

by Peter Bronski

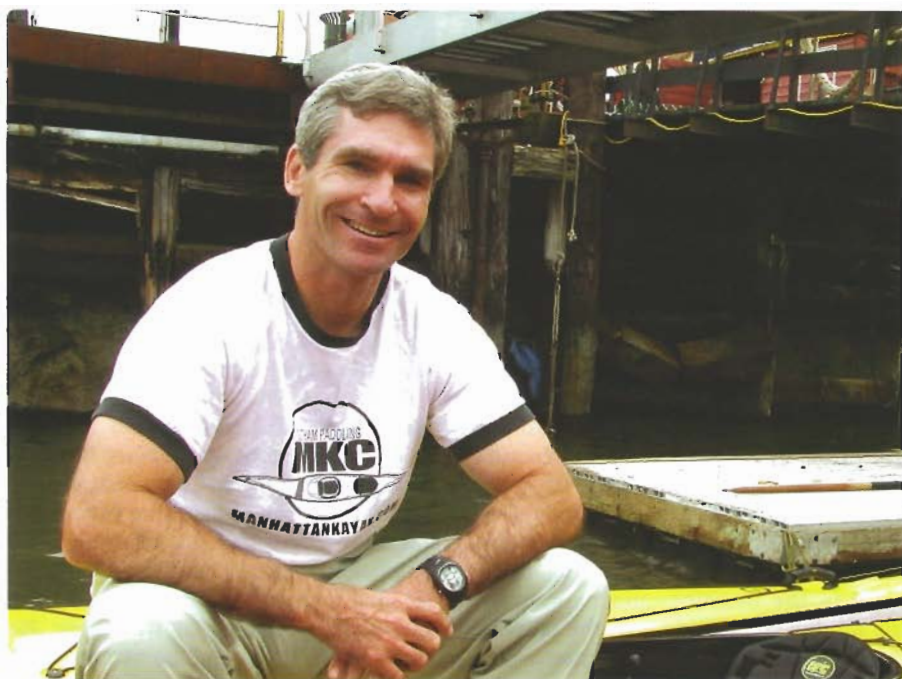
## Eric Stiller: In the Big Apple

**O**n August 14, 2003, the Northeastern United States plunged into one of the largest blackouts in history, leaving an estimated 50 million people in the dark. The power outage stranded hundreds of thousands of subway, rail and highway commuters—the bridge and tunnel crowd—in Manhattan without a way to get home to New Jersey across the Hudson River. Enter Eric Stiller, a New York City native and co-founder of the Manhattan Kayak Company (MKC), a kayak-touring company. Stiller and his staff came to the rescue, ferrying stranded Big Apple businessmen and women across the Hudson River in tandem kayaks from midtown Manhattan's Pier 23 to Hoboken, New Jersey.

It may not be your standard afternoon paddle, but in many ways, it's just another day at the office for Stiller, who deals with all the glitz, glam and, in the case of the blackout, surprises you'd expect from the city that never sleeps. And improbably, it was here, among the concrete jungle of the city, and amid one of the busiest ports in the world—New York Harbor—that the seed was planted for Stiller's love of sea kayaking.

He inherited his passion for paddling from his father, Dieter, who worked his way up the ranks of the Klepper Folding Kayak Company, based in Rosenheim, Germany. Dieter eventually immigrated to the United States and opened the company's American flagship store on Union Square in lower Manhattan, where a portrait of Dr. Hannes Lindemann, the first kayaker to cross the Atlantic solo (in 1956), hung high on one wall. Eric, born in 1960, grew up idolizing Lindemann and, with a father in the kayak business, had the constant exposure to boats that he needed to chart what would become a lifelong course in paddling.

It wasn't long, in fact, before Stiller set out on his first solo paddling "trip" at the age of three on a pond in Pennsylvania's Poconos. As he grew, so did his passion for kayaking—on the Esopus in the



Eric Stiller today, on his home turf in New York.

Catskills, on the Upper Delaware River and along the Old Forge Canoe Route in the Adirondacks. Then, it all came to an abrupt halt. Stiller ventured to the landlocked University of Colorado at Boulder, studying minerals, oils and gas management in search of a lucrative career as a Land Man, a modern-day prospector consulting for big names like Exxon and BP. There, amidst the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains, he vowed that he would never again go east of the Mississippi, especially to return to New York City, which he found manic, stressful and claustrophobic.

But in 1983, two things happened that changed Stiller's plans: The oil and gas industries collapsed, and Dieter Stiller needed his son's help to resurrect his then-failing kayak store on Union Square. Two days after graduation, Stiller found himself once again among the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Kayaking became his great escape from the hustle

Born to paddle, Eric Stiller instills his passion for sea kayaks in the heart of the world's busiest island. He made it his job to bring a sense of adventure into the quintessential urban setting.

Photos courtesy of Eric Stiller

Kayaking is in the blood: Eric's father, Dieter, had him pulling on a paddle from a very early age.



and bustle of the city. Stiller constantly sought new challenges in and around New York Harbor and the Hudson River—Bear Mountain, Manhattan, the Statue of Liberty, Block Island, Long Island Sound, Shelter Island and others.

