

by Christopher Cunningham

Crossing the Ditch

An Interview with James Castrission

James Castrission's book *Crossing the Ditch* came out last summer and turned out to be a surprisingly good read. His 300-page account of paddling *Lot 41*, a specially built, cabin-equipped kayak, from Australia to New Zealand offers some good insights into expedition planning and partnerships. Castrission also offered some perspective on Andrew McAuley's crossing of the Tasman Sea farther south, a journey that ended tragically when McAuley was within sight of his goal. (*Crossing the Ditch* is dedicated to McAuley's memory). I spoke with James after I'd finished reading his book.

For our readers who might not be familiar with your crossing, give us a bit of background.

Okay, so on the 13th of November, 2007, Justin Jones, my best mate from school, and I embarked on a journey across the Tasman Sea, from Australia to New Zealand. We were expecting a journey of 2,200 kilometers (1,367 miles), in a straight line, and we ended up paddling 3,318 kilometers (2,062 miles) due to adverse current and wind. Instead of being out here for the anticipated 35 to 40 days, we were out there for 62 days, unsupported.

The first half of the journey we knocked off in 17 days and we were really stoked with our progress and then the next half took 45 days. We got stuck in a current whirlpool in the middle of the Tasman, where we went 'round in circles for about 15 days or so.

Were you about ready to hang it up after you got stuck in that?

In 2007 James Castrission and Justin Jones paddled across the Tasman Sea from Australia to New Zealand. Halfway into the crossing they were caught up in a giant eddy and spent two weeks going nowhere.

I don't know if I'd have been able to get through that by myself. It was such a huge help to have my best mate there to pull me out of the glum dumps when I was down. I pulled him up too when he got down.

It was clear in your book that you had some frustration with Justin during the preparations for the trip. Your friend Gord said "You might wind up doing 80 percent of the work but you still need Justin's 20 percent. How did that evolve?"



Ben Barin

Castrission paddled in the forward cockpit and Jones the aft cockpit in *Lot 41*, named after the famous race horse Phar Lap, once listed as "lot 41" in a catalog of horses for sale.

Before the trip Justin was finding it difficult to get himself focused on the project and whatnot, but then out there on the Tasman Sea he really became, I guess, the captain of our ship. I was quite badly affected by seasickness and he was pulling up a lot of the slack. He was having to do a lot of the scheds [scheduled communications] back to mainland and I was very, very dependent on him. By the end of the expedition we were so dependent on one another on so many different levels.

Both of you, still in your twenties, are pretty young. Given that many of the other folks who have done long voyages in small boats were much older, was your youth an impediment?

I think initially it was and I think a little bit of youthful naïveté helped get the trip off the ground, but having said that, we were [training] out off the coast, out sailing constantly outside the heads and we built up a lot of experience very quickly.

To get back to Justin, and the frustrations in the planning stages, you also wrote that he had an ability to “push his body past reason.” Was that something that you kept in mind?

Absolutely. We always knew that out there on the Tasman Sea, even though we’d been training for a good 18 months, 25 to 30 hours a week doing a lot of paddling, a lot of core work, a lot of getting ourselves ready—we knew that within seven to ten days of getting out to sea that our bodies were going to leave us pretty quickly and the real battle was going to be in our minds. I think that’s where Justin comes into his own. He’s got just an unbelievable ability to push himself past where most people are begging to stop.

You started your voyage not long after Andrew McAuley came to an untimely end on his crossing from Australia to New Zealand. How much of a presence was Andrew for you and Justin through the whole process?

Andrew McAuley was a huge, huge presence for both of us. Unfortunately there was some rivalry when he was putting his trip together about who was going to be the first one across, and that may have put some undue pressure on him to get out there before he had done enough testing, and... look, Andrew was an incredible adventurer and an amazing person. He’d done more in the outdoors than Justin and I could ever dream about. For him to be lost so close to land really... [drove] home the ramifications if we didn’t get this trip 100 percent right. For a



Life inside *Lot 41* was very cozy.



couple of weeks after his disappearance neither Justin nor myself were able to sleep at all. Our friends and our family were constantly telling us that it just wasn’t worth it. But after looking back at all the planning we’d done and looking at our risk-management work, we realized that if we stuck to it, there was no reason why we couldn’t get across. And then after eight months of testing we found ourselves out there, and to be honest, there wasn’t one day out on the Tasman Sea that we didn’t think of Andrew.

Would things have changed much for you if he had made it through that last day to landfall?

I think it definitely would have changed things. Justin and I still would have been

all go for the Tasman. We were attempting something vastly, vastly different. Andrew had quite a bold strategy in a stock, standard kayak. Right from the beginning that wasn’t what Justin and I were out to achieve. We were doing a slightly longer route across the Tasman as well, farther north. And yeah, we still would have gone out there and attempted it.

