

Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

On the 11th of July 2013, 16 kite surfers set out to cross the Torres Strait from the tip of Queensland to Saibai Island (3km's off the coast of PNG).

I was lucky enough to be one of them.

I remember my kitesurfing friends talking about the trip they had planned, I was even in their email circle, but I passed it up thinking they were crazy.... I'd never do something like that!

4 months later the trip was all planned. They had a goal... not only to be the first people to kitesurf across these waters but to also raise awareness and money for the McGrath Foundation.

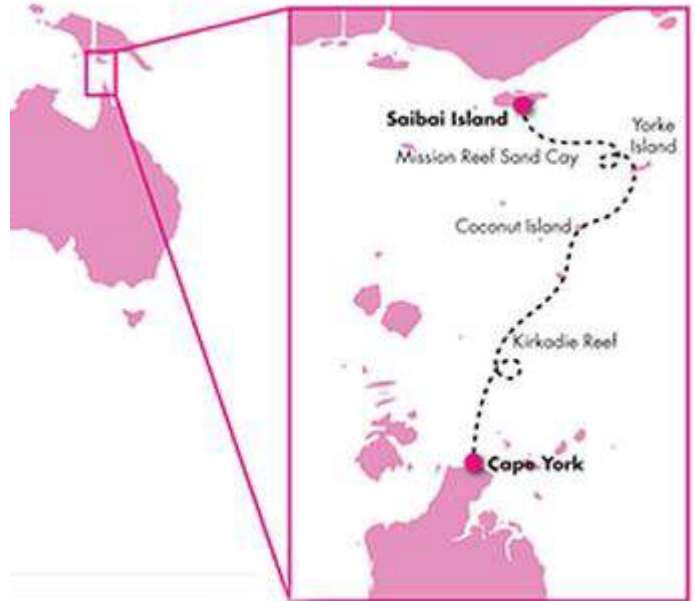
(The McGrath Foundation is a charity to raise awareness of breast cancer and early detection in young women and also provide support to people suffering breast cancer in Australia).

I'd been working in Fiji for the month when I was approached by the group for sponsorship from Zephyr Kite Tours and they also asked me to join them in the crossing as there was an injury which left a space on the team.

I said "No way ... I've not kited more than ½ hour in one go in years"!

Ironically, that afternoon, I had planned to take my crew on a 2 hour kitesurf; a 6km down-winder through the waves. On the way, I thought about what it would be like to kite for 7 days straight covering 280 km's - the predicted distance, in shark and crocodile infested waters. Also how my body would take the punishing trip and how I would mentally prepare...

And why I'd do it?



FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HER LIFE
JEN WILL...

- Wear PINK
- Kitesurf QLD to PNG - 280km over 5 days
- Educate Torres Strait women on breast cancer
- Go on a tour she has not organised,
- Raise heaps of \$ for the McGrath Foundation,
- Embark on the biggest challenge of her life!

What about the Crocs you say??? Once a Zoo keeper so been there done that!

PLEASE SUPPORT AT TORRESCROSSING.COM

My best friend has been fighting breast cancer for the last 4 years. I taught her to kitesurf 10 years ago and we've been best friends ever since. I realised it was time for me to give something a go that was totally out of my comfort zone. Kiting isn't; I've been doing it for years, but facing fear, following others directions,

Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

embracing the unknown and a bit of physical pain definitely is! I wanted to help my friend and others, I wanted to know what it might be like to feel hardship and pain... I wanted to empathise.

So I committed to the trip but joining the team late, I knew very little of what preparation they had been doing and what we were about to embark on. Subsequently, I had less than 2 weeks to prepare for the crossing.

In the end 10 out of 16 of us kited the entire distance and raised over \$70,000 for the McGrath Foundation. Here is the story of my personal journey kitesurfing across the Torres Strait.

DAY 1. We'd arrived at Bamaga; the tip of Australia, the night before and been fed an amazing surf and turf dinner 'on the house' as a donation to the McGrath from the owners of Loyalty Beach camp grounds and slept well. We knew the winds were too strong across the Strait for our support boats, crewed by local Torres Strait Islanders from Masig (York Island), so it gave us a chance to find a good launch spot and test all the gear.

