

Sea Kayaking **IN SICILY**

SMOKING MOUNTAINS AND FLOATING ROCKS!

Coach Phil Hadley heads to the Island of Vulcano for a volcanic canoe & kayaking adventure...

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Imagine a country shaped like a boot, imagine an island just off the toe of the boot, and another much smaller island, a live volcano in fact, and you have just imagined the Island of Vulcano, just off Sicily in Southern Italy

The story starts in November 2012 in Trieste, Northern Italy just on the Slovenian borders. My good friend Tatiana had asked me to go run some BCU courses for her and that's the first time I met Eugenio. Eugenio had come to Trieste to hopefully pick up his BCU 3 star sea award, he told us how he runs a sea kayak guiding and rental company on an island just north of Sicily. We got on very well, the paddling was superb and the evening socialising was great fun and although Eugenio passed his 3 star he complained about the cold weather so much, that at the end of the week he insisted that the next year's course should be in Vulcano - who was I to disagree?

So it was settled! Tatiana, Eugenio and myself set about organising a BCU Level 2 training and a three star sea kayak course for the following November. To run BCU programmes takes a little organising, the first thing was a second assessor for the L2, I asked my mate Ben Keen from the Lake District if he fancied a week in the sun in the autumn - he said yes!

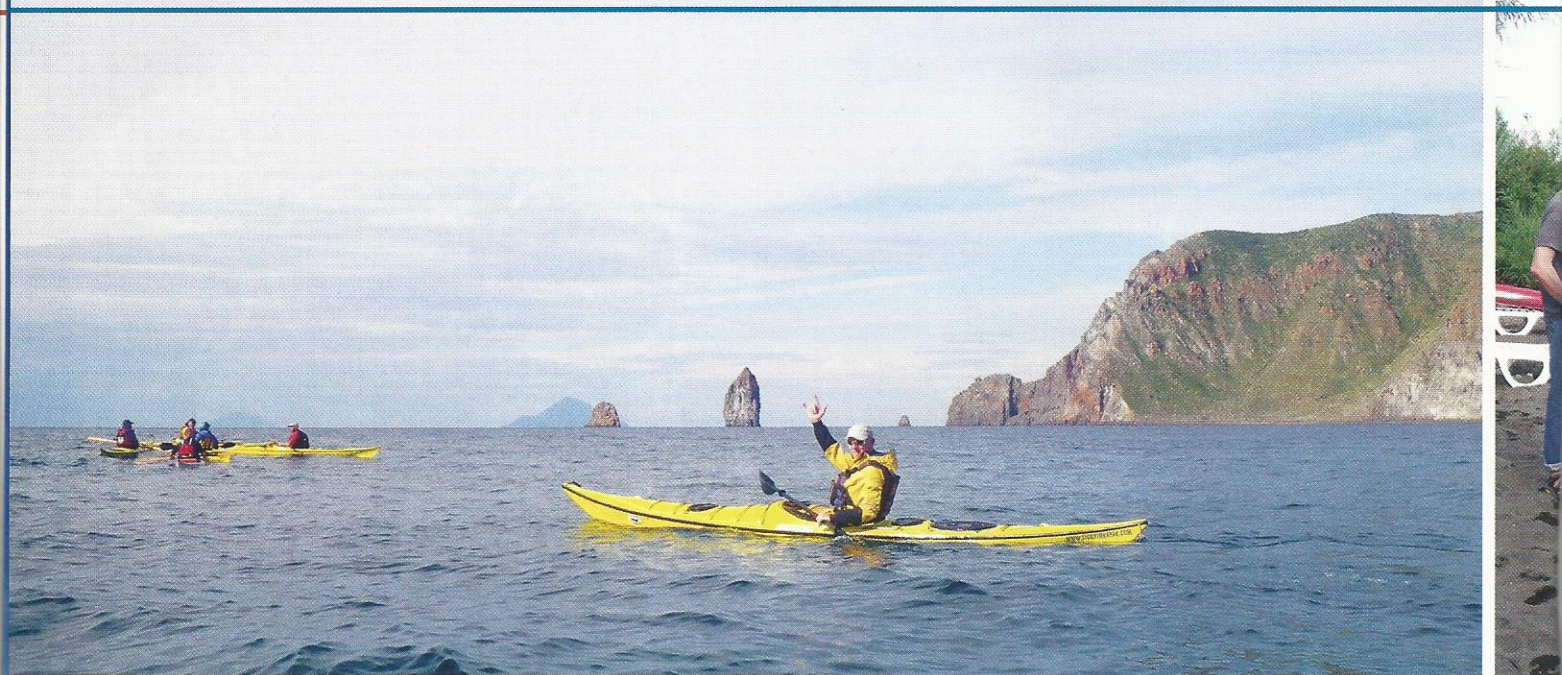
The next thing were open canoes for the L2, this wasn't going to be quite so simple! There simply aren't any canoes on Vulcano, or, I suspect, anywhere in Sicily! But since doing their L1 with me, the guys that were on the course had all become keen open boaters and agreed to bring their own boats. They are from Trieste. Go check out an atlas or Google maps right now! Just imagine the drive from the border of Slovenia, across Northern Italy to Naples and then a ferry to Sicily. Can you see that little island just North of Sicily? That's Vulcano, so another ferry needed to reach to there, all with canoes on the roof - these boys were keen!

