

Starting Out FAQ

by Joanne Schwartz

Q. How tipsy are kayaks?

A. Most kayaks, except those made for racing, are very stable. Generally beginners have no problem staying upright in either enclosed touring or sit-on-top kayaks. In fact, some kayaks are so stable that you can kneel or stand in them and fly cast for fishing. What you are likely to feel in most kayaks during your first ten or fifteen minutes is just a bit of wiggleness because of the bottom (hull) design. It has some measure of "V" throughout the length of the kayak to help you paddle in a straight line. The real measure of stability is how far you can tip the boat before it actually capsizes. You're not likely to experiment with that until you have completed a thorough introductory lesson. With capsize-prevention "brace" strokes, even waves and rough water will rarely, if ever, cause you to capsize. Skills build confidence!

Q. What's the difference between a sea kayak and a whitewater kayak?

A. Sea or touring kayaks are designed with a deep "V" hull to keep them going straight, even in quite rough conditions. Whitewater kayaks, on the other hand, are designed to maneuver quickly around rocks in the flow of a river. Hence, they have a totally smooth bottom which bows upward at both ends, like a smile. Sea kayaks are generally 16'-19' long, while whitewater kayaks are 8-12' long. Hybrid kayaks are also available, like some of the sit-on-tops which are designed for surfing ocean waves.

Q. Should I buy a fiberglass or plastic kayak?

A. Many first-time buyers select a plastic (usually rotationally molded polyethylene) kayak because of the price. At \$350-\$1400 there represent a tremendous value. Other paddlers select fiberglass kayaks because they are lighter, stronger, much easier to repair in the rare case of damage, and because the designs tend to be more refined. Too, the automobile-like gel coat finish on fiberglass is attractive to most paddlers. Alternatives are available like kevlar, an expensive but especially strong for its weight material; thermoplastic which looks and performs similar to fiberglass at a lower price; folding kayaks with wood or space age aluminum frames and various skins; and vinyl, Hypalon or other inflatable kayaks.

Q. My wife and I want to paddle together. Should we get a double?

A. Double kayaks are great if you plan to paddle with your partner almost all of the time. Most doubles are really quite large and bulky for a paddler to enjoy solo. Doubles tend to equalize strength, endurance and skills of otherwise unequal paddlers. And in very rough conditions, they offer a measure of safety because paddlers in a double can not become separated by high swells. But paddling tandem assumes that you and your partner are quite comfortable functioning in close proximity as a team without disturbing each other's sense of peace and well being. Many couples love that experience while the thought of paddling tandem for even a few hours sends chills down others' spines.

Q. What's the rudder for? Do I really need one?

A. Rudders have two purposes. Novice paddlers who do not yet have the skill to keep a kayak going straight appreciate the ability to push with the right foot to go right, and with the left foot to go left. This controls the direction of the kayak. After a beginning course almost everyone can manage a boat successfully in calm water with well executed paddle strokes, rendering a rudder unnecessary. On the other end of the scale, advanced paddlers who challenge themselves in strong wind, chop and waves find a rudder or skeg to be a safety device, allowing all of the paddler's energy to propel the kayak rather than merely to keep it on course. Yes, a few touring kayaks are designed not to require a rudder, but most paddlers prefer one.

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