

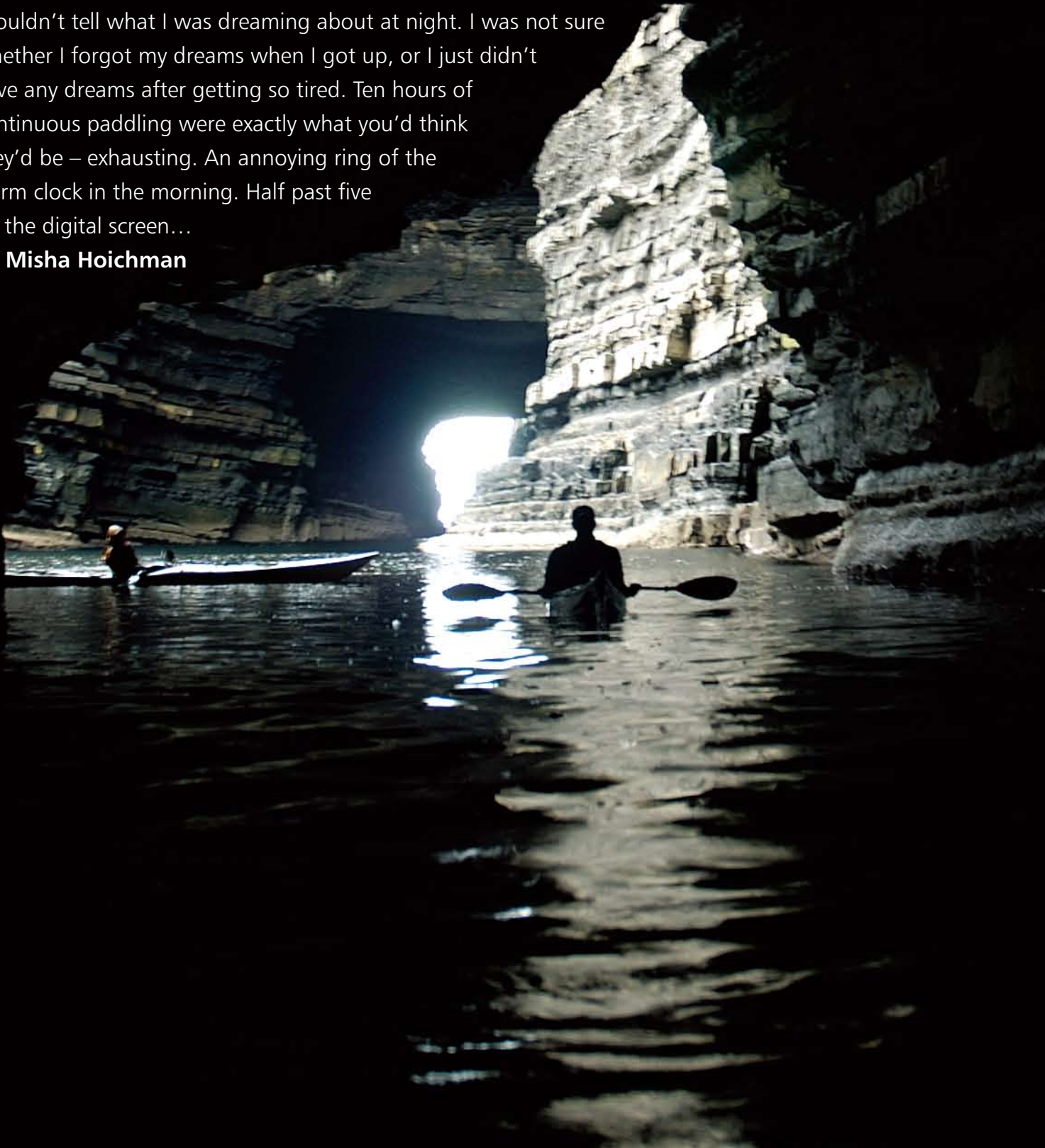


MEDITATION IN CELTIC

PADDLING AROUND IRELAND

I couldn't tell what I was dreaming about at night. I was not sure whether I forgot my dreams when I got up, or I just didn't have any dreams after getting so tired. Ten hours of continuous paddling were exactly what you'd think they'd be – exhausting. An annoying ring of the alarm clock in the morning. Half past five on the digital screen...

