were initially suspicious of the strangers arriving in their unusual craft.

The Greek coastline took them past such spots as Athos. "The peninsula," says Kuhn, "was inhabited by orthodox monks who had built their monasteries there. They had preserved the land they depended on. It was covered with trees and was green with the crops they were growing. It was totally unlike many other areas [in Greece], which are very barren."

Kuhn was impressed with the beautiful monasteries: "The interiors were magnificent—they had gold everywhere. The Greek Orthodox Church had some incredible treasures, handwritten manuscripts, books that were two thousand years old."

**TURKEY**

Continuing along the coast they decided to take a shortcut to Gallipoli, port of entry to the Marmara Sea. They strapped the folded kayaks and gear onto small, collapsible hand-drawn carts they carried with them. Two spindly ten-inch wheels fastened onto a foldable aluminum frame which was usually carried in a waterproof bag strapped to the stern of each kayak. The carts took only a couple of minutes to assemble. Once the kayaks were balanced on the frames they were easily pulled along for short overland hops.

They dragged their loads over the land bridge to Gallipoli, avoiding the strong currents through the Dardanelles, and launched once again.



Istanbul, the ancient city, with its narrow winding streets and mosques dating back to the Ottoman Empire, was their next and last stop before the Black Sea.

"We wanted to get permission to travel in northern Turkey, but everyone we talked to said 'no way!' We were told that if we did go up there we would just get arrested." Undaunted, the men bribed the captain of a postal boat who agreed to take them to Trabzon nearly five hundred miles away. There, in a small hotel bar, they concocted a plan to continue on into the mountains. The next morning, they threw their folded kayaks on the roof of a rickety bus.

"That was the most hair-raising trip ever!" says Kuhn, remembering the steep, narrow, twisting track into the mountainous country near Trabzon. The decrepit bus was laden with everything from goats and chickens to bicy-

cles and, of course, kayaks. Stuffed full to bursting with passengers and their sacks and baskets of belongings, the bus had been underway only four hours when it broke down. "There was no complaining. It was just the will of Allah." The busload of people set up camp beside the road and waited calmly for one of the bus drivers to walk to the closest town for transmission parts.

After three days of steep canyons and a climb of six thousand feet, the bus arrived at its destination, Erzurum, a small town high in the mountains of northern Turkey. "Every bush, shrub, bit of vegetation had been cut down," Kuhn recalls. The people of the area lived in simple houses terraced into the hills. Eking out a living as subsistence farmers, they supplemented their diet with mutton from sheep with large, fat tails.

Milk and wool were provided by the sheep, eggs and meat by chickens and

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*Scrounging water on the island of Flores in Indonesia.*

Sekoll capsized five times on the Euphrates, which cuts through towering cliffs on its tumbling, swirling journey to the Persian Gulf. It drops four thousand five hundred feet in seven hundred miles.

the land yielded parsnips, corn, potatoes and barley, the latter providing the major ingredient for bread. "Those people knew the mountains incredibly well," Kuhn says. "They moved like goats along the mountain trails."

The trio was made to feel welcome by members of the Turkish army located at the top of a mountain pass, so welcome they stayed for three days. When it came time to leave, the soldiers gave the visitors a send-off with full military honors. They probably thought they would be the last to see the German adventurers alive.

#### ROUGH WATER—THE KURA-SU, THE EUPHRATES AND THE PERSIAN GULF

Ahead lay the treacherous Kura-su (Black Water) and Euphrates rivers, neither of which had ever been negotiated along their full lengths before. The next three months were terrifying, exhilarating and exhausting as the men paddled mile after mile of unforgiving whitewater. "It was often so rough we couldn't take photographs," says Kuhn, explaining the hole in his otherwise excellent slide collection.

When the whitewater became completely impassable, the men spent hours scrambling over rocks until it was possible to take to the water again. Their efforts paid off; they became the first kayakers to paddle the Kura-su. That river, however, would prove a

training ground when compared to the mighty Euphrates.

Sekoll capsized five times on the Euphrates, which cuts through towering cliffs on its tumbling, swirling journey to the Persian Gulf. It drops four thousand five hundred feet in seven hundred miles. "There was just a narrow strip of sky way above us," Kuhn remembers. "That water just roared through the canyon."

Over the course of thousands of years, the river has cut caves into the cliffs, and people have inhabited these secure hideaways since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when Christians sought refuge from persecution by Muslims. Small churches and altars still sit deep inside these formidable cliffs. On several occasions, the paddlers were invited in to cave homes to rest and share a simple meal. "The caves were really quite cozy," Kuhn says. "The people wove thick utilitarian carpets. They sat on them, slept on them; the caves were quite warm and snug."

