

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Kayak the Kwanza*

Subtitle: *Source to Sea Along Angola's Longest River*

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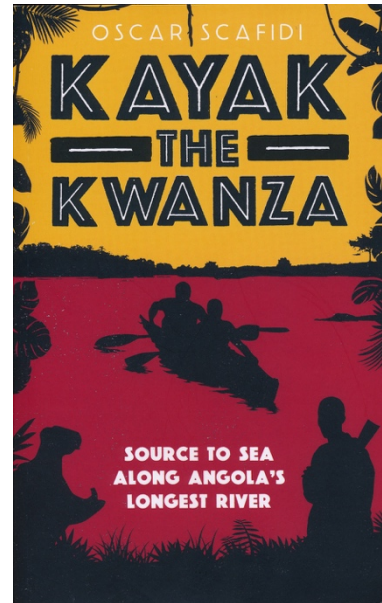
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Review: Paul Caffyn



In June 2016, two youngish English chaps, working in Angola, set off to complete a first source-to-sea descent of the Kwanza River, the longest river in Angola. As their 1,300 kilometre expedition would involve over 300 kms of portaging, the kayak of choice was a folding double, *Klepper Aerius II*, of early 60s vintage.

Their previous paddling expedience was limited. Alfie Weston, owner of the Klepper, had in 2014 paddled 220 kms of the lower river to the sea, while Oscar (the author) got some training on the Thames River and took a white-water safety course. As well as trying to gain an entry in the Guinness Book of Records, cyber coverage plus a film of their expedition would hopefully raise over \$10,000 for the Halo Trust - a non-government registered British charity and American non-profit organization which removes debris left behind by wars. In the case of Angola, this related to millions of landmines planted during the 22 year-long civil war.

Six months of planning and preparation involved quite a bit more than for a month long river trip in the USA or Canada; permits were necessary from three Angolan government ministries as well as notifications to provincial authorities. While Oscar collected kit and camera gear, Alfie mapped their intended route, using notes from his earlier paddle, speaking to local sources and satellite imagery. Halo Trust would help with food resupplies. The daily targets were set at 50 kms per day for paddling and 20 kms for portaging. To aid with portaging, a three-wheeled sand-yacht was included to carry their 105 kgs of kayak and kit.

The preface includes a two page excerpt from the *Arrested at Capanda* chapter when the chaps are rudely awoken and handcuffed, which is a rather good cunning plan to engross potential readers to buy the book and read on. The narrative text is well written, good descriptive writing of the on-the-water dramas such as evading rather territorial hippos, the torments of portaging long distances with feet that are grossly infected and serious pain kept at bay with codeine, finding overnight campsites that are free of marauding hippos and dealing with the local bureaucratic army despots along the way.

Descriptions of the heart breaking damage to the environment are well told; with variations on how the locals attempt to make a frugal living by using a garden hose to breathe while loading bags of river bed sediment which can be screened on shore for diamonds, to massive earthmoving operations run by the Chinese. Massive fires and former forests totally devoid of trees.

The history of Angola is well told, both from the days of regional tribal control, the so sad export of slaves to North America, to the pompous, cloying control of the wretched Portuguese government with insights into the exploitation of Angola's rich mineral resources, to the bailing out of the Portuguese settlers after the April 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, which then led to the 22 year-long civil year between the Russian/Cuban/Chinese support for the MPLA and the South African supported UNITA.

One of the biggest dramas was being caught against the barricade-like poles of a fish trap; the kayak capsized, wooden frames snapped and quite a bit of kit floated off down river. A potential end of

expedition disaster. But a local was able to fix the damage with, 'a few extra bits of wood, cut metal and a few rivets.'

Then approaching the last river dam, with an anticipated food resupply, and only 220 kms to paddle, the chaps were rudely awakened and arrested by the military. Despite providing the requisite paperwork, what follows is a nightmare of being incarcerated but unable to find any support from the Angolan government for finishing their expedition. Via a cellphone not found during searches, embassies are contacted and on the point of both being deported, a single phone call leads to their release.

The *Covert Expedition* chapter describes their desire to reach their 'finish line' at the Kwanza River mouth, dodging a police check on river poachers and carrying their *Klepper* over a sand spit into the Atlantic Ocean. A missing paddling/portage section from above the dam to where they launched on the covert bit means they do not qualify for the Guinness Book of Records but so what!

Although this was only a 32 day paddle, it is the difficulties the chaps faced. Not just with rapids, rhinos, bugs, blisters and crocodiles, but dealing with Angolans on the river banks, be they security forces, illegal diamond miners, farmers or fishermen.

Appendix 1 is a nine page fascinating brief history of Angola, while the next two are lists of equipment and medical supplies carried.

Downsides of this book are the sole, pathetic half page map while the cheap quality of the paper has led to very poor reproduction of the grayscale photos. A 'dear reader' page notes that funding for printing came from a reader subscription and that a 'beautifully bound subscribers' edition is produced along with an e-book (see unbound.com).

The rear cover notes that a film of the journey did well with film festivals (no mention of NZ) and their expedition raised \$25,000 for the Halo Trust.

Review: Paul Caffyn 28 July 2020