CREATIVE LOGISTICS!

The logistics for getting myself there weren't simple either; the favoured airport for flights to Palermo for my dates was Gatwick, not an easy place to get to from Dudley! After a jaunt down the M1 and a mid-afternoon flight I arrived in Palermo too late for any ferries, so I get a message to take a bus to Dario's apartment. I've never met Dario, and he doesn't speak much English so the ensuing text message conversations were fun. Eventually I found Dario's house and was met by a German girl who offered to take me out to see the sights of Palermo, I was already loving Sicily!

Next day was a very early start, a half hour walk to Palermo train station, a two hour train ride to Milazzo, a five minute taxi ride to the port (the most expensive part of today's journey!) then a one hour hydrofoil ferry to Vulcano! Hydrofoils looks so elegant on the water, as though they are gliding across the surface, which technically they are, the one I boarded didn't seem very elegant, it was so loud inside I thought





hydroplane, and the vibration was threatening to dislodge my fillings!

I finally arrived in Vulcano in beautiful sunshine, the island is stunning, long beaches of black volcanic sand, palm trees and the overpoweringly awesome live volcano dominating the little port town. There are far worse places to be in November! I was greeted on the quayside by Tatiana and Mauro who loaded my bags into their car and we set off to the resort, Tatiana pointed out the thermal pools as we passed and I saw a topless woman strolling in the hot, steamy shallow water – I just knew I was going to love it here!

THE SET UP

The tourist season actually finishes around September so the resort had been shut down for a couple of months, but Eugenio had convinced the owners to open up an apartment block for us, unfortunately the disco, the pool and the swim up bar were closed, oh well you can't have everything I guess?

Tatiana's mother Savvi, affectionately known as Mammuto, was cooking as I arrived, no surprise, she's always cooking! She is a stereotypically Italian momma, always busy in the kitchen producing the most amazing meals for the two dozen or more paddlers who had turned up for the event. She also makes a strong alcoholic liqueur called licuoritzia, which I think is essentially grappa infused with lots of liquorice – it's delicious. Mammuto always produces a couple of bottles for after dinner and always makes a bottle for me to bring back home. After a sumptuous lunch we

took a stroll down to the beach to see the setup, Eugenio has his kayaks set on racks on a small beach made from black volcanic sand nestled into a break in the remarkable volcanic rocks in a secluded nook in the bay, pretty much sheltered from the prevailing southerly winds. There is very little tide here so the kayaks we were to be using were set right on the water's edge. He has a small thatched shack where he keeps

a kilometre over to Isola Lipari, beyond that is another crossing of about 4km over to Isola di Salina, and then off to the North East on the hazy horizon is the mighty conical flanks of Stromboli, constantly sending out a plume of smoke and steam from its live core – collectively known as the Aeolian Islands it's an idyllic situation!

The paddlers on the course had come from all over Italy, Sergio and Vincenzo from just over the water in Sicily, Toni from Turin, Riccardo and Gregario from Trieste, Nicko and Giulio from Rome, Marco from Bologna, Tatiana, Claudio and Mauro from Milan and Rolph who had travelled from Germany for a little winter sunshine paddling.

