

# Is Kayak Touring Safe?

by Joanne Schwartz

Are our kayaks (and other paddle craft) safe? Most manufacturers include a safety warning label in their boats, full of good ideas for paddlers. The folks at Perception led the march to develop industry-wide use of these labels and trade groups NAPSA (The North American Paddle Sports Association) gave lots of input and support. The intent is, of course, to increase the safety of paddling and to ward off liability suits. Boats by themselves are neither safe nor unsafe. Much like automobiles, the skill and judgment of the drivers determines much about the safety of the activity.

You laugh, but paddling, whether in a sea kayak, open-top, whitewater kayak, canoe or whatever is a serious endeavor. Yes, even sea kayaking is so easy to do that people just head out to the open sea with no or little instruction, to say nothing of appropriate safety gear (like a simple bailing device). Since I have the opportunity to talk with hundreds of paddlers each year, I get to hear more "You'd never guess what happened to ME today" stories than you'd imagine. Boy do lots of paddlers have "narrow escapes" or get rescued "just in time." Paddlers try solo coastal cruising without knowing how to get back in their boat by themselves if they capsize (which happens most every weekend to someone locally). Or they go with a friend who doesn't even know basic two person rescues ("I can show him how to paddle"). They get caught by "rogue waves" out at sea with surprising regularity (of course, there is a chain of reefs just offshore along much of our coastline) and don't know how to recognize the waves and wave sets in advance, handle the breakers with a secure brace when they get caught or what to do next when they capsize. Or they "get caught" on rocks which "just came up out of nowhere" (i.e. during a large swell at low tide). Or they crash while taking off or landing in the surf since they haven't learned to handle that either. Or they use paddle leashes in the surf and are surprised when their foot gets caught (when will it be their neck?). I could go on and on.

So what is a paddler to do? Read *Sea Kayaker's* technical (strokes, equipment, safety, health, etc.) articles and similar topics in *Canoe and Kayak* and *Paddler* magazines. Read the instructional books, and watch instructional DVDs and videos. Read safety books like *Sea Kayaker* magazine's compilation in *Deep Trouble*. Learn from experienced paddlers who are also capable instructors. Take formal classes. Go on trips within your skill level and actively qualify your leaders before you show up with a boat. A good paddler, whether friend or in business, is not necessarily a good instructor or guide. Don't get over your head! Be smart. Paddling can be fun, and SAFE! But YOU make it that way!

**We would like to hear from you...**

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