

INTO THE UNDERGROWTH



Kayaking the Denison River

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UPON HEARING about MUMC's Adventure Grant at a club meeting one Tuesday in 2011, I went home and began looking for a river that seemed adventurous. I started my search with Tasmania, as this seemed to be Australia's Mecca for river missions. On Tasmania's paddling website, paddletasmania.canoe.org.au, I found the Denison River. A Denison River trip involves a bush bash to a lake, a 20km paddle across the lake, a 3km (about 13.5 hours) scrub bash to the river and then a few days down the Denison, onto the confluence with the Gordon River, a relatively (very) flat water paddle to Sir John Falls and then to Heritage Landing to catch the ferry to Strahan.

Back in 2011 I'd been kayaking for less than six months and wasn't quite ready for the Denison. A whole year later, I was in a different position. I'd spent pretty much all of 2011 and 2012 kayaking; I couldn't get enough of it! I'd also been on several other MUMC trips involving climbing, hiking, canyoning and rogaining, all of which gave me new outdoor skills and improved my existing ones. With Adventure Grant submissions due in early June 2012, fellow club member Ben Webb and I wrote an application for the Denison River.

In mid July 2012 we discovered that we were successful in our application and began planning our trip for December 2012. The months leading up to December saw us busy booking flights/ferries, working out the car shuffle (thanks, Dad), sorting out what gear we'd take (every gram was going to count—we were going super lightweight) and dehydrating food. This was on top of working, studying and getting out kayaking pretty much every weekend before the trip. We also fortunately happened to meet a kayaker called Jean Dind, who'd paddled the Denison back in 2008 and had some handy tips about webbing to tow our boats, lightening our load and potential portage spots along the river. Those few months were busy but definitely worth it.

ALL TOO SOON we were on our way and departing the access track in Strathgordon to reach Lake Gordon, the starting point for our trip, which saw us getting bogged...

Me: Maybe we shouldn't drive in there...

Ben: Nah, don't worry, it will be fi—
CLUNK...

And we were bogged. I had to run back to the tiny town of Strathgordon and ask for help from the Lake Pedder Chalet. The owner, Neville, came to our rescue to tow us out. Minutes later despite my pleas of "Be careful!" Ben got his car—affectionately known as 'Elvis'—bogged again. This time we got Elvis out ourselves (I don't think I could have faced Neville again).

Our first real test was the 150-metre bush bash to Lake Gordon. Could we handle the South West Tasmanian bush? We left camp at 7am and arrived some 50 minutes later at Lake Gordon, slightly dishevelled, and both glad to be in our boats regardless of the flat water ahead.

Settling into our boats, wearing hiking boots, gaiters and with backpacks over our laps, we couldn't get over the view that surrounded us. Mountains enclosed us from all directions and the rising sun sparkled across the still water—it was stunning. As the morning went on our whitewater

kayaker tolerance to flat water declined as the headwind increased. However we couldn't stop paddling, for if we did, the wind blew us backwards. So we carried on, navigating the inlets, occasionally taking a bearing (a recently acquired skill) until at last it was lunchtime and we arrived at the other end of the lake (20km later).

"The Denison showed us a world ... where you live by silence, the sounds of the river, wind, birds, the scenery, views and isolation."

Our bush bash began as soon as we got out of our boats. There were no flat spots and the sides of the lake were straight. Clipping webbing to our 19-kilogram boats and hoisting more than 10 kilograms of gear onto our backs (each) we began the drag up. We ditched our bags at a 'suitable' camping spot, then kept going—all afternoon

through the scrub, up, down, around, over, under, through. Our aim was to reach the ridgeline and follow it up to the first of two summits (481 metres and 526 metres). We didn't quite get to the first summit that day, but gained a fair amount of height before dropping our boats and hiking back to camp. Camp being our large, one-man tarp strung half a metre off the ground with our mats on bunches of tussock grass. We were too exhausted to complain.

The next day was similar to the previous afternoon except there was no paddling, just hiking. By 7am we were hiking with our packs and paddles back to our boats. Collecting 'Zeus' and 'George' (our boats), we began a tag-team process. Taking the boats onward, leaving red pieces of tissue paper as a trail and then going back for our bags and paddles. It was at this point we discovered the tape—those tiny bits of pink tape, found sparingly along the way, left by others who had been here before, lifted our spirits. Even though we were dripping with sweat, doing something halfway between rockclimbing and dog-sledding (us being the dogs), with our legs covered with leeches, we kept taking bearings and following those pieces of tape. However, even with the tape it wasn't easy. There is no



easy way to drag a 19-kilogram, two-and-a-half-metre plastic boat through that type of bush. At times I felt tears of frustration and exhaustion; however, there was no stopping. Having no access to water between Lake Gordon and the Denison River, aside from what we were carrying, we had no choice but to make it in one push.

Late in the afternoon, the Denison River Valley came into view at last. It was beautiful. We could finally see the Denison River, although a vast expanse of dense, wet, tangled forest and scrub stood in our path. However, there was some pretty good motivation to get to the river (aside from the rapids of course)—we would be able to set up camp and have supper. We'd already decided which of our dehydrated meals we were having that morning, and were pretty excited for lentil Bolognese and pasta! We took a quick breather and then launched ourselves down the hillside. Fortunately we came upon more tape and that became our guide through the undergrowth; crawling, pulling, yanking, dragging, throwing, until at last we hit the Denison River, nine hours

after getting up that morning. If I wasn't utterly exhausted or covered in leeches I might have danced with joy. Instead we both jumped and yelled in horror at the leeches and took a quick (cold) swim to get rid of them. Then we set up camp on a bed of moss and, barely noticing the rain, cooked supper before crawling into bed with muscles aching.



