

# How we became the first to kayak the NORTHWEST PASSAGE



Words: Mark Agnew

Photos: Mark Agnew, West Hansen & Matt Jones

I looked over my shoulder to see a huge swell racing towards us. As it neared the shallows, it steepened and curled, threatening to break at any moment. Water is heavier when it's cold, and here in the Arctic in October, the water was nearly freezing. As the swell began to tower over us, it was like I could feel its added weight. The consequences of a mistake here could be deadly.

I called out to my paddling partner, Eileen. We readied ourselves, and as the wave picked up our tandem kayak, we put down extra power. Suddenly, we were surfing at breakneck speed. Moments earlier, tension had risen between Eileen and me. She was frustrated – she'd received conflicting directions from the other kayakers and me. But now, in this moment of hyper-concentration and danger, we aligned perfectly.





“And so, in June 2023, I flew to the Arctic to join The Arctic Cowboys. I’d never met my three teammates - Americans West, Jeff Wueste and Eileen Visser.”



### RIDING THE WHITE HORSES

I dug my paddle into the water to act as an extra rudder. Eileen deftly steered with the pedals. We flew down the wave. It broke, and we rode the white horses past Cape Bathurst and into the calm of the Beaufort Sea and safety.

I tried to shout, “We’ve done it!” but was overcome with emotion. I cried, and I cried, and I cried. My shoulders shook with sobs.

Almost four years earlier, I received a Facebook friend request from a stranger. West Hansen and I had no mutual friends. He was in his late 50s, and I was in my late 20s. He was from Texas. I was from the UK, and I lived in Hong Kong. I was sure we’d never met.

West had noticed I was part of a rowing team and wanted to connect. The team in question was planning to be the first people to row the Northwest Passage in a single season.

### THE ARCTIC COWBOYS

West was the leader of another team called The Arctic Cowboys. They planned to be the first people to kayak the Northwest Passage. Although we were rowers and they were kayakers, only one of us would be the first to complete the route using human power, with no sails or motors, in a single season.

We were rivals.



The Northwest Passage is the Arctic route that links the Atlantic to the Pacific. Explorers searched for the route for centuries. The most famous expedition is that of Sir John Franklin. His two ships (The Terror and Erebus) became stuck in ice; the crew resorted to cannibalism to survive. They all perished.

The ice that proved so fatal for Franklin is disappearing. It is retreating for longer each year, and the adventure community began to dream that the Northwest Passage is possible by human power, as it



West then posted on Facebook that he planned to return for another attempt in 2023. This time, he was going in two tandem kayaks and needed more paddlers. I tentatively reached out. I was not prepared to wait another year for a rowing team that may or may not go, and most of my friends had left the rowing team anyway.

To my surprise, West accepted my application.

And so, in June 2023, I flew to the Arctic to join The Arctic Cowboys. I’d never met my three teammates – Americans West, Jeff Wueste and Eileen Visser.

### THE AMAZON AND THE VOLGA

West and Jeff are old friends and have already completed two world-first expeditions along the Amazon and the Volga. They had both attempted the Northwest Passage the year before. Like me, Eileen had joined the team at the last minute, but she at least had the chance to train with the others before flying north.

They were taking a gamble that I could switch from rowing to kayaking. Each one had a CV of ultra kayak victories as long as my arm. In a real sense, I was a novice among experts.

We cast off from shore on July 2. The water was full of shifting sea ice. We naively thought we could skirt along the edge of the sea ice and then kayak to shore when we needed to set up camp.

is open for so long. There have been multiple attempts over the last decade.

### COVID-19

Covid-19 delayed both West’s kayaking and my rowing expeditions, so neither of us set off in 2021. Then, in 2022, my rowing team delayed the departure again. But West and the Cowboys set off. I wished them luck on Facebook, but part of me was jealous that they were finally starting. They would set the world first before we’d even taken a stroke.

As it happened, they only made it a few hundred miles before they stopped. Delays in flying the kayaks to the Arctic had meant they started too late.

“We were surrounded by Narwhal – the famous Arctic whale with a tusk like a unicorn. Ten or so lined up in front of Eileen and me. Wherever we paddled, they shifted to face us.”



### A THICK FOG DESCENDED

The ice extended for miles. A thick fog descended, and we could not make out land or how far out to sea the ice floated. So, we turned around. We planned to return to where we started and start again when the weather cleared.

But the ice had shifted and blocked our route back to the coast. In the fog, perspective was impossible. Sometimes, we'd see huge mountains and assume we'd made it back to land, only to realise they were small icebergs about 20 metres away. I once saw ten polar bears on a piece of ice hundreds of yards away. A few seconds later, my eyes focused – the bears were, in fact, ten seagulls just a few yards away. The optical illusions were mind-boggling.

We paddled and paddled, unsure how far we'd have to go before the ice offered a path back to safety. Finally, we reached fast ice – this was more permanent ice that was attached to the land. We spotted Inuit camping, and they helped us heave our kayaks onto the fast ice.