By Misha Hoichman





'Alon?' 'Yeah, I've heard it.'

We were stealing a few more precious minutes of sleep, lying wrapped in our cozy sleeping bags. Day after day, for more than a month, on the same small mattress, within the same sleeping bag, on the same pillow which is in fact a rolled fleece coat. Precious minutes of peace and complacency pass.

'Shall we get up?' 'Yep.' 'What about Gaddi?'

Gaddi joined me and Alon as an 'expedition trainee'. He was in fact as strong a paddler as us. His skills were enough to paddle in any seas that Alon and I were capable of dealing with. The main difference was that Gaddi did not have an actual experience of planning his own kayaking expeditions; he needed to appreciate what his limits were and be able to analyse his ability to handle a hazardous situation.

We started the circumnavigation together with Gaddi. After 18 days my wife Inna was intending take his place and paddle with us for another ten days. A kind of relay race. The last third of the circumnavigation was meant to be completed by just Alon and I.

'Gaddi?!' 'Yeah...'

A muffled voice answered from the neighbouring tent.

'We won't be waiting for you this time. 7:30 we are on the water.'

Gaddi was taking his time about doing things, but he was definitely getting better every day, organising himself more efficiently. We were already getting help from him in the daily duties, and not just in making dishes after dinner, which didn't need to get done very quickly and therefore was assigned to Gaddi almost regularly.

I was also a bit tired of rushing up, but somehow in every expedition we ended up pushing forward. We were not trying to break any records. On the contrary, we were paddling for our internal peace and had no

interest in showing the world how fast we were. We love long paddling trips that set us clear-cut goals. On the other hand, there were obligations that we had for our families, children, our working places. That's how we found ourselves committed in a way to our continuous daily progress. Thus most of our records were achieved fairly by chance. And Gaddi was just an innocent victim of all those contradictions.

7:45 am. With a bit of delay, we finally got on the water. That day we had a long crossing. We had to cover about 60 km in





the open sea waters from Ballidavid Head to Loop Head, on the south-west coast. It was not going to be easy, especially because the seas were calm that day. The wind and the waves are those that wake you up; high seas call for all your strength and concentration. This tension and sometimes even fear push the feeling of tiredness aside and make the time flow faster. It's only when you step once again on to firm ground that you realise how tired you are. The calm seas, on the other hand, can be compared to a straight and boring highway: first you enjoy the speed and the asphalt's quality, but after two hours of driving you are sick and tired of all the radio

channels, and after four hours you already fighting not to fall asleep.

After half an hour's paddle we encountered a fishing boat and received an updated weather forecast. We reconfirmed that the seas were going to be calm. The fishermen continued on their way, leaving us with a valuable gift in Alon's hands – a bag full of fresh mackerel, which he put between his legs to avoid having them stinking in closed kayak hatches. Gaddi and I could not refrain from bursting into laughter. A festive dinner would be our reward for a long paddling day: Alon would clean the fish and get it ready for cooking, I'd grill it, Alon would cook

white rice in a thermos and Gaddi... Gaddi, as usual, would wash the burnt frying pan and oily dishes at the end of the feast and get the dance floor ready. And if someone thinks of accusing Alon and I of tyranny and oppression, let me tell you that our frying pan is big enough to contain a meal for one person only, and Gaddi would be the first one to get the fried fish, while meantime I'd be cooking the next portion for Alon, swallowing my saliva for the next 15 minutes. That's why we were claiming to have a well developed set of social rules and regulations, systematically controlled by the domestic legal authorities.