Being the first wasn’t at the top of your list?

It definitely wasn’t on the top of the list. It really did have a level of—what’s the word I’m looking for—it was quite an enigmatic dream with no one having done it before, and knowing that there were a number of people who had

James Castrission

James Castrission

dreamed about it and talked about it for so long, so there was an element there of how it would be an amazing thing to do first. But by no means was that motivating us as our primary focus.

The definition of kayak seems to have been a bit of an issue. You had a boat that was custom-built for the purpose. How much did it matter that your boat was regarded as a kayak?

To be honest, I really think adventure is relative to each individual. Everyone's got their own risk profile, and everyone's got their own individual goals, objectives and levels of risk that they're willing to take. And for Justin and I to attempt the crossing, we needed to make sure our kayak, *Lot 41*, was equipped with all the safety gear that we'd need in an emergency. So we wanted a safety raft on board, we wanted survival suits, we wanted flares, we wanted EPIRBs, we wanted a tracking beacon, and that just simply wouldn't fit in a stock standard kayak. So we designed the kayak around our risk profile. You know some people think we were insane going out in the kayak that we had; other people think that it was a little bit luxurious for what we were attempting, but we just kept coming back to, you know, we've all got our risk profiles and we all do adventures the way we feel safe in doing them. And you know there are people out there who think by putting a sail on a kayak, that doesn't make it a kayak as such, and that makes it a sailing boat. Again, it comes down to the individual and if that's what the individual wants to do then they should go for it.

The definition of first often gets wrapped up in achieving them.

I'd have to agree with you there. I have to admit it was really quite strange on day 17; we were paddling along and saw the sails of a yacht on the horizon. We raised it on the radio and it came over to us. As they got a little closer to our kayak we could smell that they were cooking something on deck. As they got to within about 20 feet or so they said, "Boys, would you like a bacon-and-egg roll?" and we said, "Sorry, it's an unsupported journey. We can't take any food on." It seemed so bizarre out there in the middle of nowhere to have these self-imposed rules. All we wanted to do was munch into that bacon-and-egg roll.



James Castrission

Day 36 and a huge wall of water crashed over the bow. At times, we felt more like a submarine than a kayak.

When you first launched your kayak, it wound up listing badly. What was the resolution for that?

The first time I put the kayak on the water it listed 30 degrees one side or 30 degrees to the other side. Our initial solution was what a lot of sailors would do: we added some lead ballast through the bottom of the kayak. We added about 180 kilograms (397 pounds), which brought it upright, but that led to a whole lot of problems out offshore. We were a lot lower in the water, so with all that extra resistance through the water she was a real pig to paddle. What we ended up doing was to rip all that lead back out and then we widened up the beam. Not much, probably 15 centimeters (6 inches) on either side. On the cabin we added these bumps. And that provided the solution that we needed. It gave us the initial stability that we needed.

Is there a design issue that you need to work out for a boat that's going to take such a long crossing? You start out with an enormous amount of weight, and you wind up with an empty boat as you eat your way into it. Was that something that was figured into the design?

Absolutely. We've reflected on Andrew's voyage and that was an issue we think may have got him toward the end there. The food that he had in his kayak was initially providing a lot of the ballast in his kayak, and as he ate through the food he ate through his ballast, so he was sitting a little bit high in the water and the

kayak had become a little more tippy and that may have resulted in a wave knocking him over. So with *Lot 41* we had a design waterline (the DWL), and we wanted to maintain that as much as possible. Toward the end of the trip, as we ate through the ballast, we actually put some water bladders with salt water inside the kayak to maintain the level and the trim that we wanted.

When you landed Lot 41 in New Zealand was its weight down appreciably?

We did lose a bit. We started out with about 150 kilos (331 pounds) worth of food and we ate through a lot of that, and we probably replaced that with about 60 liters (16 gallons) of salt water. We probably lost about 100 kilograms (220 pounds) throughout the voyage. A little but not significantly all that much.

Tell a bit about your battles with seasickness.

Look, I've been seasick on Sydney Harbor twice in my life, so the whole prospect of paddling a kayak across the Tasman Sea, which is notoriously one of the roughest stretches of ocean in the world probably wasn't the smartest thing to do. Over an eight-month period I tried 17 different sets of drugs and remedies on myself to find a combination of some things that would work. I tried everything. I tried the wristbands, I tried the ginger tablets, I tried the Quells [scopolamine], you know, all the normal stuff that people try and that did get the effect that I needed. I ended up

settling for acupuncture myself twice a day on my wrist out there on the Tasman Sea. I was doing hypnotherapy exercises and I was taking two tablets a day [of a medication] that they give chemotherapy patients, at about 40 dollars per tablet. A combination of those three things made life on board bearable.

