

Buying Your First Kayak

Bill Menke, July 2015

Friends often ask me for advice when buying their first kayak. They know that I have been kayaking for fifteen years or so, that I've have gone on several significant multi-day trips, such as the *Great Hudson River Paddle*, and have coached kayak at summer camp. I love kayaking but am very non-judgmental about the sport. I don't have a especially favorite type of boat or place to paddle and realize that each person has their distinctive approach to the sport.

The good news is that there's almost no such thing as a 'bad' kayak. Many different manufacturers sell kayaks and almost all of them are excellent boats. I recommend that you simply get one that you like. After all, you should like the boat that you'll be spending hours paddling. However, some of the larger stores have dozens of different models, so selecting a boat can be overwhelming. Here are some tips that might help you narrow down the possibilities.

Kayaks come in several general designs: Recreational kayaks, or rec-boats for short, are the inexpensive kayaks that you often see lined up on the walls of sporting goods stores. They come in a variety of shapes, but most tend to be rather short (less than 15'), wide (and hence very stable) and have very large cockpit (making them easy to enter and exit). Though slow, they perform well in calm water. They handle less well in rough water, so I do not recommend them in choppy conditions. Sea kayaks are typically longer (15-18') and narrower than rec-boats and have a smaller cockpit that allows the use of a skirt, a fabric cover that prevents water from splashing into the boat. They are faster than recreational boats. Whitewater kayaks are short (6' or so) boats used to play in rapids. They are built to be very maneuverable but for this reason are tedious to paddle any long distance over calm water, for they do not hold to a course well.

I recommend one of the longer recreational kayaks (12 feet or longer) or one of the shorter sea kayaks (17 feet or shorter) for a first kayak. If you plan to paddle in a large body of water that could suddenly become choppy, I recommend that you buy a model that can take a skirt. I don't recommend a whitewater boat unless you are going to seriously train on rapids.

Both recreational kayaks and sea kayaks come in cockpit and sit-on-top versions. Count on getting very wet paddling the latter; they are strictly warm-water boats.

Kayaks come in a variety of materials. A plastic boat makes a good first kayak. Plastic boats are cheap and extremely rugged, capable of withstanding a lot of abuse. Higher performance boats are made of Kevlar or carbon fiber. They are unbelievably light, but much more expensive and significantly more delicate. I don't recommend an inflatable fabric boat unless you have very limited storage space at home; they are not much lighter than a plastic boat and take rather too long to inflate.

Some boats, particularly the plastic ones, are very heavy. That's not so much of an issue once they are in the water, but getting them on and off a car's roof rack is a pain. I find boats weighing more than about 55 pounds very hard to manage.

A big person (like me) can swamp a teeny little boat, while a child might find a huge boat cumbersome. Be sure to sit in a boat before buying it to make sure it's comfortable.

The longer the boat, the faster it goes. An experienced kayaker can paddle a 15-foot sea kayak at 5 miles per hour, but a 6-foot boat at only 3. Longish day trips of ten miles or so are really only practical in longer boats.

The narrower your kayak, the faster it will go, but the tippier it will be. Boats less than 24 inches wide require practice to master. Boats greater than 40 inches wide are whales. Something in between, say 30 to 34 inches or so, is a reasonable compromise.

Many different paddle designs are available and each design has its advantages and disadvantages. Just pick one that feels comfortable to you. You will be holding the paddle for hours on end, so weight matters. Invest in one of the more lightweight models, even though it's more expensive.

Find a nice PFD (Personal floatation Device or life vest) that you're not embarrassed to wear and wear it! Every kayaker eventually flips his or her kayak. When it happens to you, you will be glad that you're wearing a PFD. You're fooling yourself if you think that you can merely carry the PFD with you and don it when conditions warrant. When the seas are choppy, you'll not be able to stop paddling long enough to put it on.

The US Coast Guard requires that a kayaker have a whistle and a metal signal mirror attached to his or her PFDs. I've used my whistle many times to get the attention of another boater or somebody on shore. I've never used by mirror, but I carry it all the same. I also have a compass on my PFD, just in case the weather suddenly turns foggy (which you'll find pretty freaky if it happens to you).

Keep a water bottle in your kayak, just in case you decide to stay out longer than you anticipated.

I don't want to admit how many cell phones, cameras and (supposedly waterproof) GPS units I've ruined over the years by getting them wet. Put them and your wallet in a waterproof container such as a dry bag or water-proof box.

Anytime you paddle on water where waves might suddenly build up, you should wear a skirt. With a little practice, all sea kayaks and most recreational kayaks can handle 3-foot waves. But a boat without a skirt will swamp as waves roll up onto its deck. As with the PFD, a skirt is impossible to put on a skirt in rough conditions. You have to be wearing it before the conditions get rough for it to be of any use.

Any time you are going on a trip that's more than a mile or so, or if you are crossing a wide body of water, you should carry a spare paddle, just in case you lose or break your main paddle. It doesn't have to be an especially fancy one; even an old single-blade canoe paddle will do.

You'll learn a lot from other paddlers and you'll be much safer, too, if you don't paddle alone. Paddle with friends. Join a paddling club that does regular kayak day trips.

Happy paddling!