We kept ourselves entertained for a while by discussing the anticipated dinner. This was followed by a set of jokes and comical stories from our childhood that we shared for another hour and a half. The land where we set off in the beginning of the day had almost disappeared in the morning mist. But in spite of the calm, almost oily seas, our progress had been only six miles. The GPS displayed a cheerless progress speed for which we should have blamed the current, the one that we were currently paddling against without paying attention to it. This current was marked on the nautical map, but according to the map and the tides table, the current was going to weaken and then to change its direction in the nearest hour and then start pushing us forward. The next three hours passed in silence. Lunchbreak time arrived. We gathered around Alon's kayak that hid in its day hatch the our gastronomic treasures:





tuna cans, Indian pittas, slices of fairly disgusting sausage and a chocolate bar – four bricks per paddler. While we were gulping our food, I took a look at the GPS once again and realised that the current was still pushing us backwards at the speed of one knot.

Five hours later, which made it ten hours all in all from the beginning of the paddle, we were still far from the shore, continuing our endless crossing. The current hadn't changed as it was supposed to. Gaddi's face was black as a cold-front cloud. It wore an expression of an eternal Jewish question: why is it always happening to us? Alon and I were truly entertained by Gaddi's mournful state. We were well familiar with this sort of situation. During our earlier expeditions, we had come across the same sort of situation quite often, and with the time we learned to take them easily. We learned to laugh at our hardships rather than gnash our teeth and wear a tragic expression on our face.

The silence was interrupted by Alon's heartbreaking monologue made with a deliberately strong Yemen accent: 'If you ask me, I actually hate kayaking! I never wanted to go kayaking. They told me it was going to be fun, I felt as if I had to agree, so I agreed. But I never agreed to paddle 12 hours a day!' Gaddi stopped paddling with an alarmed look on his face: 'Do you really think we have two more hours to paddle?' Alon nodded with his head and continued: '... 12 hours and a half! I hate this paddle. Now I could have had a pitta with zaatar and a juicy tomato with it, some olive oil to dip it in. But no! This crazy

Russian with his promises...' Alon pointed at me: 'He told me, come Alon, come. It's going to be fun. I am a weak man, so I agreed. Now I can see how much fun it is. And the six-meter wave that crashed on me in Tasmania, was it also much fun? It totally ruined my haircut.' Alon drew his hand along his shaved head. I couldn't hold laughter any more. Gaddi was laughing too.

Finally we approached Loop Head, and the end of our crossing. This tremendous rock protruded out of the sea as a falling wall. As we got closer, we discovered the actual dimensions of this wonder of nature. This massive wall looked like a mysterious

fortress facade or a huge monster's face plowed with deep scars and wrinkles. One of the vertical slots cut the cliff in two and formed a sea water passage surrounded by 100-meter walls. We were lucky to have calm seas that enabled us to safely enter the passage, which was so narrow that we had to paddle one after another. I was the first to paddle in, and suddenly the world around me looked entirely different. It was dark inside as the sun rays could hardly penetrate through the narrow slot between the cliffs. The dimensions of both cliffs could be compared to those of modest skyscrapers. The cliffs were not smooth at all – imagine yourself





a stone layer cake. Dozens of stores, long sills densely inhabited with birds, a building full of tens of thousands of little tenants of all kinds, sitting on the balconies watching the kayakers' invasion of their street. Each tenant is eager to express his opinion of the incident. Everyone is screaming, scolding and twittering. They make so much noise that I feel myself part of a protest demonstration. The cormorants decide to bring some order and swiftly dash into the water. They drop down with the heaviness of a turkey next to our kayaks, raising a fountain of salty drops all around. Goodness me, I had never been a subject to cormorant air bombing.

One after another we left the birds' temple, moving on along the cliffs, absorbed by the cliffs' dramatically changing shape. The chef who baked the stone layer cake decided this time to roll the stone in form of a strudel. This massive coil had an absolutely flat surface. Still shocked by what we have just seen, we faced another cliff shaped as the Arc de Triumph.