We found a great beach that would be perfect for kiting... but we had to clamber across hundreds of meters of rocks and ocean cliffs to get there.



We were kiting with an extra 10-15 kg's of weight than we normally would due to our equipment; flares, EPIRB's, inflatable buoyancy aids, hats, rashies, leggings, wetsuits, sunnies, water and food.

That evening, thankfully, our boats arrived safely with all crew except one as it had broken down half way. Being one boat down immediately put our safety at risk and meant the others had to work even harder. It also meant we would have to leave some of our gear behind to compensate.

Being a tour guide myself, extremely safety conscious, and a control freak...I did freaked out! 16 kites, 280kms of shark and crocodile infested open ocean with not enough boats! Arghhhh



DAY 2. After unloading all of our excess gear, half the food, some water and a lot of our bedding, we set out to kite the first leg. A last minute change of launch spot to enable the helicopter and film crew to film us, meant we had a new super tricky launch.

This offshore launch spot was gusty, intimidating, felt croc-y and was not what I expected based on the success from the day prior. Reluctant, I left my take-off till the last minute to see if, and how my team mates got out. Being the smallest of the team, I'd chosen to take my own kite; a 7m wave kite (not entirely suitable for long distance

Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

upwind runs) but it was as windy as the day before so I chose that one again. Nearly everyone else chose to ride the 9m Blades.

We were fortunate enough to get a whole lot of HOT PINK 9m and 12m's Blade kites, paid for from our sponsor's myNetFone & express made & shipped in time for the journey by Blade themselves. We even got giant set of boobs screen-printed on the canopies!

Most of the crew succeeded in getting out in the offshore winds, through the wind shadow, between the Island and around the 'Tip' and were waiting but a few of us just couldn't get through the gap. I tried and tried, but my board was too small, as was my kite and the tides had changed for the worse. In the end, I saw the other less experienced guys get into trouble. I made a decision to cut my attempts short, get in the boat to help the others, so the main pack could set off. We had a 4 hour leg ahead of us and they had been kiting idle for an hour already.

In the end, too many crew were in the boats, it was getting late and the first attempt was called off.

10kms upwind from the launch, we slept on the beach for the night – the beach we had practiced on and knew was a good spot to leave from the day before.



DAY 3. Up at dawn, we were set for another pumping day of wind. Again choosing the right kites for the conditions and getting 16 kites organised was like herding cats but eventually we got going.

We were asked by our Torres elder and support boat team captain; Songhie Billy, to splash water across the border when we entered into his territory out of respect for his people and to remember the slaughter of his ancestors by the whites long ago.

Passing through the islands of Dolphis and the Tip was like the gateway to our adventure. 20kms off

the coast of Australia, an armada of hot pink kites set off on the adventure of a lifetime.

The seas changed from 1 – 2m and back again, different tides, wind shadows and reefs. After 4 hours, I was totally knackered. Not only physically, from going on one tack most of the time, but mentally exhausted as well.

We had a plan to stick in pods of 4, but trying to find your Pod & Pod leader when everyone had the same kites was impossible. I also was the smallest, not very 'kite-fit' and pretty unprepared for this long first leg.

Our team leaders had GPS's and the bearings, but we were in the middle of the ocean, with nothing in front, behind or beside us, for hours. I had dropped back and to get upwind and closer to the remaining armada was getting more and more impossible by the minute. There was no room left in the support boats as we were one boat short and there were another 5 kites who unfortunately had to bail this leg for various reasons.

I started to make silly mistakes and as I edged harder, my thigh's burned more. I started falling in the water and the tides were taking my board away, fast. I was seriously scared and tired... I wanted the boat.

Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

Thankfully (in retrospect), when I finally decided to give up and get in the boat, they told me there was simply no room and I had to keep going. Without GPS, Songhie told me that our sandbar island was just downwind and not far away.

Sadly, I didn't believe him. Our kite leader was km's upwind and ahead and he had the GPS. That's who I was meant to be following. But I had no choice and I got back on my board and kept moving forward. In the distance I saw something... it was a small pole on the horizon, this I knew had to be our destination... it was in fact; down wind and not far away. It gave me a bit of hope, and from here on in, I felt like I might be able to do this.



