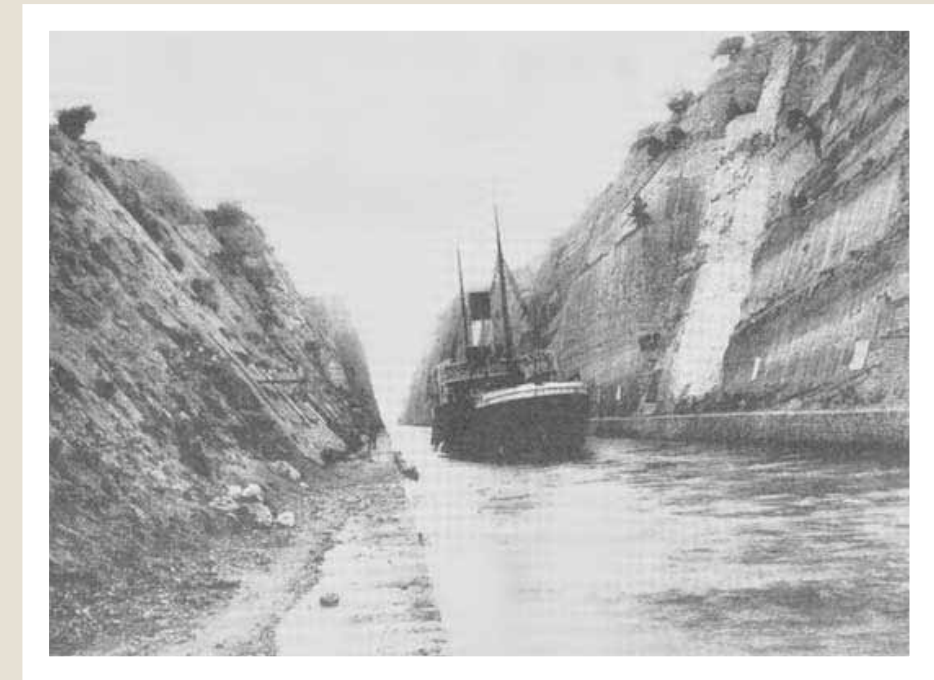




By Helen Katsarou

THE FIRST CORINTH CANAL SUP CROSSING



THE CORINTH CANAL, A MAN-MADE WATERWAY LINKING THE IONIAN AND AEGEAN SEAS, SLICES THROUGH THE NARROW ISTHMUS OF CORINTH AND SEPARATES THE PELOPONNESIAN PENINSULA FROM THE GREEK MAINLAND. FOLLOWING OUR PADDLES IN CLASSIC LOCATIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE – SEQUANA IN PARIS, SILVAPALANA IN SWITZERLAND AND THE GERMAN PORT OF HAMBURG – THE FIRST CORINTH CANAL SUP CROSSING CONNECTED THE NEW SPORT OF SUP WITH THE HISTORY OF THIS ANCIENT LAND.



HISTORY OF THE CORINTH CANAL

Many ancient rulers dreamed of bisecting the Isthmus of Corinth. The first to propose such an undertaking, in 7th century BC, was the tyrant Periander, as unpopular a man as ever lived. However, the project was abandoned and Periander instead constructed a simpler, less costly overland portage road named the “Diolkos,” along which ships could be towed from one side of the isthmus to the other. Remnants of the Diolkos still perch next to the modern canal.

Hundreds of years later, the Diadoch Demetrios Poliorcetes (336–283 BC) stepped forward with a canal plan, but he dropped it after his surveyors, miscalculating the levels of the adjacent seas, feared heavy floods. Roman dictator Julius Caesar also pondered a canal, but his assassination put an end to that thought and all others. The notorious Caligula then commissioned a study in 40 AD by Egyptian experts who claimed incorrectly that the sea level was higher to the one side, with the result that the nearby island of Aegina would be inundated. He, too, was assassinated, as would have been the next would-be digger, the emperor Nero, had he not demanded that his personal secretary kill

him first. Nero actually began the project in 67 AD, but it never went anywhere. In the 2nd century AD, Roman senator cum philosopher Herodes Atticus proposed a canal, and the Venetians debated it in 1687.