Stiller's greatest challenge to date, however, came during a 1986 trip to kayak the length of Chesapeake Bay from Annapolis to Norfolk with a cadre of college buddies. The plan was to cover 220 miles in six days, landing in Norfolk in time to make it to a friend's party. They needed to average 35 miles per day—on their first day, they covered eight. Subsequent days and nights involved double-duty paddling until three in the morning, and improbably, the motley crew made it to the party in time. Ultimately, the experience was a formative one for Stiller. "This was the real start of my sea kayaking passion...to put multiple days together with the elements and a challenge. It put it into my blood," he says.

After the Chesapeake experience, Stiller occupied himself with new challenges. Some were personal, such as icy mid-winter paddles in New York Harbor. For example, on January 7, 1988, he and a sergeant from a U.S. Special Forces team decided to race from the West Village to the World Trade Center and back. The two-boat sprint caught the attention of local helicopter news crews. The water was 42°F, the air temperature was 7°F, and the wind chill was well below zero. They abandoned the idea of a competitive race and focused instead on keeping upright and merely staying alive. They finished together, covered in ice.

And there were professional challenges as well, like training paddler Howard Rice, whom Stiller met during his Chesapeake Bay foray, for his now-famed solo paddle around South



America's Cape Horn.

Then, in 1998, Tony Brown, a male model from Australia, walked into the Union Square store with a crazy idea—to paddle around his native continent. He had an utter lack of kayaking experience and knowledge, and his motivation for undertaking such a Mount Everest of paddling sounded a little too Edmund Hillary-esque: because it was there. He would need help, and he would need a partner, and Stiller was the man to fit the bill.

In between Brown's flights to Milan for modeling, the duo trained relentlessly in the turbulent waters of New York Harbor, until suddenly, the trip was upon them—all 10,000 miles of it. Australia threw everything it had at the pair—tides, wind, sharks, heavy surf and monstrous seas, violent landing conditions. "One of the greatest challenges was fighting the complacency that arose in the face of monotony. As soon as we went on cruise control, some new challenge and new lesson would come," explains Stiller. "We thought we could just keep Australia on our left, taking safe refuge on land when we needed, but half the time we couldn't even see it."

There was the sleep deprivation, too, during their open ocean crossing of the Gulf of Carpentaria—400 miles, as the crow flies, involving five consecutive nights without the comfort of sleep. In a strange way, the gulf crossing helped Stiller understand what his boyhood idol, Lindemann, must have experienced dur-



ing his crossing of the Atlantic. But for Stiller, perhaps the most insidious challenge of all was the human component presented by a paddling partner. "We were two guys in one kayak. You can plan for the physical and mental challenges, but there are also those you don't know about, like the human dynamic," says Stiller. "The longest kayaking trips have always been done solo, and there's a reason for that."

And ultimately, it was a breakdown of the human dynamic that brought the trip to an end. Stiller and Brown were physically and psychologically exhausted. With 5,000 miles behind them, they pulled ashore at Darwin Harbor for what would be the final time. Both men realized they were finished. The trip was over, and Stiller went on to chronicle their adventure in his book, *Keep Australia on Your Left* (Forge, 2002), which has become one of the great sea-kayaking epics.

Stiller returned to New York City and established Manhattan Kayak Company. Three years later, a front-page article in the *New York Times*' Sunday Styles section touted New York City as an up-and-coming and underrated adventure-sport hub, and there, in the very first sentence, was Stiller's name. The article went on to feature Stiller—they called him "a Popeye in Polartec"—and his company. By Monday morning, MKC had been flooded with so many calls, it took staff four hours just to listen to the phone messages.

Stiller promoted New York Harbor as an urban paddler's paradise and introduced scores of would-be adventure seekers to paddling. Among them are many celebrities who want their share of the action: former Van Halen lead singer David Lee Roth; the late JFK Jr.; Cindy Crawford's personal trainer, Radu; fashion mogul Calvin Klein; U.S. Navy Seals; and cast members from *Sex and the City*, to name a few.

But Stiller doesn't allow himself to get caught up in the celebrity world. "As interesting as it is [in the celebrity world], you may feel like they respect you, but

it's still clear that somehow you're a well-paid servant," says Stiller. Ironically, though, as he says this, the telephone in the office rings. It's a producer from the television series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Sure enough, months later, while