We landed in Kirkade Reef after 80km's and 4 ½'s hour of tough kiting, exhausted and happy.

Leg 1 was done. Our reward... freshly caught lobster, sunshine and rest.

DAY 4. After an interesting night trying to sleep on a sandbar in winds up to 25 knots, we were up before dawn, to set off for Coconut Island.

My confidence in my riding was low. I'd had one failed attempt at the Tip and a near-fail the day before. I wasn't keeping up wind with the others and I felt trapped with no escape route, except to kite forward. I adjusted my foot straps, bandaged my cut toes, taped my blistered hands, covered my sunburnt lips and took off – hoping that all my years of kiting experience would not fail me today.

2.5 hours and 55km's later we arrived at Coconut Island. After a dodgy GPS reading, we travelled an extra few km's back downwind (after busting our balls to make ground upwind to meet the GPS bearing) and eventually made it to the little Island in the Torres Strait.

The small community of Coconut Island welcomed us to their school and we had a great time teaching the little kids about kiting and trying to explain why we had these hot pink kites.

We had simple luxuries at the local community hall with a toilet, a tap and a kitchen. We still had to



Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

sleep on our board bags and a hard floor but we had a roof over our heads and a great meal cooked for us by the local volley ball team.

DAY 5. You guessed it... up before dawn again, packed and ready to launch at the northern tip of Coconut Island. The team encountered a few small setbacks due to fatigue and inexperience, but I was ready, set and feeling confident. We had two legs to get through today, but the seas were getting flatter and I was getting fitter.

This leg was my favourite. We had a 3 hour leg to get to our little pit stop island of Yaouk then a short leg to Masig (Yorke) Island.

By now, I had the feel of these different styles of kites. I had fixed the lines and made my board ride upwind properly. It was still a workout and difficult, but I knew we were getting more support boats from Masig which was comforting, and I also had more faith in the boat drivers, as this was their territory.

Our lunch break on Yaouk was wonderful. It was first chance we had to see and appreciate these beautiful coral atolls and untouched reef, but not for long. We had just ½ hour here as the Masig Islanders were expecting us and we were already 3 days late.

Caught up in our excitement of nearly 'being there' most of us played around in the smooth water off this tiny island and then got abruptly nailed by the wind shadow. We had forgotten the wind rules and neglected to think, but again, we got out of our temporary pickle and all made it to Masig Island.

I literally got goose bumps when I spotted Masig Island in the distance. I knew we had nearly completed the crossing. As we got closer to the land, there were people on the beach waiting for us, including all the school kids and they all had pink balloons and flags and banners reading "Welcome to Masig Island and teaching us about breast cancer". It looked amazing and we felt so special and welcomed. For the 1st time in my life I loved the colour PINK.

Initially our entire team was given specific job for the tour. Geoff, our leader, thought it important for everyone to have a purpose. My job was to be a shared pod leader with Jason, but after my mishaps at the beginning, I didn't feel comfortable or strong enough. My other responsibility was to liaise and educate the women on the Islands about breast cancer and our cause.

This was our boat drivers' home. Eight Masig watermen had lead us this far to safety across unknown 'kiting' waters and we were welcomed like family onto their island and into their village.

In true Torres / Aussie style, the village put on a huge feast for us with local lobster, turtle & prawns in the town hall in front of the much anticipated State of Origin Rugby League match!

After the game we slept like kings and queens in luxury! Real beds in holiday accommodation.

DAY 6. We had planned a lay day for day 6, a day to get to know Masig Island, educate the locals on breast cancer and relax, but we were already late to our final destination and we couldn't afford to take the day off, so we prepared to set off again. Little did we know it would be a tedious day on the land.



Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

We had about 100kms downwind to still complete and again, the unknown ahead of us. Masig was also our only stop with a connection to the outside world and the internet (even if it was dialup speed).

Our boat drivers had gone walkabout back with their families after a tough time at sea with the crazy kites. Rumour had it, they didn't want to do the next leg across Warrior Reef though Moon Passage to PNG as they were scared of standing waves, pirates and bandits.



We were all concerned with what was next. Some of the crew looked up flight prices off Masig, I'd wondered the same. It was like an episode of Survivor, groups of people forming alliances, fear mongering and gossip spreading, conspiracy stories and plotting.

