



Eric Stiller

Urban Legend

FROM PADDLING WITH
DAVID LEE ROTH TO
CIRCUMNAVIGATING
AUSTRALIA

by Erik Olsen



Ruddering with the Devil: Stiller (top) and his frequent paddling partner, David Lee Roth (above).

Eric Stiller is an unlikely Manhattanite. With a spray skirt sagging around his waist, tousled hair and a boyish grin, he looks like someone who belongs under a canopy of trees rather than among the skyscrapers of New York City. He is a rare breed of adventurer, an entrepreneur, environmentalist and raconteur who has brought the sport of kayaking to the city's huddled masses.

The New York City kayaking community is surprisingly small and close. In the city of eight million, there are no more than a hundred die-hard kayakers. Among them, Stiller is a legend.

"Eric is one of the true pioneers getting people to paddle on the Hudson River," says Eric Hertz of Earth River Expeditions, a New York outfitter.

Kayaking is in his blood. His father, Dieter Hans Stiller, a German émigré and passionate outdoorsman, came to New York in the 1950s as a representative of Klepper, at the time one of the most prominent kayak companies in the world. For more than 30 years, Dieter ran the flagship Klepper store in a 4,000-square-foot space in Union Square. Ralph Diaz, author

of *Complete Folding Kayak*, bought his first folding kayak from Stiller and his dad, and got more than just a new boat.

"I owe a lot to Eric and his dad," says Diaz. "They were always supportive of what I was doing. Eric in particular. He has a tremendous understanding of the sea and sea kayaks."

During his late teens, Eric learned the ropes of his father's business and developed a passion for paddling on the East Coast. But when he went away to college at the University of Colorado, the allure of Boulder was huge, and centuries of neglect had made the Hudson River an environmental joke. But things were changing, and one day his father called, begging Stiller to come help run the store.

"At that time in the early '80s kayaks in New York City were an eccentric pursuit because the dirtiness of the Hudson," he says. "But the waters were being cleaned up, and all of a sudden you had a river that was now clean for water sports."

After work, Stiller would lug his Klepper to the broken down piers at Christopher Street and paddle long into the evening hours. "I had to practice what I preached every day," Stiller says. "I needed the outdoor release. For me it was a compulsion."

The Klepper store eventually folded, leaving Stiller unsure of what to do with his life. Then a famous friend and customer came to him with an idea.

"David came to me and bought a few boats and said, 'Hey Eric, let's go use them!'" "David" is David Lee Roth, lead singer of Van Halen, then one of the hottest rock bands on the planet. "He became my first paying client," Stiller says. "We would go everywhere. He'd want to do these great adventures. We'd be paddling around Manhattan and he'd sing Frank Sinatra songs to me."

At about this time the Chelsea Piers sports complex opened, and Stiller lucked into a spot on the river where he opened the first kayak touring business in New York City. But was New York City, a metropolis better known for Masters-of-the-Universe investment bankers and struggling artists, really the best place for an adventure travel business? Stiller remains convinced it is.

"New York metro is an adventurer's paradise. We have 524 miles of coastline. This is a total maritime environment here," says Stiller, who has made his mark in maritime environments across the globe.

He's best known for *Keep Australia on Your Left*, which many consider one of the best adventure paddling books of all time. Stiller's tale, which he penned with travel writer Paul Theroux, tells the real-life story of Stiller's epic effort to circumnavigate the continent of Australia with his paddling buddy, a high-paid Australian model named Tony Brown. Stiller is notoriously thorough when preparing for

adventures, but Brown was convinced navigation would be a cinch. "Aw, mate," he told Stiller. "We don't need charts. You just keep Australia on your left."

Three months into the trip, however, Stiller's homework turned out to be a blessing. The pair, paddling a Klepper Aeriis II, crossed the Gulf of Carpentaria, a 400-mile gouge in the top of the continent. To have clung to the coastline would have added 1,000 miles to their paddle. The five-night, six-day open water crossing brought the duo beyond the brink of exhaustion, and nearly pushed them to insanity.

"This was a classic case of competitive, over-amped, westernized young men coming to the cusp of understanding and awareness," Stiller reminisces. Stiller's sheer discipline got them through the ordeal. "Absolute commitment is key," he says, "for in hesitancy there is always ineffectiveness."

Ralph Diaz says Stiller's Australian paddle was a Herculean effort. "Not to take anything away from Tony, but Eric was the brains and strength of that voyage," he says. "Eric rates right up there with other icons of sea kayaking like John Dowd and Derek Hutchinson."

While the memory of that trip still burns in Stiller's memory, he says such adventures are probably a thing of the past. "There was a time and a place for this trip, and that was it," he says.