Throughout the trip the kayakers were invited to have meals with local villagers or share in a celebration. In this rugged part of Turkey, a special delicacy was offered the visitors: eggs poached in sesame oil and sprinkled with a little sugar. "We used a lot of energy," says Kuhn. "Any food anyone offered me I liked! We ate some incredible things!"

After fifteen hundred brutal miles, the men had set another record: they became the first to have traveled the entire length of the Euphrates River. But their trials were not over. Shortly after entering the Persian Gulf, they were caught in a sudden storm. "It was the worst part of the trip. We were tossed around for thirty-six hours. The wind kept blowing us off shore, and we were in constant danger of capsizing."

After battling the sea and their own fatigue for what seemed an interminable time, the three kayakers were relieved when the wind and driving rain abated. Warily they paddled toward the distant shore. The retreating tide soon left them stuck firmly in the mud, so they raised their tents in deep mud and waited for eight hours. When the tide began to rise, they threw their tents, fully erected, on top of their kayaks. As darkness fell, they drifted, unable to see. Later, in total darkness, they found themselves surrounded by sea lions. "We would have killed and eaten one except we couldn't see them properly," Kuhn says.

Then once again, when the tide retreated, they were in knee-deep mud.

This time they hauled their kayaks through the muck, trying to reach the shore. For hours they struggled, their bare feet and the hulls of their kayaks suffering cuts and scrapes from sharp shells in the mud. Heinz nursed hands so badly sunburned they were covered with blisters and open sores. Kuhn's right forearm ached from tendonitis aggravated by the hours of fighting the sea. After nearly two days and nights the men finally made shore. Covered in mud, they "looked like pigs," but they were finally able to rest, find food and repair their kayaks.

#### PAKISTAN

The next leg of their journey took them to the port city of Karachi in Pakistan. "Karachi was a huge, sprawling city," Kuhn recalls. "It was our first real taste of the Indian sub-continent and it was hard to warm up to it. We were very used to being on our own and having contact only with simple people." In the city throngs of people surrounded them, and the kayakers found themselves the center of attention nearly everywhere they went.

They stayed only long enough to receive the replacement skins for their kayaks which had been sent from the kayak manufacturer in Germany. "By that time the skins had taken quite a beating. Once they had been replaced, the kayaks had a whole new life."

All three paddlers were relieved to escape the city and begin their paddle up the Indus River. At the first village they were entertained by locals playing large, urn-shaped drums. Traveling in the dry season was difficult in this part of Pakistan. Nothing but the smallest, scrubby bushes clung to life along the banks of the river, which cuts through parched desert and sand dunes.

At times, food was impossible to come by. The poverty of the people who managed somehow to survive by planting a few vegetables in the sandy banks was overwhelming. "We lived for days on nothing but rice and sugar," says Kuhn. "We paddled for seven or eight hours a day, and we were always hungry."

As they moved ever more slowly up the Indus River, the water became shallower and shallower until, finally, the men were reduced to dragging their laden kayaks in ankle-deep water in temperatures that rarely dipped below one hundred degrees Fahrenheit.

"It was more like taking our kayaks for a walk," quips Kuhn. Man's need to



*Guests of the local sheik in Iraq.*

build, to manipulate and dominate nature had reduced a once-mighty river to a trickle. Building the Sukkur Dam on the Indus drastically changed the landscape—below the dam the land was parched and barren. The irrigated land above the dam was rich and fertile.

Continuing beyond the Sukkur Dam for another hundred miles or so to Lahore, the men once again folded their kayaks and boarded a train for Delhi and the start of their journey down the sacred Ganges River.

#### THE GANGES RIVER

The holy Yamuna River, a tributary of the sacred Ganges River, passes through Delhi en route to Allahabad. Kuhn found the city fascinating. Of particular interest was the Red Fort, which, until 1857, was the seat of kings in Delhi. Named for the red sandstone from which the walls were built, the fort was a city unto itself. "It contained a hospital and a bazaar. The interior was made of white marble, mother-of-pearl, and colorful stones. We thought we had found ourselves in an Indian movie!"

Leaving Delhi on the Yamuna River, they found themselves witness to some of the most intimate rituals of peoples' lives. "Every village had a temple right on the river. Steps led down to the water, and people bathed, prayed, washed, and drank from the river."

From their kayaks the three paddlers witnessed a Hindu burial. "We heard a lot of loud shouting and waving, and then the group came down to the river to bathe the body. Then they put it on a funeral pyre. Whatever was left after that they tipped into the water."

After only a day of travel, the pad-

Everywhere they turned were signs of a rich and fascinating culture; huge effigies of Hindu gods made of woven sticks and grasses looked silently upon them as they explored the island.