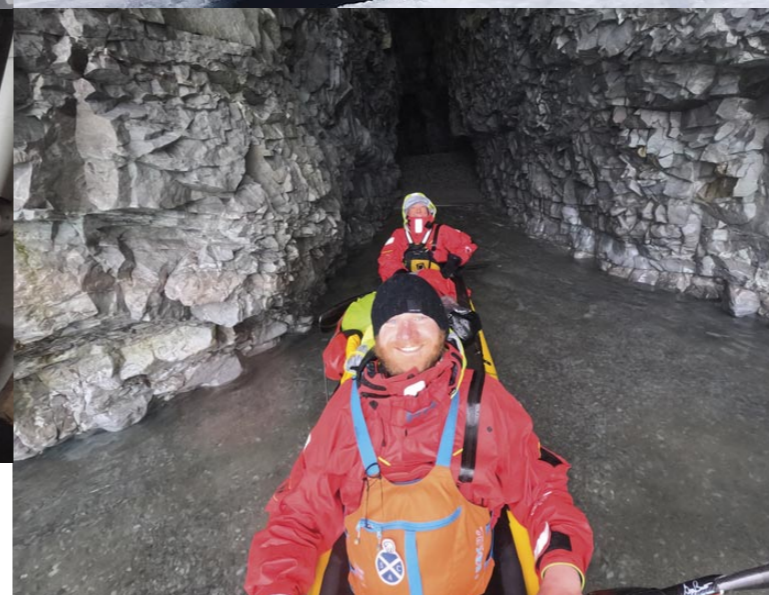
We then strapped our kayaks around our waists and began to drag them back to land. At one point, I stepped on thin ice and plunged into the ocean below. I remained calm, told the others to stay back, and they pushed the kayak's bow towards me. I held onto the bow, and they hauled me out. I got up, laughed it off and continued to drag the kayak forward.



### COMING TOGETHER

After launching back into the water for a short paddle, we finally returned to where we'd started, bedraggled and humbled but coursing with excitement. We'd come for an adventure and got one. This band of strangers was coming together. Even though we'd made no headway for all that effort, I loved the experience.

One glaring issue was my kayaking. I felt like an idiot. Why did I think I could keep up with ultra kayak champions? I'd switched from rowing at a few months' notice. There were worried glances. The team was supportive, but we all knew I had to get quicker, or we could not finish the Northwest Passage before winter returned.



We waited in a cabin for two weeks for the ice conditions to change and started the expedition again.

### PATIENT COACHING

Fortunately, my kayaking improved surprisingly quickly. With patient coaching from everyone, particularly Eileen, I was up to speed within a few days. There was always a discrepancy in the speed of my kayak and the others, but it was not as dangerously slow as it had been on that first night on the ice.

Over the next few weeks, we weaved through ice, were woken by polar bears and saw incredible vistas.

One day early in the trip, we tried to cover 45 miles to reach a cabin before a storm arrived. We had no time to waste and were reluctant to take breaks that weren't completely necessary. But then we saw splashing in the water, which made us stop in our tracks.

### SURROUNDED BY NARWHAL

We were surrounded by Narwhal – the famous Arctic whale with a tusk like a unicorn. Ten or so lined up in front of Eileen and me. Wherever we paddled, they shifted to face us. After about 10 minutes, one raised its head in the air as though it was inspecting us, and then, like a synchronised swimming team, they all rolled on their sides and disappeared. We whiled away many hours debating what the display meant and if the whales were communicating with us.

As the summer went on, the water became ice-free. We began to chew up the miles – 24 miles, followed by 34 miles, followed by 30 miles and so on.

Some days were tougher than others, but I didn't find the long distances difficult. We all just got up and got on with it. The days I found challenging were when there was a short weather window or the conditions were borderline. When it was unclear if we should go or have a shore day, it was more mentally draining than covering an ultramarathon distance. I spent those

days second-guessing our decisions. What's more, differing opinions about if the conditions were acceptable caused tensions.

We made it halfway after around 60 days. We took a planned break in Cambridge Bay and restocked our supplies. It was the end of August. We met other expeditions there – one group of hikers, another person canoeing and some sailors. They were all heading home. They warned us that the Arctic was no place to be in September, let alone October. But what choice did we have? We still had half the distance to the end of the Northwest Passage.

### TIME TICKING

We put our foot down with time ticking – we often did consecutive 40-mile days. Anything under 30 miles was now considered a short day.

Once, to reach a cabin before a storm arrived, we kayaked almost 40 miles overnight. The sky was absolutely clear. We saw countless shooting stars. We spotted a comet slowly moving across the sky, leaving a trail like a Christmas card. We saw the Northern Lights. We were so far north we looked south to see them. We arrived at the cabin just as the sun peeked over the horizon.

It was a special night, and it reminded me that even as we counted the days to the finish, it was essential to appreciate every moment of this unique adventure and cherish sharing it with West, Jeff, and Eileen.

The weather was becoming more hazardous and we spent six days in that cabin waiting out a storm. We anxiously counted those days, knowing that winter was coming. When the storm broke, we continued to push ourselves, ticking miles off.

