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Battle Of The Jellyfish

A young woman named Cynthia Alguilar went over to Cuban territory waters on Friday morning, in an attempt to paddle her 15-foot, custom board back here to Key West. I spent a bit of time with Cynthia before she left for her journey. Young, but soulful. A humble, generous young woman. My whole team followed her progress closely.

She immediately got thrown into a large, powerful eddy off the North coast of Cuba. That made for tough forward progress. She saw a number of jellyfish during that first day and could paddle around them. But when night fell, she couldn't see them and wound up with five or so nasty zings along her right forearm. In the end, after about 25 miles and almost 18 hours, having fought headwinds and a bit of hypothermia, along with the stings, she thought it wisest to pack it in and come back some day with better conditions. I met her on the beach here in Key West when she and her crew arrived. We ran to each other, sisters of the sea. She said she left everything out there and I was very proud of her. I also learned quite a bit from her experience. The eddies, the counter- currents off the Cuban coast are powerful. This is not just a far, far way to swim (or paddle). It's fraught with navigational challenges. You head out NE, stroking toward Key West and yet your GPS tells you you're in fact heading 180 degrees the wrong way, as happened to Cynthia. And she was in such a strong current that when she stopped briefly for some sustenance, her crew reported that she quickly lost a mile or more of the mile and a half she had gained over the last hour. The current was too strong. It pulled her a long way when she was stopped. Because of what we learned from Cynthia and her crew, we are thinking hard about which point on the Cuban coast we should leave from. We need somehow to get through that Westerly counter-current and out away from the Cuban shore.

Also, this is the first report this time of year of jellyfish stings in the Florida Straits. These evidently weren't Portuguese Men of War, dangerously venomous. But these stung Cynthia badly, to the point that she lost her breath and had to pull up and sit on her board until the anaphylactic shock passed. And my exposure vulnerability, the entire body in the water, will be much higher than a paddler up on a board. I was badly stung by Portuguese Men of War during both my Cuba and Bahamas Swims back in the 1970's and I remember having to receive a Benedryl injection from the boat as I tread water back then, to offset the reaction I was having from the intense sting. All of a sudden, I'm now picturing swimming through huge schools of stinging jellyfish. My doctor, Michael Broder, is prepared to treat any localized sting with liquid lidocaine.....and he'll be ready to instantly give me Benadryl as well. Cynthia proved that you can be physically prepared for this extreme endeavor....

yet you need to be prepared for all aspects of the expedition as well. I applaud Cynthia's courage and strength. I have no doubt she will make it across one day. Now we get to work, analyzing those Cuban eddies.....and talking about what other precautions we can possibly take to combat the jellyfish. As for calm seas, no new news. Still waiting. Still believing."

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