
Skills to Get You Started

by Joanne Schwartz

Everyone can hop into a kayak their first time and paddle away with a smile. But to paddle with minimal effort and enjoy the miles safely, you'll need to learn a few strokes. For touring kayaks and sit-on-tops, the most essential, but complicated stroke is the forward paddling stroke. Most beginners push and pull, swinging their arms like windmills - that's about as efficient as trying to swim using a "puppy dog" stroke! But paddlers who twist, using the large muscles of their entire torso rather than only their upper arms, can paddle 20 or more miles a day without a problem. Too, correct positioning of a paddler's hands and wrists (so that the wrists do not bend or flex while paddling) alleviates most common overuse injuries generally classed as "tendonitis." Make sure your initial lesson and coaching covers these points thoroughly.

You'll want to be able to move your boat backwards efficiently (with the rear paddle blade flat on the water as you start), rather than flipping at the water at the side of your boat. And you'll need to be able to move sideways (yes, to approach a dock or assist another paddler), say 20-30 ft either way, with a draw stroke, without zig-zagging as you move. After a beginning lesson you should be able to control your travel direction by inserting gentle sweep strokes into your regular cadence. You should also be able to spin your boat around within its own length by combining forward and reverse sweeps. And, finally, you'll want to learn several brace strokes, the capsize prevention strokes, to keep you from capsizing in most conditions. These all take time and paddling miles to master, but making the initial effort will add much pleasure and safety to many enjoyable trips to follow.

Before you paddle on your own you'll also want to learn how to capsize your kayak, flow out of the boat, and reenter or hop back on top safely. Most beginners have about the same learning curve with touring kayaks with cockpits and with sit-on-tops. At first you'll learn rescues which depend on other paddlers since you'll probably be paddling with friends for a while. If you decide to paddle by your self, you'll need to learn several ways of reentering your boat all by yourself. These solo rescues are essential for anyone venturing out to sea, even in groups, since you will not want to depend on others for your own safety.

Skills For Commercial Tours

Many companies advertise week long trips as suitable for first-timers. Such opportunities to paddle in Alaska, Baja and a host of wonderful destinations can work well as long as paddlers use double kayaks; swell, wind, currents and surf are minimal; daily trips are pretty short (3-5 hours paddling, up to about 10 miles); and as long as leaders are sensitive and responsive to the needs and limitations of all paddlers. Occasionally, motorized support boats are available or it is possible for a weak paddler to make part of the trip in a vehicle, if needed.

Most paddlers find that knowing the basic skills described here gives them a decided advantage even when paddling with commercial groups. They can paddle more miles each day, exploring side coves without worrying about taking the most direct (least scenic) route. They have more energy left at the end of each day for hiking and exploring the area. They have less chance to develop tendonitis problems. And they generally seem to have more fun, often enjoying the freedom of a single kayak which is often available.

A Few Words for Your Safety

Paddlers should only paddle when their skills and equipment which match the day's conditions. Paddle only in conditions in which each paddler can rescue him/herself and in which each would be comfortable swimming. Don't rely on "good luck," "magic," or "The Coast Guard" to get you out of a tight or dangerous spot. Prevent accidents before they occur through prudent judgment. Take responsibility for yourself, not relying on guides or others to "take care" of you. Be self reliant! Have fun!

We would like to hear from you...

Submit your kayaking tales to info@southwindkayaks.com, with "Story for Website Kayak Library" in the subject line!

[Back to the Kayak Library](#)

[Back Home](#)

Southwind Kayak Center

17855 Sky Park Circle #A, Irvine, California 92614
949-261-0200 or 800-SOUTHWIND (800-768-8494)

<http://www.southwindkayaks.com>

info@southwindkayaks.com