

explore



ERIK BRITS

CHRIS Bertish is no stranger to the Cape West Coast. He has taken part in numerous stand-up paddleboarding (SUP) races in Cape Town and Langebaan, including long-distance events. And Chris believed that with this experience behind him, he would easily handle 323km of SUP over eight days.

Preparing for The SUP-Crossing, a 3 250km journey across the Atlantic Ocean, he thought the eight-day paddle was small fry. By comparison, the West Coast would be but a training run, yet retrospectively, Chris reckons that crossing the entire Atlantic on his board would be easier.

He did the West Coast expedition solo, which meant that just over 50kg of equipment was strapped to his board, adding a significant deadweight. When the time came to set off, the surf at Cape Point was so heavy that Chris would have ended up taking the scenic trip to the reef, so he was forced to launch from Olifantsbos, 5km further on. Again, the surf was pounding, but the beautiful scenery buoyed his spirits and a light tailwind helped carry him out. Chris set off for Llandudno, but on trying to come ashore there he realised the surf was too big, and he paddled back to Sandy Bay. Although the surf there was heavy too, the day went without further hitch, and 39km were dispatched.

On Day Two he was greeted by howling wind, which fortunately died down but meant heavy seas again. He made it to Robben Island, but was exhausted after two days of paddling in heavy surf. The island doesn't normally allow stayovers, but Chris was beat. He leopard crawled, pulling his gear, up the beach into the bush, set up camp amidst a penguin colony and crashed. Rising at 4am, he was gone by daylight, his fleeting visit unnoticed.

Day Three was intimidating, with 52km planned to Dassen Island, and the wind howling across his line the entire day. With the distance and the tough conditions, it took 10 hours to get to camp. He arrived exhausted, and suffering from moderate sunstroke and sunburn, particularly on his corneas.

"That day is difficult to put into words," Chris reflects. "Only sheer will power, endurance and my never-give-up attitude got me there alive. Paddling over 50km in one day has rarely been accomplished on a SUP, never mind by someone carrying 50kg of gear on board,



EARLY BIRD: Chris Bertish was out on the water before daybreak each day.

Eight days up the windy West Coast proved a tough training ground

while paddling across a howling wind for 10 hours. I made the island by the skin of my teeth, just before the wind picked up further. It was about as close as it gets. A slightly stronger wind and I'd have been blown out to sea. When I made it to shore, I lay on my board for 20 minutes holding on to a piece of kelp, just recovering and trying to summon enough energy to get to the beach, where I passed out.

"The warden took one look at me and offered to let me stay and recover. Not that I had time for much rest before heading off early in the morning."

With his vision already impaired by the sunburn, he awoke to a thick fog along the coast. "Heading out from Dassen Island into the fog was frightening," he admits. "I had no sense of direction, so I had to follow my GPS and hope for the best."

But there was a silver lining: as the fog started lifting, Chris was greeted by a pod of humpback whales, which swam with him for

more than 40 minutes while he battled a headwind. Later, a frustrating sidewind pushed him towards land, where the huge swells that were smashing into the rocky coastline offered virtually no points to exit safely. The 55km to Langebaan turned into the ultimate battle, with the heavy swell making any mistake dangerous. Only barely making it past the treacherous rocks of the lagoon entrance, Chris finally got his first downwind run into Saldanha Harbour.

With his sunburn at its worst, the skin peeling off his feet, blisters on his hands, and his

VICTORY:

Chris arrives in Saldanha Harbour sunburnt and nearly sun-blind after a tough day.

vision almost completely gone, it was time for a rest day.

Day Six was another 50km paddle, past St Helena Bay, and as expected by now, there was a slight headwind all the way, but the company of his brother, Greg, for most of this stretch, was great motivation. On Day Seven the wind finally got the better of him. After messing up his planned route, it turned into an unassailable headwind and then into a crosswind that washed him up through huge, life-threatening surf. He ended up stranded, in the middle of nowhere – no roads, houses, food, water or help, just a deserted beach 23km short of his destination. A

concerned arrival party heard that he would not meet them at the planned campsite, and that he would be adding 23km to the 33km planned for the final day.

"I made the call, with one energy bar and one litre of

water remaining, to paddle the last 56km straight. At first light on Day Eight, I set off through the massive surf, straight out to a waypoint 12km offshore that I had set in my GPS. If all went to plan, by the time the devil south-wester picked up, I would be so far out that it would blow me almost directly into my final destination."

His anti-wind master plan worked, and on the last few kilometres of his trip he even had a tailwind. And after thinking they'd lost him on the last night, the support crew arrived in Lamberts Bay to find Chris with a celebratory beer in hand.

CHRIS BERTISH is one of the contenders for the Nightjar Adventurer 2013. To read the adventures of all nine contenders and to vote for your favourite, see www.nightjartravel.com/adventurer-2013. The awards ceremony will be at Cape Union Mart's Canal Walk Adventure Centre on May 8.



SCORCHED: Chris' feet got toasted.