In 1830, the Greek statesman Ioannis Kapodistrias asked a French engineer to assess the feasibility of the project. When the quote came back at a cost of 40 million gold francs, discussions came to an abrupt halt.

Finally, a classic case of canal envy drove the Greeks to do the job right. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was all it took. A French company started the project in 1881, and a Greek company completed it on July 25, 1893.

The Corinth Canal changed everything in the area. Trade and transport could be conducted more efficiently, and everyone wondered why the heck they hadn’t done it earlier. Now approximately 15,000 boats from at least four dozen different countries cross the canal every day ... and recently they were joined by 25 stand-up paddle boards.

THE PLAN

Crossing the canal via SUP for the very first time ever: The idea was bold, the plan was challenging, and the bureaucracy was egregious. The canal’s management team had lots of questions, the first of which was, “What is a SUP?” We answered endless queries patiently, describing the burgeoning sport, explaining how winds and currents affect paddlers and reassuring everyone with liability on his mind that proper precautions would be taken. Finally, after months of visits, letters, phone calls and pressure, permission was granted, and for one day, the canal was dedicated to stand-up paddle for a full three hours.

When the approval was granted, we had less than 24 hours to be on the water. Emails were sent at once to a pre-established network. Paddlers and schools from the islands of Andros, Syros, Crete, Ios, and Cyprus responded with a resounding “We’ll be there!” And they were.

THE CROSSING

We hit the road at 6 a.m., scarcely believing what was ahead. By 8:30, friends from across Grece had arrived, photographers were in place, and our boards were in the water.

Via the VHF of our attendant board, “Skiron,” the inspecting officer of the Canal’s control tower called out, “Skiron, this is the

canal control tower speaking. In two minutes, Poseidonia Bridge will be sunk. Are you ready?” Our response was immediate: “Everyone is ready!” Moments later, the bridge operator spoke. “The bridge has been sunk. You are ready to go!” From our attendant board, alone in the morning silence, came the command, “Start now.”

Paddles dug hard in the water. Everyone paddled vigorously, seeking the proper rhythm. We all wanted to place first in this mesmerizing, historic canal crossing. The bridge was submerged, and as we all crossed it, I couldn’t even see who was in first. The only thing I saw was that this dream of ours had become a reality.

So many emotions surfaced — satisfaction, pride, joy. I just can’t describe the sights well enough in mere words — turquoise water with 80-meter-high rocks flanking the waterway, ancient walls standing above. It was absolute bliss. Only the splashing of the paddles interrupted the silence.

I found myself not sure what to choose. Do I keep paddling hard, to have a chance to place in the race with a good time? Or do I just enjoy the beauty and the uniqueness of the canal on this historic morning? I quickly realized that everyone was feeling the same way. Earlier comments about who would place first and have the best time had slowly been put aside for all of us. Nobody was in a rush to finish. We all realized how fortunate we are to be SUPing, if only for a short while, inside the Corinth Canal.

As we reached the bridge, our photographer Albina was hanging



from a bungee cord, shooting each unique moment. People on the bridge cheered. The end of the canal grew closer, but nobody wanted to reach it. Everyone wanted this breathtaking experience to last.

A boat packed with tourists was waiting for us to finish, so it could cross the canal. However, none of its passengers seemed to be in the least bit of a hurry. With cameras in hand, they snapped away and embraced in celebration of our obvious joy. We waved to them, hello

and good-bye in one, and took one last glance back, trying to imprint every moment in our minds. Finally, we arrived where no one had ever been ... at least on a stand-up paddle board.

Our appreciation is extended to the canal company AEDIK's supervisor, Captain T. Filis, and everyone who participated and made this event happen. We are thrilled to announce that a second crossing has been approved, and that it will be an international SUP race event.



How to get there

From Athens Airport, either drive 110 km directly on the highway to Corinth Canal, or take the train (Proastiakos) directly from the airport to Corinth, about 1:15 duration.

Places to stay

There are many nice hotels close to the Corinth Canal in the towns of Corinth and Loutraki. The hotel closest to the canal is the Isthmia Prime Hotel.

Places to eat

Restaurants close to the canal can be found on Trip Advisor.

Day cruises into the canal can be arranged with tourist boats.

Something else to try is bungee jumping into the Corinth Canal. Check out zulunubgy.com.