SUN, SEA & BUDGIE SMUGGLERS!

So the first three days were planned as a 'Three Sea Kayak' course and if anything the conditions were a little too idyllic, sun was shining, no wind and the sea was like oily glass. The smoke emitting from the crest and the flanks of the hillside on the opposite side of the bay was rising straight up. The forecast was for wind the next day, so I wasn't too worried about conditions and was looking forward to a day on the water in the sunshine. I'm always amused, and sometimes bemused, by the kit paddlers wear and today was no exception, we had half the group head to toe in Gore-Tex drysuits and the others in tiny 'budgie

smuggler' Speedos, I went for a modest middle ground! To be fair this wasn't too dissimilar from the recent weather at home, we had experienced a very mild and pleasant autumn and I'd been paddling off Anglesey just the week previous in short sleeves, but paddling in November in shorts and tee shirts is quite a treat!

"We walked back up the coastal path through stair rods of torrential rain, and the whole bay was illuminated by a spectacular display of lightning and the thunder reverberated from the natural amphitheatre of the volcano, it really was a spectacular display of Mother Nature showing her power."

When coaching I often bear in mind an old military saying that goes, 'Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted', which in layman's terms means don't be in too much of a hurry to rush into coaching people, so we spent the morning mooching around the bay, marvelling at the rocks tortured by pressure, heat and lava, and weaving around the natural playground they provided for us,



in my charge. Tatiana had recently passed her moderate water endorsement and was keen to become a three star assessor so we spent a lot of the time discussing the syllabus and the stages of skill acquisition of each paddler and comparing them to the standard.

RESCUE RANGERS

In the afternoon we decided to look at some rescues, sea kayakers' love playing at falling out of kayaks, Tatiana led the way towards the beach. We went to an area just beyond the breakers close to where I had seen the thermal pools the day before near a rock stack made from white limestone streaked with bright yellow bands of sulphur. Tatiana smiled and plunged her hands into the water, I did the same and was surprised at the temperature, and it was almost as hot as a bath! I then noticed the surface was bubbling and boiling, and when I looked down through the gin clear water I could see volcanic gasses bubbling from cracks on the seabed. What a fantastic place to practise rescues, the guys in the drysuits looked quite envious of the boys in the Speedos! We spent a very pleasant couple of hours playing there but I said that they would all need to do the rescues again in cold water tomorrow, it surely can't count in hot water, it's a British Canoe Union award after all!

FLOATING ROCKS

The other cool thing about paddling so close to volcanoes is the phenomenon of floating rocks! Every little bay is full of lumps of floating pumice and the black sand beaches are littered with the little lumps of magic, I was very excited by floating rocks and bought some back for my kids, it's good for the hard skin on your feet too according to my mom!

Just as we were getting off the water the wind started to pick up as forecast, the skies turned grey and black and ugly and the heavens opened, we walked back up the coastal path through stair rods of torrential rain, and the whole bay was illuminated by a spectacular display of lightning and the thunder reverberated from the natural amphitheatre of the volcano, it really was a spectacular display of Mother Nature showing her power.

There was one more surprise before we sat down to another spectacular meal courtesy of Mammut, Claudio it turns out is a bit of a yoga guru, so we set up mats in the corridor of the resort and attempted to bend our bodies into weird contortions, Claudio assured me it would do me good, I wasn't convinced! The best bit was when he made us all lie down and relax; I was snoring within five minutes. Luckily they woke me in time for evening meal



A large background image showing a person in a yellow kayak on a rough, white-capped sea. The person is wearing a life jacket and a helmet, and is holding a paddle. The sea is dark blue with white foam from the waves. In the background, there are dark, rocky cliffs under a cloudy sky. The overall mood is adventurous and somewhat dramatic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Hadley

Phil is a keen and busy coach who is based in the midlands. Phil spends most of his time moulding the minds of the new coaches. You can find him dotted around the UK and running level 1 and 2 coaching courses. Or running workshops at the Open Canoe Symposium, or off sea kayaking in the states. He's a keen whitewater kayaker too!