*Lower Indus River*

diers were surprised to see a dam. There was so little water beyond the dam, they were unable even to drag their boats and had to carry them for four days. For the next three weeks, there was rarely a day when they didn't have to carry the kayaks, at least part of the time.

At the time, Europeans were typically dubbed "Englishmen," and Kuhn found the typical welcome to be quite cool. "After two hundred years they [the English] hadn't made themselves too popular!"

At one point a police patrol discovered they were Germans and invited the men along on a hunting trip. "They were going after antelope. We had a chance to see the jungle as well as the steppe. We had never experienced such a multitude of birds and animals. We saw swarms of cranes and storks, monkeys and peacocks." They also saw plenty of antelope, but the hunters came back empty handed.

Water buffaloes were also numerous. "Sometimes there were as many as a hundred together. They would lie down in the water and block the whole river! They just looked at us stupidly, and we couldn't get by!" Thousands of vultures also watched their passage down the river.

The animals were very tame, probably because of Hindu beliefs which prevent the killing of animals. "Sometimes they would feed wild animals and birds. And cows, of course, well even if they were in the middle of the road in Delhi, people would drive around them rather

than get them to move."

Mile after mile, the water conditions on the Yamuna River remained poor. When the men stopped and left the river to travel inland to a village, the heat was nearly unbearable. Of the multitude of images both shocking and profoundly beautiful, none made an impression as intense as one memorable evening in Agra. "We pitched our tents just across from the Taj Mahal. The building is gorgeous by day, but by the light of the full moon it is unforgettable."

Once the Chambal River joined the Yamuna, the water situation improved greatly. "We were often able to sail the kayaks for several hours each day," Kuhn says. "In the middle of the day we would have sandstorms, and it was extremely hot." High winds in the middle of the day allowed the gear-laden boats to move quickly. "We capsize twice, and because we didn't have the boats closed, we lost some equipment."

On the sacred Ganges River, the sights, sounds and smells were truly a world apart from anything they might have come across back home on the Danube. A young *howdah* (elephant boy) brought his charge to the river for a bath, antelope and gazelles grazed nearby, and turtles swam past in the murky water which was also home to crocodiles fifteen feet long. Boats made of sticks and reeds shared the river with the three Germans. Jackals and vultures fed on human remains.

In contrast to the desperate lack of

food they had experienced in Pakistan, the men ate relatively well in India, feasting on breadfruit, bananas and dates. But the heat in India was unbearable. Each day they began to paddle at first light, but by ten in the morning they had to pull out and seek a bit of shade in which to wait out the hottest part of the day. To keep their drinking water relatively cool, they strapped clay pots onto the aft decks of the kayaks.

For the first part of their trip down the Ganges River, they made a habit of walking inland to buy fresh drinking water from villages in the hills. The dirty water of India's most important river didn't seem potable, and the men felt their excursions inland were well worth the extra effort...that is, until they discovered the local people made regular trips to the Ganges with empty containers which they filled to take back to their villages. After that they drank straight from the river like everyone else and suffered no ill effects because of it.

During the dry season, the Ganges and Hooghly rivers are not connected. Once again, the kayaks were dismantled and transported overland, this time on the back of an oxcart. Arriving in Calcutta the men were overwhelmed with the crowds, noise and squalor. They were please to move on, loading their kayaks onto the roof of a black carriage pulled by a bony nag.

#### BURMA, SINGAPORE AND INDONESIA

Rangoon, the principal port of Burma, held many surprises for the trio. Kuhn was impressed by the magnificent Golden Pagoda and its fairytale spires of gold. "The main tower looked like a very tall ice cream...the gold is seven inches thick in places!" However, the paddlers were unable to obtain a visa for paddling in Burma.

Continuing south, the paddlers took to the ocean and followed the Malaysian coast, past communities of stilt homes to the high rises of Singapore.

Hundreds of tiny Indonesian islands awaited the explorers. Sumatra was the first they explored. "That was the first time we saw coconuts. We mixed the milk with salt water, and it was perfect for cooking rice." In some areas the gnarled, woven roots of the dense mangrove forests were impenetrable. Occasionally, a small river disappeared into the jungly bush. "Sometimes we followed little rivers into the mangroves.

We often saw crocodiles in there." Occasional settlements on the river were built on high stilts, thirty feet above the water. "There was sometimes no land to camp on, so we asked to sleep outside one of those houses. We pitched our tents right up there on the platform."

The Indra-Giris River cuts deep into the island of Sumatra. The paddlers made their way up the river and met up with a German doctor stationed on the island.

"The local people only went to see him as a last resort, after their village witch doctor had given up on them. They were typically half dead by the time they showed up at his place. He [the doctor] had to be very careful. The whole family would arrive with the patient and then watched every move he made."

