

UMOC's winter retreat to the Florida Everglades turned into more of an ordeal than we had bargained for; in fact, we were diffusing set-backs before the trip even started. Only two vehicles were needed to bring us to our canoe/camping adventure, but they were loaded to full capacity. Al, the trip leader had his van, and Karl drove his VW Jetta. Karl's carried 2 canoes, and Al's carried a canoe and a single kayak, to accommodate the 7 of us on the trip. (Al, Karl, Chris, Tammy, Nathan, Thomas, and me (Erik)) Some of the paragraphs below are numbered in order to tally the challenges we had to overcome!

1. Three days before we left, we had to change our destination from the Okefenokee Swamp to the Everglades, since southern Georgia had been through a drought. This was the first of a few disguised blessings, as we would have frozen our butts off in Georgia anyway.
2. We left Amherst in a snowstorm - the first of the year - and it had to be just as we were trying to get out of New England! Thanks to our seasoned drivers, though, we were soon safely past this hazard and were rewarded with the breathtaking views and scents of the natural gas refineries gracing the peripheries of the New Jersey Turnpike.
3. Then, as we were cruising down the left lane of Interstate 295 in western New Jersey, torturing Thomas with our Beavis & Butthead routine, Karl happened to glance into his rear-view mirror and uttered, "Oh my God!" I turned back just in time to see the kayak paddle, which had been lashed alongside the canoe on Al's van, fluttering through the air like a maple seed in the springtime, and landing gracefully in the median strip of the highway. We were able to pull over about half a mile further down the road to inform the oblivious van occupants about the recent turn of events. My plans for a mid-afternoon snooze suddenly evaporated as I found myself sprinting up the road and dodging three lanes of oncoming traffic to retrieve our wayward paddle.
4. The plan was to stay the first night in Norfolk at Sandy's, a friend of Al's, but it became so windy that the nice toll-taker wouldn't let us cross the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, and we got stuck at the Cape Motel on Cape Charles overnight. What the heck - ONE more hot shower before our little outing, and ZERO boats launched into the Chesapeake Bay from the roof of Al's van!
5. The next morning, the bridge was still closed, so we began the long backtrack north through the DelMarVa peninsula, around to Annapolis, where the next closest crossing was (an additional 7 hours of travel), but Karl's car immediately started hesitating and would barely run. We checked the spark plugs, and when he tried starting the car again, one of the plugs completely blew out of its hole like a cork out of a champagne bottle. As in an old MacGyver episode, we managed to retap the threads in the engine block, install an insert, and resecure the plug. The car worked, and during this 2-hour delay, the bridge had opened up to all traffic again, so these mechanical difficulties had actually saved us a few hours. By North Carolina, however, his car began misfiring again, so we found a Pep Boys in Fayetteville and had them replace the fuel filter while we ate dinner at Fat Daddy's. ("Get in ma belly! . . . I'm higherrrr on the food chain than you arrrr!") They claimed that the old filter was dirty, so we figured the problem was solved. But by Georgia, the car was up to its old hesitation tricks again, so we stopped at a real Volkswagen place in Daytona Beach. The mechanic took one look at the engine and

immediately found a ruptured gasket on a vacuum hose. After Karl and I bowed humbly in front of the man, crying "We are not worthy!", he replaced the gasket for free, and we at last experienced that elusive "fahrvergnügen".

We spent Saturday and Sunday nights at a really cool camping area on Long Pine Key, near the entrance to Everglades National Park and packed our food and gear for 5 days on the water. Sunday was also sightseeing day – break out those cameras, Hawaiian shirts, and Bermuda shorts! We got on the water Monday morning to start our 50-mile loop through mangrove, bays, rivers, open ocean, and swamp, spending the first two nights camped out on "chickies", or elevated, wooden shelters with outhouses. There was no dry land in this area, and even island exploration involved precariously balancing on webs of mangrove roots that were suspended above the brackish shallows.

6. Upon starting out, we discovered that the kayak had a big leaky crack on the bottom, which fortunately, we were able to repair (duct tape is our friend). Shame on us - we should have checked out the boat better before leaving Massachusetts, and also not chosen a white-water kayak.