All this talk fuelled our fears. It was getting late in the day and we still hadn't left yet. The boats were out of the water, some of the kites had gone for a 'free kite' while others stayed back to save energy.

By 4pm we finally had a plan. To knock over a few km's of the last long leg and get to the next island for the night.

It was dark and stormy when we were on the beach and with kites in the sky ready to go, our leader Geoff gave the call... "If the last boat isn't here by 5:15pm we bail and go tomorrow"

This would mean we'd have over 100km to do in one day, dead down wind. None of us wanted to do either – launch late at dusk in storm clouds or do a longer distance the next day.

True to form, Geoff took the chance and we left as the last boat arrived at 5:30pm.

40kms and 2 hours later we arrived on the beautiful little island of Dalrymple, practically in the dark.

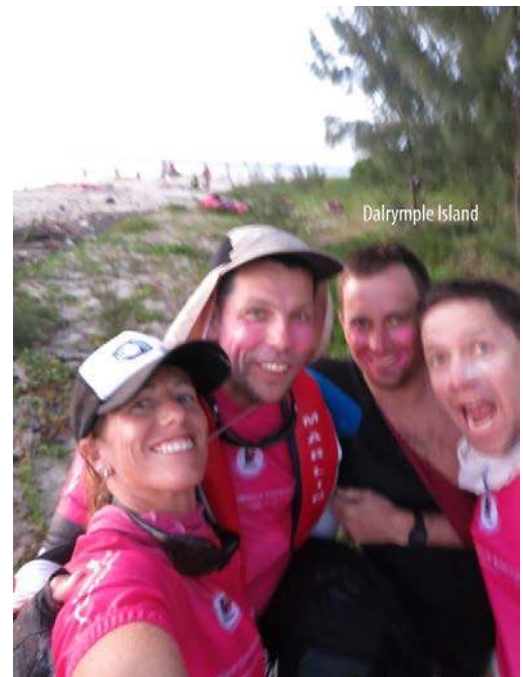
I had a realisation here...

I'd been kiting all these days, across what I was told were shark and croc infested waters. I'd not sighted any but had been afraid of them the entire time. Apart from the 1st day, I'd not fallen in the water once. I knew how to kitesurf. I'd been kiting for 13 years but I was still afraid of death by croc or drowning at sea... which the chances of, were actually quite low. I had a GPS, flares, EPRIBS, tracking systems, boat support, a pod, an armada and support crew. Everyone knew where we were, we'd been on TV, the news and social media.

I was afraid of dying, the chances of which were so small... plus I'd volunteered for this!

Others are not so lucky though and some people's fears are founded, but not me, not now. I was kitesurfing and alive and achieving something far greater than I ever thought I would. I didn't realise at the time, but it was huge... and more perpetuating than I ever could have imagined.

The positive affect of this crossing, not only for the McGrath foundation but to me personally, is one I totally underestimated.



Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

Arriving on Dalrymple was amazing. I'd heard there were carpet snakes everywhere and I was finally relaxed enough to focus on something else, even if they were carpet snakes. As it turns out, Dalrymple was Songhie Billy fathers' home island and where he grew up. We didn't see any snakes but I liked the idea of them – kind of like Pi's floating Island with the meerkats when he got stuck at sea.

DAY 7. Up at 4am, tents packed, breakfast of champions again of baked beans, tuna and corn chips, boats packed and kites in the sky, we were ready to go.

We had picked up our 5th support boat from Masig Island and eaten all the food. This was our last day and last chance to cross the finish line.

We had to bear dead downwind and find the small Moon Passage that is the only way boats can pass through. Our main concerns were the tides and the swell. If they were not favourable, we would have to skirt around Warrior Reef, approximately 50km east, almost impossible for our stamina, petrol and food supplies or we would not be able to pass and fail the mission.

The previous year, 10 kilters attempted to do the same trip. Unfortunately they didn't make it due to the winds and lack of time, but they did actually kite most of the way. They had done this last leg to another Island slightly more east to our final destination. Three of the guys were with us again and told us horror stories of 6-8 hours of kiting and fatigue. They made that leg, and funnily enough, they were here to do it all again.