Was it an official entrance to the bakery that we had just visited? It was hard to imagine that all this amazing beauty was gathered together in such a small place. It felt kind of unfair. No one was tired anymore, and we paddled for another hour to the first suitable landing spot. The time flew rather quickly since we were still absorbed by what we had just been through. The reward for this long paddle was mackerel with rice, dipped in beer contributed by another kind-hearted Irish family on the beach. The bag of food they gave us also contained a milk package, a steak and fresh bread. Isn't that amazing?

Irish people are the most amiable. They brought us food, fresh fish, invited us to their homes to take a hot shower, gave us a ride when we went hitchhiking. They offered their help in spite of us being three unshaved men, whose faces were burnt in the sun, with a strange look in our eyes. I wondered what their welcome would be when Inna takes Gaddi's place. The doors of the houses would open on their own, and the Irish fishermen would be chasing us with their boats pleading us to accept their humble present of mackerel. We would be satiated with daily gourmet dinners and would kindly decline their offer and ask for their help to get to the nearest branch of McDonald's.

Inna arrived and brought good mood, calmness and a lot of smiles along with her. It looked like nature welcomed her with the favorable weather: finally we were enjoying tail winds that pushed us forward along the hazardous west coast of Ireland.

Alon and I were considering the eight days of Inna's leg a kind of vacation: after 18 days of paddling together with Gaddi we were in excellent shape, while the major part of Inna's training at that time was putting our two kids to bed in the evening and arriving at her office in the morning. In addition, Inna has a quality to her character – she often underestimates herself. When talking to her you get an impression that she has just heard about kayaking a week ago, and the 600 kilometers

that she solo paddled among the Greek islands and in Turkey is a kind of a joke. I am well familiar with this quality of Inna's, however she continues to surprise me every other time. This time she did it as well. First day she paddled only 25 miles, since she hadn't fully recovered from the night flight. Several days later, this tiny lady made an open sea crossing of 34 miles across Donegal Bay. She didn't complain at all and even decided to sprint towards the end of the crossing. Alon and I, two machos, often found ourselves biting our lips chasing after Inna's white kayak. What is the source of her energy?

Three of us were padding along the chain of islands at the west coast. All the surroundings were covered with the thick fog. We navigated with a compass. It looked as if we lost our way inside a cotton-wool cloud. Seagulls emerged out of nowhere, circled over our heads and disappeared out in the endless whiteness. Where did they come from? Where were they heading to? All of a sudden a cliff silhouette of an island appeared in front of us, as in a fairy tale. We shifted our kayaks from their course and proceeded along the shoreline. We could not even guess what the cliff's dimensions were, since their upper bodies were obscured by the fog. The seas were calm. I am truly fond of these cold and gloomy days, when nature is sober and alien. It emphasises the enormous power concealed within it. The thin layer of arrogance and excessive self-confidence that had formed around me during the earlier sunny days quickly evaporated. The obscure light and the darkened sea bring me back to the 'working state'.

Contrary to our expectations, Inna didn't bring us any luck with hot showers. Her gentle soul strongly refused to use any hints when it came to getting in touch with locals. She expected that our fellow man would understand our situation and generously give us a hand and a towel. Our fellow man wouldn't usually guess what we were longing for, therefore in most of the paddling days



with Inna we ended up with a chilling bath in the waters of Atlantic. So we didn't complain that much when Inna completed her part of the expedition and went back home to take care of the kids. It is true that she was a charming companion, and from now on Alon and I would brew up in our own sauce, but I'm asking you what is this gentle soul worth when the water temperature is 13 degrees celsius only and ordinary soap doesn't really get soaped in the salty water?

