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Paddling the Inside Passage Alone

by Sean Griffin



Susan Marie Conrad never meant to write a book about her solo kayak trek through the Inside Passage; that was going to be Jim's job.

Jim Chester was her mentor: a man who had kayaked the Inside Passage in 1992, and whose annotated navigation charts from that journey guided Susan, then 49, on hers. He had streamed the progress of her voyage to a global

audience on the Internet. At one time Jim had been her husband.

During the spring of 2010, in the midst of Susan's 1,200-mile solo kayak trek from Anacortes, Washington to Juneau, Alaska, he began having serious heart trouble, requiring multiple surgeries. Jim had been expected to recover, but did not. He died exactly two weeks after Susan's trip ended.

"When Jim died, that's when my whole life went haywire," she said. "I couldn't bear to look at 4,000 pictures from the trip. I didn't look at my journal entries for a long time."

But eventually she did. Inspiration came in part from a piece of laminated paper taped securely atop *Chamellia*, her 18-foot kayak. Printed on it were Jim's words:



“The conditions of the mind must interact with the conditions of the sea; the result is a good paddle versus a terror-stricken one.”

For the first time, she saw there was wisdom in Jim’s words that went well beyond kayaking. Hers had been a voyage of healing, of self discovery, of striving for the self acceptance that had eluded her during a life punctuated with episodes of self-destructive behavior. Moving forward required both attitude and adaptation, no matter what surprises or challenges life had in store for her.

Since Jim wasn’t around any longer to write the book, she began looking through the diaries of her journey, and sorting through the photographs, then sat down to write. The effort resulted in 2016 with the publication of *Inside: One Woman’s Journey Through the Inside Passage*.

The Inside Passage is a water route, traditionally connecting Seattle with





Ketchikan, Alaska, plied by tourist-laden cruise ships, salt-encrusted fishermen and container ships. As a result, people think of its waters as placid.

“Nothing,” Susan said, “could be further from the truth.” Long stretches, such as that connecting Port Hardy at the north end of Vancouver Island with Shearwater, BC, cross open ocean, where she contended with six-foot swells.

On a typical day, Susan paddled a marathon—26 miles, at a rate of 1,000 strokes per mile—an exertion that required her to consume 4,000 to

5,000 calories a day just to maintain her weight throughout her 66-day trek. But one day she went far beyond marathon distance. After entering Grenville Channel, a long strait through towering mountains, Susan found either mother bears and cubs, or fresh bear scat, at a succession of potential beaches suitable for camping, and ended up pulling ashore during a gale at an inadequate campsite ... after paddling more than 40 miles.

“The campsite I ended up at was going to be flooded during the night.

I thought about quitting; I was exhausted almost to the point of hallucinating. I was hypothermic. There were gale-force winds,” she said. “I literally had my hands on my radio and was about to call for help. What saved me was my rage. I was so pissed at how everything had deteriorated and how dire my circumstances were.”

At other times, the seas calmed and the air stilled. Beauty was everywhere: in the mixture of blue water, green foliage and gray-brown beaches; in

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the arcing fluke of a humpback whale surfacing beside her. In the stillness and quiet.

Yet it was life on the edge. Mortality was possible, and at times seemed too close for comfort. Rising seas; surging waves. Extreme weather and wild

animals. Most people wouldn't put themselves in such conditions willingly. So is she crazy?

"People ask that all the time. I think I was just very driven. I was very definitely a woman on a mission. That was kind of the mother of all goals."

What did Susan learn during her 66 days on the water? That she can do anything she sets her mind to. That she can live in the moment and be patient with it. And she learned how stubborn she can be—and that she can let go when appropriate. —

Excerpts from *Inside: One Woman's Journey Through the Inside Passage*



"Fear is a wily enemy, and as a woman paddling alone on the Inside, I entertained many fears. I feared big seas and swirling currents and whirlpools and boomers; I feared cantankerous waves that go 'HISS' as they break beneath my hull; I feared bears; I feared capsizing, hypothermia and drowning; I feared getting run over by big ships; I feared getting run over by small ships; I feared getting lost; I feared men with ill intentions; I feared what was at the other end of that snapping twig deep in the forest as I lay alone in my tent at night; I feared poor choices that could render me uncomfortable—or dead. I soon realized that my body could do this trip, but that my mind controlled it—a mind that was scared shitless at times."

"My kayak slid over the robust swells of Dixon Entrance, and my surroundings, I thought, were beginning to take on a different look and feel. The sea exploded against the cliffs, and I pulled harder on my right blade to move further out. Chamellia and I skidded around the next point, and there it was: an alive, wide-awake ocean."

Thinking of Kayaking the Inside Passage?

Here's what you'll need:

..... 1

Lessons—No matter your level of experience. Conrad is a kayaking instructor, but she still takes lessons from world-renowned coaches.

..... 2

Practice—Eskimo rolls may be fun to learn, but they'll never right a fully loaded kayak in treacherous conditions. Learn to re-enter an overturned kayak in calm water, then increase the degree of difficulty until you reach a level where you can capsize your kayak in a place like Deception Pass, Washington, where tides and currents are strong.

..... 3

Preparation—A kayak can only hold so much. Conrad spent a year dehydrating foods, and then shipping them and other supplies to remote post offices along the route.

..... 4

Equipment—Wetsuit, navigation charts, compass, flare gun, bear spray, VHF radio, SPOT satellite tracker and a GPS (not a substitute for navigation charts, but a backup, because electronics can fail). Conrad includes a detailed gear list as an appendix to her book.

Day # 45 - I'm in Alaska!!!