The worst thing that could happen was for a patient to die while being treated. The doctor could be accused of murder. "If he saw he couldn't help, he would send the person back to his own village." Sometimes even when a cure should have been straightforward, problems arose. "Mothers wore bottles of medicine like charms around their necks but wouldn't give any to a sick child."

The Mentawai Islands in the Indian Ocean were the next stop. But the welcome they received on one island was hardly warm. "We were greeted on the beach by people wielding bows and arrows, people whose grandfathers had been cannibals!" The paddlers were surrounded and feared for their lives until a local resident who spoke a little English happened upon the scene and intervened on their behalf.

The west coast of these islands was open to the full force of the Indian Ocean. The kayakers surfed ashore each evening, negotiating the rolling breakers before finding yet another pristine beach on which to camp. "We broke paddles getting ashore at night the water was so rough," Kuhn says.

On shore, the jungle was so thick at times that dead trees rotted standing up. The easiest way to explore the islands was to find a creek or small river leading inland. While following one of these quiet channels they came upon a group of native canoes in a pool. The owners of the vessels fled into the jungle, terrified of the intruders. The men paddled closer and inspected the canoes made of hollowed-out logs.

"These people only had simple tools,

bush knives and small axes, which were made by fastening the axe head to a stick with vines. They didn't have anything like planes to smooth the wood, and yet those boats were beautifully made."

Approaching a village by kayak produced similar results. The inhabitants abandoned their village and disappeared silently into the thick jungle. When braver locals stared at the intruders from the banks of the river, the men could see that although they wore few clothes, large hats made of banana leaves were common, and the people were tattooed from top to bottom.

Kuhn smiles as he remembers ceremonies shared with the locals and some of the customs he came to understand. "When a woman wanted a divorce she left her husband's sandals outside the door!"

The men continued south along the coast to Java, where they visited the bustling port city of Jakarta. From there they chose the lee side of the island and paddled from lagoon to lagoon. Bali was not much farther along. "That was paradise," Kuhn says with a melancholy conviction. He describes processions and celebrations steeped in centuries of history and tradition. "The people played out ancient Hindu stories. They performed dances which are no longer found in India where they originated centuries earlier."

Whenever possible, the three stayed inside the reef and paddled from village to village. Ashore, villagers shared meals, dancing and celebration after celebration. "The houses were in walled compounds that kept out the evil spirits," Kuhn says. Everywhere they turned were signs of a rich and fascinating culture: huge effigies of Hindu gods made of woven sticks and grasses looked silently upon them as they explored the island. Children played in the lush, green vegetation.

Kuhn found the dancing "incredibly expressive" and the music "haunting and beautiful." The most promising dancers were chosen to attend the village dancing school. There, teachers passed on the secrets of the intricate dances. Only the best students were honored with being able to wear the intricately decorated outfits passed down through generations.

"There were decorations everywhere," Kuhn says. "Intricately woven cloth, stone carvings...It was truly a marvelous place. The bougainvilleas

bloomed all over the island."

One of the most interesting aspects of island life was the way in which everything was shared among members of the community. "Everything simply belonged to the community as a whole. People shared, and everyone had what they needed." In return, all members of the community were expected to contribute to the well-being of the village. Everyone participated in growing the rice. They harvested three times a year. "The women planted the rice, and the men harvested both rice and coconuts."

Reluctantly the paddlers left Bali and continued on to Flores, an island first discovered by Magellan, where they were greeted by thousands of locals lining the harbor. "We stayed at a Catholic monastery. The mixture of the Portuguese Catholic traditions and the pagan rituals was fascinating. The processions were marvelous!"

Although it was often hard to find water on this volcanic island, there were always coconuts. The natural landscape was unusual, and striking along the coastline. Kuhn remembers a mushroom-shaped rock that protruded like a huge pillar from the ocean. "The wave action caused incredible erosion of rocks along the shore."

Portuguese Timor was next on the itinerary. "Timor was one of the last Portuguese outposts. There is a beautiful whitewashed lighthouse there." And once again, the hospitality of the locals was overwhelming. "We were given the highest honor when a local Chinese man presented us with chicken rolls," Kuhn says. "I ate sixteen! That was a good dinner!"

Unfortunately, the men were denied the visas which would have allowed them to kayak across the Strait of Torres to Australia. Nonetheless, the three managed to make it to Melbourne for the 1956 Olympics, where they stayed in the Olympic Village with German athletes, including a powerful kayaking team. "It was great to see many of our old kayak friends from Germany after such a long time," Kuhn says.

And it is good now for Kuhn to look back at those three years spent paddling some of the most exotic and, at that time, unexplored regions of the world. It is an adventure he remembers with great fondness—an adventure never to be forgotten.

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