

## HOW TO CHOOSE A RECREATIONAL KAYAK



Recreational kayaking has been one of the fastest growing summer sports over the past several years. The term 'recreational' refers to flat-water kayaking that can be done comfortably and at low risk by the general populace at the cottage, campsite or lakeside. It is NOT the type of kayaking that requires a superhuman (some might say "amphibious") capability to be suspended upside down in the water, while bobbing through a set of rocky rapids.

### **Is Recreational Kayaking for me?**

**User friendly** is a very appropriate descriptor for these water craft.

Most recreational paddlers have never mastered the rolling technique because they don't need to. People who are new to kayaking often have a paranoia that they will not be able to get out of the kayak if it tips. Firstly, recreational kayakers do not tip easily and secondly, as long as the paddler is in an appropriately sized kayak, the paddler will easily fall out if it does tip. Recreational kayakers are easy to get in and out of, relatively light weight and most importantly, they are designed for stability and to track a straight line in the water. For example, it is much easier and more efficient to paddle a kayak solo than it is to paddle a canoe solo. Having said this, there are some safety tips and techniques to know about and if you are completely new to the sport we recommend that you take a short course or paddle with someone who is experienced, at least to start.

Trying to decide which kayak to buy? Consider these questions first.

### **Where are you going to paddle?**

The larger the body of water the more likely you are to encounter wind and waves. A longer kayak, especially one that has a rudder, can generally handle rough water better than a short kayak. If you plan to paddle large lakes or open areas such as Georgian Bay then you should consider a boat that is 14' or longer. If you are paddling on a small cottage lake then you can easily go under 14'. If you plan to paddle in different lakes then you will need versatility but know the limitations of the boat you purchase.

### **What kind of paddler are you?**

Do you anticipate that you'll want speed and performance or do you plan to putter along the shoreline? Are you looking for fitness as a main objective or perhaps a way to get out on the water away from responsibilities on shore?

The longer and narrower the kayak, the faster its natural hull speed and you'll cover more distance for your effort. A shorter and wider kayak will naturally be slower and will cover less distance with each stroke. One feature of all recreational kayakers, regardless of

length, is their natural stability but there are still variations from boat to boat. Have this conversation with our knowledgeable staff and choose a length and hull shape that fits your style and comfort level.

### **What size are you? Do you fit?**

Not every boat fits every person and a lot can be determined by simply sitting in a kayak. You should be able to comfortably get in and out and sit in the boat without feeling cramped. You should also be able to brace your lower thighs on the sides of the kayak and reach the foot braces with a slight bend in your knees. Most kayaks have a maximum weight capacity and this is worth knowing beforehand. If your weight is approaching this limit you should consider a larger volume boat.

If you are a large or tall person, or if you are not very agile, then getting in and out of the kayak can be one of your biggest challenges. In this case look for a kayak that has a large cockpit as this greatly eases entry and exit. Some kayaks have a cockpit large enough that you can virtually stand on the hull and easily drop your butt onto the seat without having to do any wiggling. A large cockpit such as this is also perfect for someone who is paranoid of tipping and not being able to get out of the kayak.

If you are a very tall person you also need to find a kayak that accommodates your leg and foot length. Because kayaks narrow towards the front, large feet can be problematic. Make sure that your feet will sit comfortably on the foot braces without being cramped by the frame of the boat.

Smaller people will not want a kayak that is too large as you will be surrounded by too much boat and it will be harder to manoeuvre. If you are small you will want a smaller cockpit as it offers more protection and a better 'fit'. You should be able to brace the sides of the boat with your thighs which improves your paddling efficiency and stability, so weigh this into your decision. If you are a size small, you would never purchase a size large, so apply the same concept to the kayak you paddle. Children for example should use a kayak that is appropriate for their size to allow them to easily manage the kayak.

### **Further considerations:**

- **Seat comfort:** the seat configuration of a kayak can vary dramatically, but good back support is essential. More athletic paddlers will want a seat that allows an upright paddling position with a straight back. This enables the paddler to engage the back and torso muscles in their paddling stroke, thereby giving more power. Relaxed paddlers might prefer a more reclined seat back. A good feature on a seat is one that allows adjustability between upright and reclined positioning.
- **Rudder or no rudder:** Many beginner kayakers are under the impression that a rudder is designed to turn the boat but in actual fact its main purpose is to help the kayak hold a straight course in windy conditions. For this reason a rudder becomes more necessary on larger bodies of open water. Kayaks being used on smaller lakes or protected areas will not require a rudder as the hull is designed to make it easy to keep on course. Most kayaks are equipped with foot braces as this offers an important point of contact which aids paddling and improves stability.
- **Sit-upon or sit in?:** A sit-upon kayak is obviously very easy to get in and out of and it is a very stable watercraft. This type of kayak appeals to someone who is more comfortable with the idea of sitting 'on top' the water vs. 'in the water'.

A sit-upon is also great for kids who will enjoy it as a water toy and they will learn how to handle a kayak quite easily. Paddling a sit-upon is generally a "wetter" activity and is not as suitable for longer paddling excursions. If it is a true paddling experience you are looking for then we recommend a kayak with a cockpit.

- **Storage Areas:** If you plan to go on short day excursions it is nice to be able to store gear in a water tight area. "Bulkheads" (a sealed-off watertight portion in bow or stern) with a covered hatch are a perfect option and they also provide excellent buoyancy should the kayak ever fill with water. If a watertight hatch is not an option you can also store gear in a watertight "dry bag" behind the seat or in front of your legs if there is space.
- **Size of boat for carrying and storing:** The size of boat you purchase may be limited by your available storage area when you are not using the kayak. It may also be limited by the weight you are willing to carry to get the kayak down to the water or on to your vehicle.
- **Material:** Most recreational kayaks are made of a moulded plastic called polyethylene. They are extremely durable and capable of handling a fair bit of abuse. Fibreglass or 'hard-shell' kayaks are lighter in weight and faster in the water however they do scratch and damage more easily. They are also quite a bit more expensive so they typically appeal to a "one-person" user who is prepared to take excellent care of their kayak. Both polyethylene and fibreglass materials are susceptible to UV rays so they should be stored out of direct sunlight when not in use.
- **Accessories:** When planning to purchase a kayak don't forget to budget for a good quality, comfortable PFD, a paddle, and the required safety kit. Depending on the type of kayak you buy, a spray skirt and cockpit cover may be necessary items.

Your PFD should be short enough that it doesn't 'ride up' when you are sitting in the kayak and it should be designed to leave lots of room for your arms to move without interference or chaffing. When testing a PFD it is a good idea to sit in a kayak with the PFD on and imitate a paddling stroke, in order to give you an accurate feel. A good PFD will be fitted but have plenty of adjustability.

We can't emphasize enough that no matter what kayak you purchase, a good paddle is key! We won't go into the full details at this point but a light weight, well constructed paddle makes a world of difference to the enjoyment of recreational kayaking.

- **Try before you buy:** Taking the kayak and paddle for a "test drive" is a great idea. Many of our floor models are also represented in our rental programme making it easy for us to offer this option. If you wish to do a test paddle just let us know and it can be arranged at no cost. If you would like to rent a kayak, then a portion of the rental cost will be deducted from a future purchase.

We look forward to helping you get into (and out of) your new kayak. An important part of enjoying your kayaking experience will be getting the right kayak, paddle, PFD, spray skirt and cockpit cover. Our staff will be happy to spend the time discussing your needs and offering our expertise to help you get out and enjoy this wonderful summer sport.