

CHOOSING YOUR FIRST KAYAK - WHERE TO BEGIN

By Sherri Mertz

So you've seen some kayakers out on the water and you thought it might be fun to get one yourself. Great idea! You stop at a paddlesport shop, do some research on the Internet, and suddenly you are overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite number of choices available. There are kayaks of every shape, size, material, and price. How do you decide which one is right for you? It's not as hard or as daunting a task as it first appears if you know which questions to ask, and if you learn some basics about the different types of kayaks that are on the market.

The first thing that you need to do before looking at any boats is to honestly assess what you plan to do with your kayak. Where do you plan to paddle - small inland lakes and rivers, whitewater rapids, the Great Lakes or the ocean? Each of these waterways suggests a different type of kayak. By narrowing down your likely paddling destinations, you can eliminate many boats from your list of possible choices. It is important that you are brutally honest with yourself about how you will use the kayak or you are likely to buy the wrong boat and will be unhappy with your choice. If you are having trouble deciding what kind of kayaking you want to get involved in, take a lesson from a qualified instructor. Getting some actual experience with a paddle in your hand will help you better understand the differences in kayaks and why each is appropriate for only certain conditions.

What are the different kinds of kayaks and what kinds of water are they best used in? Let's start with recreational kayaks since they tend to be the least expensive which makes them very attractive to first-time buyers. Recreational kayaks tend to be relatively short (8-13 feet long) when compared to touring kayaks, although they are longer than many whitewater kayaks. They are also usually rather wide (over 25 inches) so they feel very stable on flat water. Most recreational kayaks have very large cockpit openings making them easy to get in and out of. There are generally very few additional features on recreational kayaks as these tend to add cost. Most will not have hatches with dry storage compartments and they have very little if any flotation built into the boat. If the kayak capsizes or is swamped with water by a wave, it will float very low in the water or just under the surface. This makes it dangerous to use these boats in cold water or in areas far from a shoreline on which you can easily land (read, "not a good choice for paddling on Lake Michigan"). Recreational kayaks are excellent choices for people who want to spend some time on our many small inland lakes and rivers where waves will be few, current will be slow, and the water will warm up to comfortable swimming temperature during the summer. Recreational kayaks don't capsize very easily in these conditions, but if they do, you need to be able to swim the boat to shore in order to empty out the water and re-enter the kayak. You can wear a sprayskirt in most recreational boats which will keep out rain and water dripping off your paddle. However, because the cockpit opening is so large, the sprayskirt cannot be secured tightly enough to keep out water from large waves breaking over the side of the kayak. This is another reason not to use a boat like this on the Great Lakes or on the ocean. You will also not be able to learn to roll a recreational kayak because there is no way to keep yourself from falling out of the boat if it capsizes.

If your plans for paddling include wanting to venture out on big water, then you're going to want to take a more serious look at the touring/sea kayaks. Kayaks in this class are longer (14-18 feet) and narrower (under 25 inches). This longer and narrower hull profile helps the boat to track better than a recreational kayak. In other words, the touring kayak will stay on course in the direction you want it to go with fewer corrective strokes than would be needed in a recreational kayak. This is important when paddling long distances on open, exposed waters where you may be fighting difficult wind and wave conditions for extended periods. These kayaks may also have either a retractable rudder or skeg than can be used to assist in tracking. Touring/sea kayaks should have built-in flotation fore and aft that restricts the amount of water that can fill the boat. Typically, this flotation is provided by bulkheads (walls) that separate the interior of the kayak into three compartments. The bow and stern compartments are accessed by watertight hatches. The center compartment is the cockpit where the paddler sits. When a sea kayak capsizes and the paddler exits the boat, water can only fill the cockpit area. The air trapped in the bow and stern compartments keeps the kayak floating high enough above the surface of the water that the paddler can re-enter the kayak and pump the water out, or a second kayaker can lift the capsized kayak and empty the water out before the paddler re-enters the boat. This makes it possible to do deep-water rescues without having to swim the kayak ashore. The cockpit opening on a touring/sea kayak is much smaller than that on a recreational kayak. This allows the paddler to seal the cockpit opening with a sprayskirt that can withstand waves breaking over the kayak. The smaller cockpit opening also lets the paddler brace his

knees on the underside of the deck so that he can remain in the cockpit in the event of a capsize. This is absolutely necessary for being able to learn to roll a kayak. Being able to brace the knees on the underside of the deck also gives the paddler much more control over the kayak in challenging sea conditions. A touring or sea kayak is the best choice for those who want to spend at least some of their time paddling on big water. A sea kayak can still be used on inland lakes and flatwater rivers although it might be wise to choose a shorter, more maneuverable design since turning space may be limited on small rivers. You can purchase touring/sea kayaks in either plastic or composite (fiberglass or kevlar). Plastic is less expensive and more forgiving when a boat is dropped or scraped on rocks. However, plastic kayaks are heavier than fiberglass, more susceptible to hull deformities and UV damage: they tend to move more slowly through the water, and are not nearly as repairable as a composite kayak. For these reasons (and because they just look cool) serious paddlers will usually upgrade from plastic to composite when they can afford it. A more recent option in kayak materials are the new polycarbonate plastics which offer the performance of composites at a price that falls somewhere between polyethylene and composite kayaks. Polycarbonate plastic does not deform like polyethylene and has greater abrasion resistance as well as being more easily repaired. More and more manufacturers are offering boats in this material.

