

KAYAK THE KWANZA



Following his time in Equatorial Guinea, Oscar decided to embark on something a little more challenging than research. With his friend Alfie Weston, Oscar attempted a record breaking feat – to kayak Angola's Cuanza, or Kwanza, river, from source to mouth, a journey of over 1000 kms.

The journey aimed to raise awareness and funds for the HALO Trust, a humanitarian charity who work to clear landmines and the debris of war so as to create a safe environment for some of the world's most vulnerable communities. As of July 2016, Oscar and Alfie have raised nearly £13,000, an exceptional achievement, made more exceptional considering the dangers they confronted along the way. Over the course of their 1000km journey, the pair survived rapids, hippos, crocodiles, diamond mines and waking up staring down the barrel of an AK47...

Here is their story, told via the brief updates they were able to send home.

5th June: the adventure begins on World Environment Day.

9th June: authorities dropped us at wrong entry point to kwanza; struggled through reeds for hours. managed 11k; river looks clear tomorrow...saw first crocodile.

12th June: 56k Saturday, inc. delay portaging kayak past wooden bridge. Saw first Hippos! Heard music and singing from nearby villages at camp.

13th June: Sunday 50km, fish dinner from a local fisherman. Saw two hippos and a 3m croc... Camped near a very vocal hippo!

15th June: 53.5k Tuesday... clear day, no croc or hippo! Kayak through big forest fire. Only 30k (and first set of rapids) to Kuito bridge.

15th June: Klepper Kayak sinks in rapids.

17th June: Camping in a military base by the river after an 18k hike. Hopefully our repaired Klepper parts arrive tomorrow from Kuito!

20th June: 30k kayak and 11k trek with gear. Camp by rapids. Dando town tomorrow for beer! Bought new shoes from illegal diamond miner's camp.

22nd June: 32k yesterday inc. 5k in the dark! Now in Sakanjala, North of Dondo. Saw mongoose in forest and met some Mauritanian diamond merchants.

23rd June: A fun day hanging out at a diamond mine with the Congolese. Day cut short by three notorious local hippos who wouldn't get out the way!

24th June: Chased up a tree by hippos. Soaked walking kayak through waist deep rapids. Camping in abandoned diamond mine.

26th June: Awkward on the kayak now as Alfie was pro leave and Oscar pro remain!

28th June: 50k day lots of rapids and only 2 hippos! Camping by stunning waterfall tonight. Next stop: Capanda dam!

29th June: Good news: we made it through all rapids and around waterfall that recently killed some South African kayakers. No more hippos!

29th June: Bad news: still 40km to Capanda dam with no current to help us and Alfie isn't feeling great after being munched by insects today.

30th June: Woken at 12:30 am by AK47 assault rifles shoved into tent. Dragged out and handcuffed by local police forces. Spend night at police headquarters in medical storage cupboard with three armed guards. Next day transported back to Melanje, 135 km in the wrong direction. All possessions confiscated, including clean clothes!

1st July: We are being forced to return to Luanda by SME (Immigration) and the Ministry of the Interior. They have confiscated our passports and sent two officers to escort us back. No explanation as to why, or what happens when we get to Luanda. Hoping they give our passports back, but at this stage we wouldn't be that surprised if we were re-arrested! Currently 60km outside Luanda.

2nd July: Free after 8 hours of negotiations thanks to Carlos at the British embassy in Luanda.

3rd July: The journey continues in secret, with radio silence on social media.

➤ *We headed straight back to Alfie's in Luanda, repacked our bags, and early on Sunday 3rd July we drove out to Dondo, to the next navigable point on the river that we had been heading to before our arrest.*

We kept a low profile and did 25km of paddling on the Sunday, 70km on Monday, 68km on Tuesday then a final 40km on Wednesday, camping in isolated areas and avoiding security forces as much as possible.

There were a couple of tense moments heading through checkpoints (which is a bit ridiculous, as we have done nothing wrong, and were even cleared of doing anything wrong earlier in the week), but we could not afford any further delays with Angolan officialdom so best to be cautious. It was three nights of getting munched by mosquitoes and the last 20km of the journey were hell, with a strong headwind and some big waves. So big in fact that we nearly sank in the last 1km of the journey. However, we just ploughed on and kept thinking of that delicious can of Cuca beer waiting for us on the finish line!

The Ardinian would like to congratulate Oscar and Alfie on their excellent achievements. To learn more about their cause and see the area of minefields that your donation would clear, go to www.kayakthewanza.com and click on 'donate'.