

PADDLING HALIFAX HARBOUR

So Near and Yet So Far



The last thing most touring kayakers envisage is a paddle in a city. Most times it's not even possible (i.e., no water) and, even when it is, this is where most of us live and work. We often wish to escape, seeking out a more pristine and slower paced world. However, an urban waterfront is not without its attractions and the kayak provides a novel perspective, and even a degree of solitude in the face of the familiar. My own city is Halifax, Nova Scotia, and my first paddling trip here was also the beginning of my longest - a three month circumnavigation of the province in the summer of 1980.

Halifax is one of Canada's oldest cities. It was founded in 1749 as a military counterpoint to the French fortress at Louisbourg, on Cape Breton Island, and its sheltered setting and deep, ice free, waters have made it one of the busiest ports on the eastern seaboard. It has grown in size and importance over the years, becoming the capitol of the province and the commercial and cultural centre of the region. This has resulted in an extensive and eclectic waterfront, where poking about the wharf pilings and piers, dwarfed by high rises, cruise liners, and navel frigates is a fascinating journey indeed.

The Peninsula

The original city was built on a rocky peninsula, bounded by the Bedford Basin, the Northwest Arm and the main harbour. The Citadel, a massive early 19th century fort atop a hill in the centre, overlooks it all. You have several paddling options but for a day long journey I would begin at Horseshoe Island Park, at the apex of the Northwest Arm. Here you have parking and an easy launch. On the way down the narrow inlet you will encounter few other paddlers, but there will be plenty of sailing craft, as this is home to our two major marinas. The Armdale Yacht Club now occupies tiny Melville Island which once served as a prison during the War of 1812 (between Britain and the US). Thousands of prisoners were interned here and a granite memorial marks. Halfway up the Arm you can stop at the Dingle, a prominent stone tower several stories high, and climb to the top for a great view of the city.

At the entrance to the Arm, Point Pleasant Park covers the southern tip of the peninsula. This was Queen Victoria's gift to the city, a treasure of exotic trees, romantic trails, and harbour vistas, and the pride of its citizens. The park took a major natural hit a couple of years ago when Hurricane Juan made landfall and, within a few hours, flattened much of the forest. A passionate debate is currently underway among "Haligonians" on how to best nurture it back to health. At Black Rock beach you can land and explore the park.

Once past the park, residential suburbia gives way to an active commercial and industrial waterfront where the massive piers dwarf the kayak, and where a take out would be difficult, if not impossible. A large container terminal leads into the cruise ship docks which are visited regularly by some of the world's largest ocean liners (including the Queen Mary II). Halifax is also a destination for many Tall Ship regattas and there is usually at least one or two square riggers in town. Just offshore, George's Island offers great panorama of the inner harbour and is a perfect private spot to relax with your lunch.

Halifax's central core has followed the trend of many North American port cities, and has been substantially renovated. At Historic Properties, the boardwalks, trendy boutiques, trinket shops and restaurants are crowded on the warm summer days and evenings with both tourists and locals jostling about in the festive atmosphere. Occasionally they will glance down at the paddler floating so near, and yet so far. More often than not we will just go unnoticed.



Beyond the ferry terminal (where the frequent connections to Dartmouth require particular caution) public access decreases as we reach the HMC Dockyards. At least a few destroyers and supply ships from Canada's East Coast Fleet are tied up behind a string of buoys to keep curious boaters at an distance (especially since 911). We are now in the Narrows which are lined with more commercial piers, dry docks (where hulls and propellers of large vessels are on display) and the city's two bridges. Dartmouth seems just a stones throw away. It was here in November, 1917, that the explosion of the Mont Blanc, a French munitions ship, wiped out the entire north end in the deadliest blast in a city prior to Hiroshima. Over 2000 people perished. The narrows then open into Bedford Basin which was the North American staging area for convoys during both world wars. The boat slip in Seaview Cove Park is an easy take out and your car it's as close as a taxi call away.

The Outer Islands

The outer harbour islands are more removed from the summer bustle. This time you put in on the Dartmouth side of the Harbour at Fisherman's Cove, a juxtaposition of traditional fishing village and trendy tourist destination only a few minutes from the closest island. A short trip round the north tip of Lawlor's and you will be on your own. Land by the deserted wharf ruins and wander a short distance into the ragged spruce and difficult brambles. Here you will find several huge concrete foundations, the remains of a quarantine station which covered most of the island. Not so very long ago (until the early 1900's) fear of cholera and typhoid outbreaks forced thousands of immigrants to spend their first months here and hundreds made it no further.

The largest harbour island is McNabs, where human history has also left its mark. In Wreck Cove the decaying hulls of several fishing vessels can be seen resting under the clear waters. If



your time is limited you can land here and explore the island via the trails. Otherwise paddle around to the Halifax side (avoiding the southern route, and its shoals, except in the calmest of conditions) where two abandoned forts (one with the guns still in place) have been dug into the loose drumlin hills. These extensive fortifications guard the main channel and reflect the evolution of military technology from the early 1800's into the 20th century.

Meaghers Beach Point juts into the channel only meters from where cruise liners and container ships enter the harbour (with their high wakes!). In earlier years, deserters of the British navy would be seen dangling from a scaffold, coated in tar to make them hang longer, a stark deterrent to others who might have entertained similar thoughts after a particularly nasty voyage. In these more enlightened days a classic light tower welcomes incoming vessels. The interior of the McNabs has numerous trails which lead to the military ruins and abandoned homesteads (much McNabs was once cleared for farming, as well being a retreat for the affluent). It is now home to the largest Osprey colony along this coast. Although you can travel this entire route during one day, camping is permitted, and the distant city lights will provide a unique evening backdrop.

The more adventurous (and experienced) can visit Devil's Island, a treeless and windswept sentinel, and the last stop before Europe. The keepers are long gone and the houses are decaying but the legendary ghosts still stalk the island.

Safety Considerations

Halifax harbour is a busy place with many boats which are not in the habit of looking out for little sea kayaks. So be wary. Don't venture out in fog or strong winds (especially those which parallel the length of the harbour) and avoid shipping channels and the ferry routes. Carry a map (a topo or chart are preferred but a good city map will do fine) and be sure that you have all the Coast Guard required gear. This is one of the few places that you might get inspected. And, oh yes, you might want to avoid Eskimo rolling practice and skirt those areas on the water where you see the gulls hanging out and. Modern sewage treatment has yet to arrive in Halifax.

Text and Photos: Scott Cunningham

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