You were sticking yourself with acupuncture needles?

That's right. It provided Justin with some entertainment one night. We were being tossed around in a good six- or seven-meter (19 to 23 feet) sea state and I was feeling pretty queasy in the back of the cabin. We were strapped down to the cabin floor. I got my acupuncture needles out and for about five minutes I was trying to get in the nerve. I kept on going in there and then out, and then in and then out, trying to find the right place to get them in. Jonesy said it made him queasy looking at me trying to do that for myself.

Did you end up looking like a junkie after that?

That's exactly what he called me!

You had a lot of technological devices on board: electronics like GPS and radios. Which were absolutely essential and which do you think you could have done the voyage without?

Probably the two most essential electrics we had on board were our tracking beacon—every six minutes our position was being tracked both on our website and in the Rescue Coordination Centers in Australia and New Zealand. So if there was a problem they could actually locate us. I guess that one of the big issues with rescues out at sea is not knowing where the person is out there. That was one of the problems Andrew had; they couldn't know exactly where he was. If they knew where he was they could have gotten a rescue to him straightaway. Combing the sea trying to find two heads bobbing around in the middle of the ocean is near impossible. So the tracking beacon was a big one, and I'd have to say the second was having the satellite phone on board. Twice a day we did our scheds back to our mainland team. At 6 A.M. in the morning and at 8 P.M., we'd call. In the morning we'd send a text via the satellite phone to say all through the night things went OK. Then at night time we did quite a detailed sched with the nav team. They'd relay things to us. Things like the weather, what the currents were doing, different RFLs—requests for information—and

we'd give them all the information from the kayak: our speed, our progress, how we were feeling mentally, physically and emotionally. So they were tracking us very, very closely and knew exactly how we were doing out there.

Did the Rescue Coordination Centers have any issues with you taking on this trip?

Surprisingly, yes, right from the beginning. We started planning the expedition a good four years before we executed it. Right from then we engaged them and wanted to work with them. We showed them what we came up with to deal with the risks of being out there and we asked them for advice and input into that [risk profile] document and I think by working together with them on it, they felt quite comfortable and knew that we were just as well equipped as any other yacht out off the coast of Australia.

It's my understanding that they don't draw a distinction between working vessels and yachtsmen.

No. We were doing a testing thing with them one day out off the coast of Sydney. We were doing some exercises with the New South Wales Water Police where

we were doing some retrievals, and us boarding their vessel and whatnot. There was a southerly coming through and it was going to bring winds of 50 or 60 knots. About an hour before the front hit, they got news of it coming through and they basically dumped the towlines and said, "Boys, you'll be all right out there. We've got to get back to the harbor to save some of the yachts that are going to get into trouble." So they had a lot of faith in the way that we'd been equipped and that we knew how to deal with those conditions.

If you'd been born prior to the electronic age would you have considered this trip?

I think in another era, say a hundred years ago, it would have been a completely different kettle of fish. Back in 1978, a man by the name of Colin Quincy, a New Zealander, rowed across the Tasman in a big ocean-rowing vessel. He didn't have any communications on board his rowing boat. I guess that's the way they did adventure back then. When Scott and Shackleton went down to Antarctica you didn't hear from them for a number of years. That's just how it was. We're entering a fascinating era of adventure where tracking is possible and

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And has that added something to the sense of adventure?

I think it's providing a means and an opportunity for a lot of people to follow these voyages. It also provides a layer of redundancy and safety that enables a traveler to push the boundary a little bit harder.

On a long expedition you can either focus on the relationship between the people in the expedition or on the goal. In your book you write about finding a balance between the two. Was that something you were conscious about, not sacrificing one for the other?

Absolutely. In fact, the number-one priority for both Justin and me was for the whole journey we wanted to remain good, close mates. At times our relationship was tested like it had never been tested before, but the day we arrived in New Zealand we can happily say that we arrived better mates than when we left. And that's what made it a successful expedition. I know lots of other people go out with a common objective without the mateship or camaraderie kind of objective, but I've always found it beneficial for me and for my partners when I've been on trips. If you're going out there with a close group of people and a close group of friends, you can really dig in together when things are tough. You feel as though you're doing it for the greater good of the group.

Late on the afternoon of Day 34, pumping the manual desalinator, which provided us with enough fresh water to keep us going.