7. Mild headwinds and opposing currents slowed our progress for two and a half days. At one point we could not advance against the tidal currents and had to pull over for a few hours, but finally we got through the mangroves and rivers and out into the Gulf of Mexico. On the third night we made it to a beach campsite - a beautiful place with palm trees, sand, surf, a full moon, and lots of seashells. We found some coconuts and did the 'Gilligan's Island' thing for a while. Some of us even decided it was time to liberate the grime that had accumulated on our bodies and took a salt-water skinny-dip in the Gulf.

8. Luckily, we had camped in a really nice spot, because we were stuck there for a day and a half. Just after beaching, the wind picked up, and the seas became so stormy, we could not launch the canoes on Thursday morning. All day we waited for things to calm down, but it never happened, so we strolled along the beach, ate, sunned ourselves, and determined who was to be eaten first if we got stranded there permanently. Finally at 4 o'clock Friday morning, Al said, "Let's go for it. We're leaving", a prudent decision given that we had to make up the lost day and paddle about 20 miles before the evening. There were still waves, but it had become possible to launch if proper use was made of the incoming wave crests and troughs. It was also my turn to paddle the kayak on Friday. Departure was well before sunrise, with Venus rising in the east and the full moon in the west lighting up the coastline and casting an eerie but beautiful glow over the whole bay. We managed to get off the beach and rode with following seas about 4 miles down the coast to a river inlet, where we stopped for breakfast until the tidal current permitted us to enter the river and the subsequent canoe trails which would take us to the end. With the kayak it was almost like surfing for 4 miles, and I even had a flying fish land in my lap! Way cool! It jumped back into the water before I could file it.

Anyway, we got through the river/lake area and eventually entered some shallow man-made canals, which are used as canoeing trails. Here's where we saw a few 8-10-foot alligators sunning themselves on the muddy banks. I also managed to paddle right over a 'gator that was lying on the bottom in the shallow murky water. There was a loud thump on the bottom of my

kayak - I first thought I had hit a log - as the alligator smacked its tail against my boat. I turned to look and saw the fanged monster swim out from under me, and I'm not quite sure where it headed after that, due to the rapid acceleration of the kayak as my paddle propelled the tiny, vulnerable craft forward. Reports were that it turned and hissed at me before swimming away. In the distance behind me, I could hear Tammy's hysterical laughter as my wake splashed against the sides of the water trail, followed by Karl shouting at her to "Just Paddle!" We enjoyed numerous other forms of wildlife too, from pink flamingoes, spoonbills, and herons to egrets, snakes, and dolphins.

9. We did not enjoy the spiders. (except for Thomas) The scariest part of the trail was the last section we were funneled into on Friday afternoon. The guidebook said that parts of the trail may be overgrown. Well, they were not joking. I recommend avoiding the Bear Lake portion of the Homestead Trail unless you enjoy getting scratched by branches, smelling methane, or want to get even with the arachnophobic member of your group. We got into a 4-MILE long section where we had to literally beat down branches and glide through roots and huge webs of spider nests, in a dark, murky, sulphur-and-methane-saturated swamp. It was obvious where the trail was, but passage was very difficult. We made it out of there within an hour of dusk, and I can't even imagine what a hell-hole that place must be in the summer. As it was, I paddled point, since I had the more-maneuverable kayak and was better able to beat down the spider infestations and break off a few branches. By the time this trail opened up near the end, I was covered with twigs and webs, and there were spiders crawling on my legs inside the kayak where I couldn't reach them. Stinking mud covered much of my body (my tank top could stand on its own after it dried), and my muscles ached from the lengthy battle.

An hour later, we reached the take-out. Al and Karl walked a couple miles to retrieve the cars, while the rest of us, by lantern light, pulled the boats out and prepared all of the gear for the long ride home. We loaded the cars, tied up the boats, and got a couple motel rooms in Homestead so we could clean up, eat, and sleep well before the marathon drive back to Massachusetts.

10. By Sunday afternoon, after an uneventful but long drive up the eastern seaboard, we had made it as far as Stamford, Connecticut. There, as a parting shot from the Goddess of Bad Luck, Karl's left rear wheel bearing broke, right on Route 95. This time our bag o' tricks was empty, and we had the car towed to a nearby VW place, which of course was closed. Karl and Tammy didn't have to work on Monday, so they stayed overnight and had the car fixed in time to drive back to Massachusetts on Monday evening. Everyone else piled into Al's van and returned to the arctic environment of UMASS on Sunday night. And so ended an exhausting but entertaining week!

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January 2000