Whitewater kayaks are very different from recreational and touring/sea kayaks because the conditions in which they are used are very different. A whitewater kayak needs to be highly maneuverable. Tracking is not really a benefit in most situations. While whitewater kayaks used to be made out of fiberglass (and a few still are), now almost all whitewater boats are made of plastic because it is more resistant to damage from impacts with rocks. Older whitewater designs used to be longer (10-14 feet). You will rarely see anything that long in a whitewater kayak anymore. Some of the boats are as short as 6 feet. Around the mid 1990's, whitewater kayak designs began to change very rapidly and they are becoming more specialized all the time. Rodeo playboats tend to have a very flat bottom almost like a surfboard, which can help them surf on standing waves in a river. Low volume ends make it easier to submerge the bow and stern when doing stunts like cartwheels. Creek boats have blunt ends and higher interior volume to prevent the kayak from submerging too far when descending steep creeks and going over waterfalls. Slalom kayaks, which are still used in racing competitions in which the paddlers have to negotiate gates that are suspended above the rapids, are still required to be 13'2" in length for legal competition. Beginners often start with a medium length kayak that looks somewhat cigar-shaped. These are known as all-around whitewater kayaks or river running kayaks. They can be a little more forgiving of your mistakes when you are first learning than some of the highly specialized performance-oriented kayaks. If you are interested in paddling whitewater, you should get lessons from a competent instructor. Whitewater carries a great deal of risk, especially for beginners who don't know everything they need to know. A safety feature that you will want in your whitewater kayak is reinforcement in the cockpit area so that your legs do not become trapped in the boat if it gets pinned on a rock in the middle of a rapid. Without this reinforcement, the kayak can very quickly fold in half around a rock under the pressure of the water. Taking lessons will help you figure out what kind of whitewater paddling you are likely to be engaged in and consequently, what kind of whitewater kayak would best serve your needs. When you buy a whitewater boat, you will need to have flotation bags or foam in the bow and stern to limit the amount of water that can enter the kayak if you have to wet exit. Even a small whitewater kayak can become very heavy when it is filled with water. A paddler who has exited his/her kayak will usually have to empty the water out on shore and then re-enter the kayak. A few hybrid kayaks on the market are targeted for people who want to paddle both flatwater and up to class 3 whitewater. This is a pretty tall order. These kayaks will not track very well on flatwater and generally require a skeg or rudder in those situations. They will allow you to paddle down a stretch of whitewater rapids, but won't do very well if you desire to stop and do some cartwheels along the way. That is why there are only a very few designs being marketed in this category. If you want to paddle flatwater and whitewater, you had better start saving up for two separate boats!

Sit-on-tops are a fourth type of kayak, although there are sit-on-top kayaks designed for recreational use, sea touring, whitewater, and racing. Sit-on-tops are generally (but now always) more stable than kayaks where you sit inside a cockpit. They are a good choice for beginners who haven't practiced wet exits or who have a fear of being trapped in the cockpit. People who paddle in warm climates often prefer sit-on-tops because the paddler can stay cooler. Conversely, sit-on-tops tend not to be as popular in colder climates where the water temperatures are also colder. The paddler is more likely to get wet and cold if he/she is not dressed appropriately. Sit-on-tops have a shorter usable season in the upper latitudes. Scuba divers will often choose a sit-on-top because it is easier to carry air tanks on deck and it is

easier to climb back aboard after completing a dive. Most sit-on-tops are manufactured in plastic, but there are a few manufacturers who also produce sit-on-tops in fiberglass.

There are a few other types of kayaks that fill special niches in the market. Folding kayaks are a good option for apartment dwellers who have limited storage space or for travelers who want to be able to take a kayak with them on an airplane. They do, however, require 15-45 minutes to assemble depending on the model and how much experience you have in putting your boat together, and they tend to be expensive. Inflatable kayaks have similar benefits and disadvantages. They are also popular among some river runners because the inflated tubes make these kayaks more forgiving in rapids for beginners. Whitewater inflatables are sometimes referred to as "duckies".

Whatever your needs, there is probably at least one kayak, if not several, that will fill the bill for you. Keep in mind that there is no one perfect boat for every kind of paddling. Educate yourself, test paddle, get reliable advice, then take your best guess. More than likely your first kayak will not be your last. What you learn from owning and paddling that first boat will be indispensable when you buy the next kayak, and the one after that, and the one. . . you get the picture.