With just a couple hundred miles to go, I felt so depleted that my body screamed out for food. Each time we covered over 30 miles, I had to dig deep to find reserves to keep moving. I was so hungry, but no amount of food seemed to sedate my famished body.

### NAVIGATING

I'd been in charge of navigating for much of the journey. I felt quietly chuffed that I had saved us an accumulation of days by cleverly navigating. I kept us on track through thick fog too. But as my physical energy plummeted, so did my mental energy. Moreover, I often hated navigating and tried to look up and enjoy the last few days of the journey instead of staring at the GPS saying, "Left, right" every few seconds. The combination of mental depletion and taking in the surroundings meant my navigation skills were beginning to slip, and I found myself aiming for the wrong landmark on more than one occasion in the last 100 miles, probably to the frustration of my teammates.

With just 89 miles to go, it felt like the end was in sight. But we still had a 40-mile crossing. There was a dubious weather window we decided not to take. There was meant to be better weather in a couple of days. But the forecast changed.

My heart sank when it said there was no good weather for ten days. We only had a few days of food left. I felt we'd messed it up completely by not going for it when we had the chance. So close and yet so far.

This was my lowest moment. I felt gutted. I went up to a cliff top and watched the sunset. I could make out

the far side of the crossing, silhouetted against the sinking sun. I took some deep breaths and calmed down. The value of this trip was not in the outcome but in the experience. This was a fantastic view that few people ever had the chance to see.

To my absolute relief, the weather forecast changed again and we made the crossing. It was a brutally hard day. By the end, we were all like zombies. Seeing the others suffer ironically helped me. I was worried I was the only one feeling this way and that they were cruising along uninhibited. But now that some of them seemed drunk with fatigue, I was given a boost. The communal nature of our condition spurred me on. We were in this together.

### FINAL PUSH

The next day, we made it to within 16 miles of Cape Bathurst, which marked the end of the Northwest Passage. The final push beckoned.

It started dramatically. We launched in heavy surf. As I dragged our kayak towards the water with Eileen in, one huge wave raced up the beach and caught hold of our kayak. It swept around and took my legs out from under me. I ended up face down in the water. After some panting to regain my breath, we launched again, this time without incident.

We kayaked towards Cape Bathurst. Just as the end was in sight, we entered the breakers. There was confusion. I aimed for the shore side of the breakers, where I thought it was shallow enough to avoid the surf. West and Jeff went behind the break zone and called us to follow. We turned late. We had to paddle back through the breaking waves to West and Jeff. As one wave broke over us, our bow went into the air, and half our kayak came out of the water; then slammed back down onto the surface. If we had flipped there, there was no helping us.

We were safe. We were behind the breakers. Having made it out of the danger zone, I assumed we would continue north until we found a piece of water that wasn't breaking. But West decided to surf down the waves towards the cape. I told Eileen to turn back out. She was caught between two directions. Momentarily, we were side-on to the waves and again in a high degree of danger. Seeing West and Jeff begin to surf, we turned back again. The confusion was costing us precious time and putting us in harm's way.



### FOLLOWING WEST AND JEFF

But now we had a plan. We committed to following West and Jeff. Eileen and I had been kayaking as a pair for almost 100 days, and in this moment, all our shared experiences mattered. We focused, relying on each other. We had no choice but to trust each other absolutely. We paddled hard and surfed in an exciting melee of white water and crashing waves.

The Northwest Passage had required a great deal of grit and determination. This was the first moment it required a high degree of skill and concentration. Even in these last seconds, completing the passage would take work.

### WE HAD DONE IT

We sped down the waves and exited the passage. We had done it. We were the first to kayak the Northwest Passage and complete it by human power, with no motors or sails, in a single season.

As I cried, it was not for the adrenaline of the last few moments. It was for the years of dreaming and planning, the months away from my wife and kid, and all the times I never thought I'd start the Northwest Passage, let alone finish. It was catharsis.

We then kayaked another 16 miles to a campsite. We experienced a storm. I had to dig the back of our tent out from the snow in the pitch dark. We then kayaked another 34-mile crossing to an abandoned airport to be picked up and to end the expedition.

### 103 DAYS AND 2,000 MILES OF PADDLING

It was 103 days since we were dropped at the ice edge. It was almost 2,000 miles of paddling. The news caused a sensation in the UK, where the Northwest Passage had been a national obsession in the 19th century. I was on the BBC, ITV, the Times and hundreds of other outlets. I was even awarded European Adventurer of the Year: <https://paddlerezine.com/mark-agnew-european-adventurer-of-the-year/>



I am booked up with talks to corporates, schools and kayak clubs nationwide.

The validation feels great, but it is fleeting. When the media moves on, only three other people will truly understand what it was like up there – West, Jeff and Eileen. Without them, I may have never started the Northwest Passage, and I certainly would never have finished. If I put too much emphasis on the world first and the expedition's outcome, my joy would come and go until the next success. If I remember that adventure is about being in nature and sharing those experiences with my teammates, my fulfilment will last a lifetime.