SURFING WITH SEA MONSTERS

Fortunately the next day the rain had stopped but the wind was howling from the South West, easy for us in our sheltered little cove, we launched and went through more skills. After a couple of hours we decided to paddle to the headland to see what the wind was doing to the sea in the channel between the two islands, I guessed it would be pretty rough. As we rounded the headland the waves increased, the wind funnelling through the narrow gap was turning the sea into a white streaked maelstrom, the waves near the shore were huge, and the monolithic

sea stacks were often disappearing in flumes of spray – it was a scary sight! Some of the more experienced guys were determined to get a little closer; I wasn't too concerned, so long as I stayed down wind in the quieter water I could pick up anyone who got into difficulties as they drifted back with the wind, and the wind driven current. I hung around with half the group while the brave went to play in the waves. It wasn't too long before Marco was testing his roll, a huge wave built from nowhere just off his bow and lifted his kayak almost vertical, he paddled hard but to no avail, and next second he was being back surfed down the face of the monster, he was pushed sideways and capsized, and then as the wave washed over his upturned hull he pulled off a lovely roll and was quickly heading back to the quieter water, his excitement satisfied for one day. The next casualty was Giulio, storms in the Mediterranean often produce very steep confused sea, there's not much fetch for the waves to become uniform, and one of these particularly steep waves pitched Giulio's kayak up, unseated him and dumped him unceremoniously in the frothing waters. Tatiana was soon at his side and had him back in his boat but the waves kept swamping his kayak, so Tatiana rafted with him and Riccardo towed them both towards the little bit of lee where I was sheltering with the rest of the team. I explained to Tatiana that this was a little beyond the usual three-star remit! It was a fantastic experience, even for the ones that just watched from a safe distance. With big smiles we headed back to see what culinary delights Mammut had in store for us this evening, after another stretch and snore session on the yoga mats.


HOT FOOTIN'

The next day the storm had pretty much blown itself out although the wind had now swung around 180 degrees to the North East,

making our little secluded cove a little more interesting to say the least. Eugenio explained that this wind was due to increase so we shouldn't attempt to land back here at the end of the day and instead land on the beach in the lee of the volcano. This was the last day of the three star and some people were keen to finish early to get ferries, so we landed on the beach where Eugenio met us and showed us where to stash the kayaks in the grounds of a hotel ready for tomorrow. This meant we were at a loose end for a few hours, so we decided to hike up to the top of the volcano. Now I'll paddle all day, but I'm not much of a walker, especially uphill so although I was keen to see the top of the volcano I was a little sceptical. As soon as I realised that Mammut and her similarly aged friend Carla were going too I wasn't so worried, they are both in their seventies and both smoke like troopers so I thought I'd be ok. Needless to say they were fitter than all of us and pretty much sprinted up the side of the mountain! It actually was quite a pleasant early evening walk up to the crater and the views across the Aeolian Islands to the north over as far as Stromboli were spectacular, and to the South you could see Mount Etna. The crater rim is hot to the touch and the steam that rises from the cracks in the rock brings a strong sulphuric stench from the bowels of the earth. The crater itself is particularly impressive. It is a fantastic way to spend half a day off!

ON COURSE

The next day Ben arrived and we were into a four-day Level 2 training course, this is the first level 2 that's been run in Italy, so it was very exciting. Luckily the weather had settled again so we had lots of opportunity to play with coaching styles, observation and analysis and other fun things in canoes and sea kayaks. Ben hadn't done a huge amount of sea kayaking before so he was very keen in the evening after the course to potter around and see some of the wonderful scenery around the island. What a fantastic way to spend an autumn week and did I mention there were floating rocks?

The logistics of getting to Vulcano take a little working out, but you don't need to take boats as Eugenio has a great fleet of composite and plastic sea kayaks and the stunning paddling and phenomenal scenery makes it all worthwhile. If you want to go paddle the Aeolian Islands check out Eugenio at www.sicilyinkayak.com, or if you want to combine your next BCU course with an Italian adventure check out Tatiana at www.tatianacappucci.it 

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To find out more about sea kayaking head to the Sea Kayaking section at www.canoeuk.co.uk/Articles/