

Business and Pleasure – Paddling Has It All

by Joanne Schwartz

A sales team gathers for their annual meeting in a fine Anaheim, California hotel with all the amenities. The team has come from Chicago, Orlando, Buffalo and other major cities. Since they are in Anaheim, they expect to see lots of Disney Land and Knots Berry Farm for off-hour entertainment. But instead, the President encourages them to don their swim suits, T-shirts and sunglasses: they are going kayaking! They shake their heads in disbelief and poke fun at each other for not being in shape. One claims to be a proficient canoeist, but when questioned, he admits that he hasn't really been in one since, well, since summer Scout camp.

Within a half hour they arrive on a sandy beach in Newport Harbor. Arrayed before them are 25 touring kayaks, slim craft about 16' long and 26" wide. A man and woman rise from crouched positions near the kayaks and greet them with outstretched hands and warm smiles. The handshakes put them at ease and once again the joking begins. But the guides know their unspoken questions and begin chatting to the sales team about kayaks. Yes, they're so stable that probably no one will get wet. Yes, we really paddle out to sea and land through surf in these boats. And yes, we can carry enough food and water to go long distances, but we travel at about 2.5 to 4 miles an hour so the going is slow.

The group circles a teal and cream fiberglass kayak and the guides take turns describing parts of the craft and telling stories of paddling in exotic destinations. They demonstrate holding the paddle and a couple of strokes which seem simple enough that even the most skeptical are now convinced they'll do OK. Each paddler receives a paddle and perfectly sized life vest. With just a little encouragement, the team selected personal kayaks from the wide variety of models and colors and tentatively ease themselves to a sitting position inside their chosen boat. Their guides assist them in adjusting foot pedals and seat backs for maximum comfort. With a couple more words about procedures to follow in case a paddler capsizes or gets separated from the group, the team is all smiles and eager to push off.

Newport Harbor is one of the largest pleasure boat harbors in the world. Lines of multi-million dollar homes surround the harbor and its islands, most with private docks sporting exquisite sailing craft or motor yachts. With one guide in the lead, the other at the end of the flotilla and two assistants circulating through the pack, the sales team winds their way under tiny bridges, around islands and through canals. They occasionally stop so the guides can demonstrate efficient strokes or point out famous people's estates and yachts. About half of the sales team takes the guides up on their offer of individual coaching en route, while others seem content to stoke just well enough to enjoy the view. The guides point out great blue herons, common egrets and white pelicans standing on mooring cans - these silent birds don't even flinch as the paddlers slide silently by. As the kayakers enter a small channel, the guides halt the group and reach into the hatch of one kayak for a big blue bag of ice and sodas. These and cheese appetizers are passed around as everyone laughs and shares stories about their paddling prowess. "Ready for dinner?" asks a guide, and with a resounding "Sure!" they paddle to a nearby restaurant perched over the water. The President, perhaps the most proud paddler in the group, hosts his team to a casual but hearty seafood dinner before a brief paddle back to waiting cars.

In a week, the President received photos of his sales team, which he forwarded to the regional offices. The team members felt tremendous accomplishment that evening and got to know each other as one can only do while playing together in unfamiliar territory and mastering new skills. They enjoyed experiencing the harbor as none had before imagined. And they certainly have stories to tell the folks back home! A sales meeting was never so much fun.

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