By this stage we had no spare kites left due to some being left behind & others being torn on coral. Then when we were getting a group photo just before we left, we all hear a loud....

'Pffffffffffffffffffff' ... And every kilter knows what that means.

Randomly, it was Phil's 12m that had spontaneously sprung a leak. Phil had done every leg so far and had just this one left to complete the journey unassisted. This is where the Legendary John Rothe gave up his kite and rode the boat again allowing Phil to complete the crossing.

This time we were all determined to stick to our 'pod structure' for safety. So far, on all legs, our ability to 'stick together' and within reach of support was impossible. Our tactics changed for this leg as we had learnt it was easier to keep the boats flanking the whole armada keeping the 5th boat available for the film crew to cruise, as they wished.

Staying inside the 4 support boats meant we had to kite a maximum tack of about 300m each side, dead downwind. The winds were getting slightly weaker each day and today we had about 15 knots. I had stuck with the 9m Blade kite the entire way, since my failed 1st attempt on my own kite. Most of the others were comfortable on the 12m's, including 2 other girls who were doing well to hold down the 12ms.

Personally, I think Jess and Christelle worked the hardest of the team, always pushing forward on big kites. Their strength and determination inspired me the whole way to keep up.

For these two girls and most of the group, this tour had started out as a 'holiday' for them. It didn't take them long to realise it wasn't the kind of relaxing, tropical island paradise kite holiday they had planned.



Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

So after an hour kiting, we had no land on any horizon. The waters were still dark blue and the pod structures and armada were working well. The leaders stopped every 20kms and waited for the back pods or weaker kites. Thankfully I was in a back pod so I wasn't needing to bob in the water waiting for too long!

After 1 1/2 hours, we finally came to Warrior Reef. We were expecting either shallow waters or standing waves, thankfully we got none of those, we had just an awesome smooth passage through the reef and we were dead on track with the GPS.

We'd also heard that as this is the only passage through the reef for miles and it's where the sharks hang out waiting for passing fish. So imagine my fear as I passed through the passage and saw a HUGE big grey 'thing' splash away just under the surface!

It was no time or place to stop. I couldn't confirm what I saw with anyone or if they had seen it too, as we always had to keep a safe distance away from each other so we didn't tangle. I thought of that 'thing' for the rest of the journey and wondered if I would see more.

As we had lighter winds and a downwind run, I was pretty underpowered. I had to work my kite a lot and I was on a very small board. Pete had the right board for these legs – a directional surfboard. He had a ball, cruising heel to toe side unstrapped. I was wishing for my surfboard but had to give it up in our gear amnesty, when we had to shed some weight at the start.

Riding my board & kite with all my skills I went toe side, heel side, switch heel side, under grip, over grip, kite looping, down looping, carving – anything to stop the monotony and the fatigue and to get to our final destination in one piece and quickly.

Past Warrior Reef we were blessed with deluxe butter smooth sailing and aqua blue waters.

3 hours passed with no sight of land. I'd worked out how to eat a muesli bar at sea without littering the little tear off piece of plastic – a small but worthwhile accomplishment. In true French style, Christelle had cracked a boiled egg on her board rail and ate it on the run. One of the team – who will remain nameless admitted he even managed to go to the 'toilet' on the run. But now in hindsight – this may have been the scariest thing in water for the whole trip!

After 4 hours, we could finally see land. Once we could see land it made everything ok. We had a goal, a destination and I could work out how much longer I had to go. By this time, only one of the 4 GPS devices was working but the boat drivers knew this area and we had our final landing in sight.

I was elated, excited and relieved to spot Saibai in the distance. I thought we would be landing in an hour. But unfortunately not, we had way more to go because the village of Saibai was on the opposite side of the Island. Finally after 2 more hours, we'd made it past the east side of Saibai and were headed straight for the PNG coast.

I'd planned to get in the boat once we'd crossed the QLD/PNG territory border. Wasn't that what we were trying to achieve... to cross the Torres?

By half-way through this epic leg, the water turned brown and murky. My old fear of sharks now turned into a new fear of crocs. At one point the wind got quite light and if it got any lighter I wanted a boat beside me ASAP!



Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

But guess what? Everything was ok, my fears subsided. As we got close to the PNG coast, the wind stayed up and the town of Saibai on the leeward inside coast of the island, was in sight.

I was quite apprehensive to land on PNG as we didn't have our passports with us and what if I was kidnapped, raped, enslaved to bandits, arrested or sold as a white bride to drug lords?

What if I stacked it and got lost in the deepest, darkest jungle only to die of malaria or eaten by crocodiles?

But thankfully, and as predicted, the low lying land of Saibai made the wind work in our favour and turned to hug the PNG coast, to give us the best conditions for a perfect landing.



Some of the team tip toed on the PNG coast amongst mangroves and swampy beaches & they made their mark. Some of the crew were already in the boats again and I was coming up the rear again. I was about 100m off the coast when the armada and all support boats zoomed off for the landing 3kms across the wind in Aussie territory on Saibai. At this point, I too changed direction and charged to the finish line.

Of the whole 7 days, this might have been the hardest run of the entire trip. It was only 3 km's across the wind but after 6 hours of kiting, fatigue, wobbly legs from changing direction every 3 minutes, it was tough on the thighs.

We landed on Saibai. We had crossed the Torres Straight on kites and we were all safe! We hugged, we fell on the floor, we ate and drank, and we were exhausted.

I had found more strength day by day, while others had lost it. 10 in total did the whole crossing as the others had some turns in the boats. Ultimately we all did it as a team, the film crew, boat crew and support crew had all succeeded.

As it turns out, the only croc we saw was behind a fence, as a pet on Saibai and the big grey 'thing' I saw in Moon passage was just a docile dugong. If only I knew...

The Saibai people welcomed us. I'm not sure what they thought of it all... 11 hot pink kites arriving on their doorstep from the ocean?!

It was a long, noisy and sleepless night for everyone in the dirty sports hall and by morning we were all ready to get back home to a nice hot shower, patch up our blistered hands and celebrate in comfort. Three flights home from Saibai through Horn Island and Cairns and it was over.

In total, we actually covered 400 km's in 5 days and raised over \$70,000 and counting for the McGrath Foundation.

It was and will always remain an epic adventure for me. I was totally unprepared and unfit to begin with, but I had a mission and determination to try something out of my comfort zone. I wanted to help raise awareness about breast cancer, so young energetic and amazing women like my best friend, don't have to suffer on their own.



Pink Torres Kite Crossing QLD – PNG July 2013

I hit the ground running when I got home to Sydney then drove back north the next day to a music festival for my birthday. Queuing, weaving and dodging 40,000 people in the mud (an area no bigger than Kirkadie Reef) was definitely not the right thing to do after such an amazing adventure of soul searching, solitude and pushing the limits.

It's been 2 months since we crossed the Torres. I'm still processing my experience but best of all, the \$5,000 I personally raised from friends, family, customers and even strangers for the McGrath foundation is currently being put to the best use of all... my friend now has access to her own McGrath Foundation Breast Care Nurse in QLD.

My love goes out to my best mate Helen, who I hope & wish can join me on the next kitesurfing adventure soon. XXX

And a massive thanks to all those who supported us and donated to our cause.

I'd like to give a shout out to the following people:

Jon Turner: who unfortunately had a pre-tour training accident and had to pull out of the tour leaving a space for me.

Alex Unsworth: for inviting me, putting the team together & getting all the amazing sponsorship & exposure.

The whole Torres Crossing Team: for giving me inspiration and the good times and life long memories.

Geoff Wilson: Big Thanks and wishes to our fearless and tin-ass leader for leading the team to safety and making this opportunity what it was. I wish him the best of luck in his [PINK POLAR](#) solo kite crossing in December-January 2013/14 where he will continue to raise more money for the McGrath foundation.



See more of the trip here on my [Picasa web album HERE](#). (Photos supplied by various team members)

Watch the 20min [documentary on our trip HERE](#).

Donations are still welcomed at: <http://mcgrathfoundation.gofundraise.com.au/page/jenniephillips>

NOTE: My dear friend passed away on the 16th September 2013 just a few days after I finished this story. She will always be in my thoughts whenever I kitesurf forever more. Love you H.