THE NEXT DAY the real paddling began! We'd planned a rest day but by lunchtime we'd had enough of the drizzle and there was no point getting our dry clothes wet. We packed up and left. That afternoon the first couple of hours saw us paddling long stretches of flat water accompanied by a silence broken up only by the faint trickle of tiny waterfalls down rock cliffs, the bubble of a stream as it entered through a dense bush screen or the splash of our paddles as they dipped into the water. That didn't last, though. Soon we entered Marriotts Gorge. Marriotts Gorge is tight with some

nice drops and must-make moves. It was so much fun!

The following day was a big one: we had the Denison Gorge awaiting us at the end, but first we had some flatwater paddling to do. This section was broken up by some small rapids and surrounded by one of the largest remaining stands of Huon Pine—the Truchanas Nature Reserve. This reserve was named after Olegas Truchanas, a photographer and environmentalist who dedicated his life to saving Tasmanian rivers from being dammed.

By 10am we entered the Denison Gorge. It had a few tricky rapids that we scouted before running. Mostly, though, it was 'read and run', until the gorge began to really tighten and the rocks in the river became more apparent. The flow also got stronger, and I found myself eddying out above a rapid where all the flow was funnelled into a tight chute with a boulder in the middle. Not long after, towards the end of the gorge, the river vanished through a series of strainers into the ground, becoming a kayaker's death trap. It was portage time and



two hours of it. I'm sad to say that both our boats left slivers of plastic all over the rocks, as they were lowered or hoisted up from tree anchors and we rockclimbed beside them.

Thoroughly exhausted after the portage, we got back in our boats and managed to miss the Denison camp and instead came to the Gordon–Denison confluence. It was late afternoon by this time. We had planned to paddle up the Gordon River to see the geological phenomenon of the Gordon Splits, however our progress was too slow. Instead we bailed. Leaving behind the hope of seeing the Splits on this trip, we turned back and set about finding a camping spot.

While Ben scouted the banks I sat in my boat, close to sleep, until I heard him cry out. A twig had poked him in the eye as he was returning through the undergrowth to his boat—and not just poked, it had snapped off, so that he had to pull it free of his eyelid. With Ben half blinded I had to take the lead. Paddling downstream, into a rapidly setting sun, I called instructions back to Ben. His limited vision meant that he could no longer see the logs or rocks just below the surface. When I was starting to get desperate I spotted a tiny beach on the side of the river and decided it would have to do. Not wanting to waste the setting sun, we quickly laid out our wet gear and then collapsed on the sand, enjoying the warmth.

There was one thing we'd forgotten though—the Gordon is dammed and apparently water is released in the evenings. With the sun almost gone, I got up to get my down jacket and suddenly realised our three-metre-wide beach had started to shrink. We packed up camp quickly—there was no time to faff. By the time we left, the beach had halved in size and we spent the next hour in the fading light with increasing anxiety trying to find a camping spot on the overgrown banks. Fortunately we came to a large island and set up camp as close to the middle as possible... just in case. I don't think either of us slept well that night, both wondering, *Is this island high enough?*



THE LAST DAY of paddling was another big one, not in terms of rapids and portaging, but more in the sense that it was a whole day of flat water broken up only by Sunshine Gorge and the confluence of the Gordon and Franklin rivers. As with Lake Gordon we paddled separately for most of the day. Ben prefers to take his time, while I just want to get the flat water over and done with. However we did pause together to have lunch on a sandy beach, this time laughing as we watched the water level



change dramatically as we ate. We paused again at the confluence with the Franklin River (which is a must-do on any serious paddler's list) looking upstream at the water flowing gently down to join the Gordon and imagining the rapids it held deep within its steep gorges. I was thankful for those who fought and saved it from being dammed some 30 years ago. However, it was the sight of the Sir John Falls landing that brought the biggest sense of relief. We'd made it down the longest stretch of flat water for the trip—26km of the majestic Gordon. We could finally put down our paddles, pull up our boats and rest.

The peace didn't last. Half an hour after our arrival, small fishing boats zoomed into view with the arrival of a Tasmanian boat club. We helped them tie up to the jetty, and while we were standing around chatting they offered us a lift. We did not hesitate. Neither of us had been looking forward to the next day of 20km flatwater paddling to Heritage Landing.

Settling in for the night, our boat friends were so welcoming and hospitable, even though we'd only just met. They offered us food, beer, a bed and their company. Something we were very grateful for after

six days in the wilderness. They left us the next day at Heritage Landing, but only after giving us lunch, tea and coffee.

I wish we could have stayed longer and kayaked some other rivers in the region or simply lived out amongst the wilderness. Instead we took the ferry back to Strahan, knowing that we weren't done with South West Tasmanian rivers. There is something very special about them.

The Denison showed us a world so different to the one we live our everyday lives in. A world where you live by silence, the sounds of the river, wind, birds, the scenery, views and isolation. Despite the long hours spent dragging our boats and gear through dense bush, the leeches crawling up our legs, the sketchy camp spots and the continuous drizzle of rain, we were happy. To be able to walk and kayak in a place where few people have been before us was an amazing, unforgettable experience. Each day brought something new: another challenge, another view, but always the serenity, beauty and encompassing isolation from the rest of the world. 📍