Justin Jones

I'll never forget one morning out there on the Tasman Sea where we hadn't slept all night. We were being buffeted around and in the morning I just wanted to curl up in a ball and die. I was so exhausted. Justin crawled over the top of me inside of the cabin and got out and started paddling. I was just so angry at myself that I had let my best mate down. He was out there paddling while I was trying to get some sleep. The sense of guilt just overwhelmed me. If I was out there with someone I didn't feel so close to and someone who I really wanted to live up to, then I don't feel I would have put that same pressure on myself.

Even with the closeness you developed with Justin during the trip, you had plenty of quarrels and times that you were at cross-purposes. Was that a natural part of the relationship and could you quickly recover from any disagreements?

I think that's one of the great things about Justin and me. We can be quite vocal, and we can yell at each other for five minutes and get off our chest what we're feeling, and ten minutes after we're just back to normal again. It's dangerous on these expeditions when you let things underneath the surface bubble and bubble for days on end. It's a lot easier to address a problem straightaway, and get it out in the open and try and deal with it from there.

When you and Jonesy get married, presumably not to each other, will this experience help you in long-term relationships?

I think so. A lot of married people have actually given us the advice that if you can put up with another smelly bloke in a kayak for 62 days, you'll have no trouble getting married to a lovely woman.

A couple of times you reached a point where you were ready to have the crossing over and done. At one point you were beating your fist against something and Jonesy said you were going to break your hand. You replied that would be just fine, because then you could go home. How did you get up to that point and how did you work past it?

The sleep deprivation was the hardest thing we had to deal with out there. On average we were getting about two to three hours of sleep a night. Then after 40 days out at sea we found ourselves going around in circles for two weeks where you get up, you paddle for 12 hours and you make 10 measly kilometers (6 miles) of progress. You're absolutely exhausted, you're hallucinating, and you have to cut down to half rations. I was in a place physically and mentally where I'd never, ever been before. I'm quite embarrassed and not very proud of the way I acted when I was in that state. All I wanted to do, all I wanted, was for the kayak to sink, for my wrists to break. I wanted to jump in the water and just drown. I just wanted the whole thing to be over. The pain, the suffering was right at that breaking point.

At that point you weren't thinking, "This is great, this is just why I wanted to be out here"?

No, it was funny. Every now and then when we called back to home, you know, once a week we spoke to our families from out there. A couple of times that's exactly what they said to me, "You wanted to be out there testing yourself. Deep down you love it." Those comments made me so angry, so frustrated, saying, "You don't know, you really don't know how bad it is out here!" It was just so frustrating to be hearing that from people.

So you went beyond that point of testing yourself that you thought would be a good part of an adventure?

We knew that the Tasman was going to push us to that level and we tried to equip ourselves with the skills, and with the systems around us, and the processes onboard the kayak to ensure that we could push ourselves past that level, but you just never know what that level's like until you've actually been there.

Did Justin ever get to that point?

He got down a couple of times but I've got to say in general he handled both the stress and scaredness, and the tension of being out there, a lot better than I did.

When you landed in New Zealand you both jumped out of the boat and your legs buckled. Justin grabbed you by the arm and hauled you ashore. That seemed like a symbol of a resolution of the imbalance that you felt at the beginning. In that moment that you came ashore did you feel you and Justin had achieved an equal footing?

Absolutely. We're arm in arm. We'd made our way up that beach and I've got to say it was that happiest day of our lives. Justin's legs were a little bit stronger because he'd been on the rudder the whole journey. My legs had just been pushing up a flat bulkhead and were quite dead by the end of the journey. For him to pick me up like that, it was a day I'll never forget.

How are you different now?



Rob Tucker

Heading into the morning sun (photo taken at 6:30 A.M.), 18 kilometers (11 miles) from New Plymouth, New Zealand with Mt. Taranaki in the background.

I'd have to say one of the big ways we're so different is we don't let little things agitate us like we used to. You get stuck in traffic for an hour or your toilet breaks, those aren't real worries compared to being out on the Tasman Sea and your desalinator has broken, or there are sharks coming up on your kayak. It really puts life into perspective. When something goes wrong in normal day-to-day life now I just laugh at it. I don't look at it as anything significant compared to when things went wrong out there on the kayak. It's also taught me, and I know it sounds a little clichéd, that anything is possible. It has really opened my eyes up. Five years ago, you know, I was working as an accountant, doing

a lifestyle that I really didn't choose. I just kind of found myself in it like a lot of people do. Now to have the freedom to be out there doing what I want to do, and absolutely loving it, it's like, cool! Sometimes you just have to choose and take action. **SK**

James Castrission, 28, worked as an accountant before committing to a life of adventure. He has led mountaineering expeditions around the world, run numerous ultramarathons and sailed to remote locations across the globe. He is currently a corporate motivational speaker. His book, Crossing the Ditch, is available through his website: www.crossingtheditch.com.au

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