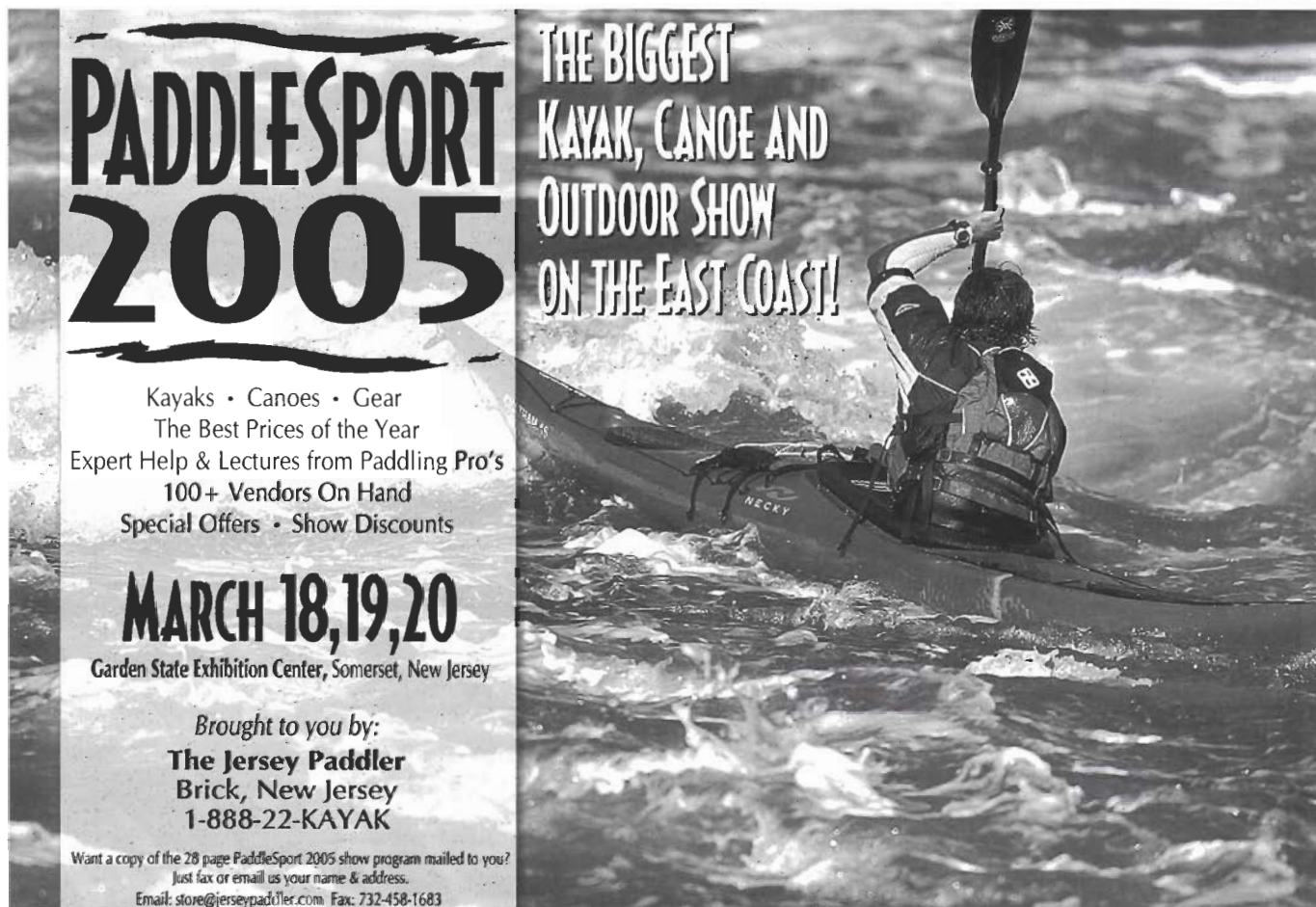
**Stiller promoted New York Harbor as an urban paddler's paradise and introduced scores of would-be adventure seekers to paddling.**

flipping through television channels, I landed on the Bravo Network, and there, on-screen, was Stiller. *Queer Eye's* Fab Five had taken their latest make-over subject and his fiancée to MKC for a day of tandem kayak paddling to help deepen their relationship and foster cooperation.

I recently stopped in at the Explorer's

Club in midtown Manhattan to listen as Stiller recounted his Australian saga, with accompanying slide show, as part of the Club's Public Lecture Series. Off to the side of the room stood Dieter, a father obviously proud of his son. As I glanced around at the hundred or so faces packed into the room, I noticed not only dedicated paddlers, listening intently with admiration, but also everyday folks who were curious and interested—riveted by Stiller's storytelling. It occurred to me that this is perhaps his greatest contribution to kayaking. It was not his attempt at circumnavigating a continent or rubbing elbows with celebrities. Rather, here, in New York, Stiller has exposed the masses to paddling, introducing hundreds of new urban kayakers to the sport he loves so dearly, in the heart of the city he calls home. **SK**

*Adventure writer Peter Bronski also writes for Adirondack Life, Adirondack Sports & Fitness, Westchester Magazine, AMC Outdoors, Cornell Alumni Magazine and many others (peterbronski@hotmail.com).*



**PADDLESport 2005**

Kayaks • Canoes • Gear  
The Best Prices of the Year  
Expert Help & Lectures from Paddling Pro's  
100+ Vendors On Hand  
Special Offers • Show Discounts

**MARCH 18, 19, 20**  
Garden State Exhibition Center, Somerset, New Jersey

Brought to you by:  
**The Jersey Paddler**  
Brick, New Jersey  
1-888-22-KAYAK

Want a copy of the 28 page PaddleSport 2005 show program mailed to you?  
Just fax or email us your name & address.  
Email: store@jerseypaddler.com Fax: 732-458-1683

**THE BIGGEST KAYAK, CANOE AND OUTDOOR SHOW ON THE EAST COAST!**