

# Paddling from Montauk Point to Block Island

BY KELLY LAFFEY



The sun started to rise just as I was driving east passing Wölffer Vineyards. Thankfully, the temperature did too.

I had mulled over the idea of signing up for the Block Challenge—an 18-mile paddleboarding event from Montauk Point to Block

Island organized by the nonprofit Paddlers for Humanity—all summer, but had just signed up a few days prior, and I was feeling nervous.

When I hit the Stretch, I realized I had time to stop for coffee before driving to the Lighthouse, our launch point. 7-Eleven was crowded at 6:20 a.m. Caffeine in hand, I wondered if anyone there would see me in the water in just over an hour. The coffee and humidity calmed me down, as I was thankful for a hot day when chances were high I'd fall in the water.

Upon parking, I made friends with fellow paddlers who provided encouragement. As it turns out, many others join the group on a whim, seduced by the opportunity for a unique adventure and bolstered by encouragement and donations from friends and family.

We headed down to the launch area, about a quarter-mile walk from the Lighthouse parking lot. There, Lars Svanberg from Main Beach Surf & Sport showed me the board he was graciously letting me borrow, an 11' 4" Recon ocean-going SUP. The boards and kayaks were spread out along the beach, a sea of colors and excited paddlers against the backdrop of the Lighthouse. We received final instructions that we were to paddle out about 300 yards to the *Kimberly*, our lead boat, where we would then all gather and, at the sound of the *Kimberly's* horn, begin our trek northeast to Block Island.

At 8 a.m., we were off. Sitting in the water, with the Lighthouse to my right, I finally allowed myself to be fully excited for the adventure ahead. I was not the most in-shape person at this event, and I was fully prepared to bring up the rear. But I couldn't believe that I was about to check this bucket list adventure off of my list.

The first leg of the trip was the most difficult, as the currents whipped around the island to make for a gnarly chop. I figured it would flatten out once I was past the Lighthouse, and a fellow paddler confirmed that suspicion as we neared the first checkpoint. All paddlers stopped and gathered around the *Kimberly* about once every hour to refuel with water, Gatorade and snacks that the crew threw down at us.

The weather was perfect, and we could see Block Island during our entire journey. As the waves became more of the rolling variety, I stayed standing for the majority of the trip, and truly enjoyed every moment. There were times when I was swept to the front by the jet skis that patrolled the entire group. Travelling at a speed far faster than a paddle, the water became a beautiful blue blur. The *Kimberly* played music, I realized when I was first swept, and I tried to stay as close to her as possible during the journey. Soon, the lighthouse faded into the distance, the radar tower became an indistinguishable figure, and the dunes and trees of Block came more into focus.

The hours flew by. This was the most physically intense thing I had ever done. But it was also the most fun. Though I began to feel the physical effects of the paddle toward the end, never once did I wish for the trip to be over. And soon, we gathered at a buoy that marked the entrance to New Harbor, Block Island, indicating that there was a mile left to go in the journey. The stop was scheduled so that all 50-plus paddlers would arrive in Block at one time, as an empowered, cohesive unit.

And just like that, it was over.



Arriving in Block Island

The feeling of accomplishment was overwhelming. And it was time to celebrate. With mudslides and a barbecue and high-fives. And the knowledge that we had raised the most money ever for local children's charities in the 10 years of the event.

Turns out, all of the encouragement I received prior to (and during!) the event was founded. I could do this. Many thanks to all the people who donated to my cause, and to Dan Farnham, Scott Bradley, Lars Svanberg, Ed Cashin, and Fred Doss for organizing and putting on such a memorable event. Until next year!

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