Alon and I were left alone. We returned to a daily routine known to us from the previous expeditions: early awakening, nine working hours, overtime if necessary, lunch breaks on the water, landing, dinner, sleep. According to our collective agreement, every seventh day was a paddle strike, except for the paddling weeks when there was a storm that forced us to make an unplanned break in the middle of the week. The stormy days are poorly coordinated and are hard to predict, just as the holidays in the Jewish calendar.

The two of us know each other well, from each other's technical level and decision-making abilities up to the amount of sugar in our tea and the level of sleeping mattress inflation. Likewise in the sea, we analysed quite similarly the potential of the seas and winds, and made the decisions that led us to the expected outcome, almost always...

Ireland faced us with a new challenge that we did not have before – strong tides that in some places were twice as fast as our paddling speed. This made an obvious impact on our progress. However, the most hazardous impact of these currents were big and messy waves, whirlpools and tidal races, all the phenomena that are more common to the river, but here they are part of the sea. There are certain factors that define the strength of the above-mentioned



phenomena: the wind direction in relation to that of the tide, the speed of the two, and the topographic character of the shoreline and of the sea-bottom structure. The speed of the tide – the determinative factor of the equation – changes according to the hour of flooding or ebbing. In other words, we were rather limited in predicting the strong tides of the sea. One could take a conservative position and stay on shore in case of doubt,

however the doubts were so many that if we did not take risks, we would have stayed on shore most of the time.

On that very day we planned to get around the north-eastern tip of Ireland. The magnificent and threatening cliff was speedily getting away from us. Our average progress was above eight knots, which was much beyond the regular speed. The strong tide amplified by the 35-knots tail wind pushed the





kayaks ahead. Our extraordinary progress made us give up the idea of having lunch on the shore – we wanted to take advantage of the remarkable seas. We realised that our festive paddle would slow down the moment the high tide changed to low tide. At that very moment the stormy wind blowing against the current would transform the sea into a dangerous boiling soup, with steep waves that would break deep in the sea. According to the tide table the change was about to take place at 4.45 pm. We didn't have much time left.

The time was 4 pm. We were still in the sea, planning to paddle another five miles up to the landing point. We noticed that suddenly the seas started rising up rapidly. The waves were up to three meters. I switched on the GPS and realised that our speed had dropped to just three knots. The tide must have switched before the time that was noted in the tide table. No delay in making decisions: we needed to paddle back against the wind, to the nearest point where landing was possible. It was scary to watch the waves, which got steeper every minute. The upper part of the wave was already breaking, and the wind was roaring in our ears. We managed to turn the kayaks 90 degrees, parallel to the waves; however, we could not yet complete the full turn. Every time the bow was rotated a bit, there came the wave that turned the kayak back towards the wind and the waves. We kept struggling for a few more minutes, but finally we overcame the waves. Now we had a one-kilometer paddle to make, under the salty shower of sea water that the wind tore out from the seas and threw in our faces. Our eyes were almost shut. Through narrow eyelid slots I could see the furious mountains of water that rose against us. I bent forward,

braced with a paddle to prevent a capsize and paddled on stubbornly, putting all my force into every stroke. The day after, the tendons would be inflamed as a result of an irregularly strong effort, but nobody thought about it that day. I found myself fascinated by the might and beauty of the beast named the sea.

No, the sea is not treacherous, it is noble and beautiful. It demands respect and does not forgive arrogance. It is certainly stronger than Alon and I. Its flicks are painful. Being in the sea is like playing with a satiated tiger: it allows you to pet it, and crawls with you on a carpet, but the moment it feels it is losing your attention it will rise against you. The sea has the soul of a living creature. It talks to you, helps you to better understand yourself: what material are you made of, what is your true love. It makes you experience the childish joy and the fear of death, sometimes both of them on the same day. The sea draws

and attracts you even after it has shown you its furious look. It's hard to rationally explain this attraction, but believe me it's a strong and sincere one. And what about us? We cannot resist its call to come again and get to know it anew.

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