

Choosing a Kayak

So Many Boats - So Little Money

By Ed Berg



This is the second of a three part series discussing choosing a sea kayak.

Price

There are a few broad categories here. If you need to stay under \$2000, you have three choices: buy a used boat, buy a polyethylene boat, or build your own plywood or cedar strip boat. Anything goes in the used boat category: there is an infinity of good and bad choices, so get knowledgeable help with your decision.

Polyethylene boats range from pretty bad to very good. They are all a bit heavier (55-65lbs) than fiberglass (50-55lbs), and are considerably heavier than wood or kevlar/graphite boats (40-50lbs). Polyethylene boats are all very low on maintenance, and they are nearly indestructible. No need to worry about gouges from rocky landings or from dragging the boat across rocky beaches.

As far as weight goes, a light boat is easier to get off your vehicle and over to the water, and the lightweights accelerate a bit faster. But 10 pounds added to your weight of over 130 lbs is less than eight percent difference, so it isn't really critical once you get moving. And with a load of camping gear, the difference really disappears.

The plywood kit boats cost less than \$900 to finish and launch. They weigh no more than a kevlar boat! Fiberglass boats run from \$2000 to \$2500. Kevlar and graphite boats start in the area of \$2500 and go up to almost anything you want to pay. Add \$120 to \$350 for a paddle.

On paddles: you get what you pay for. The more you paddle, the more pleasure a well-designed, well-fitted lightweight paddle becomes. If you think a 36 ounce wood paddle feels just as good as a 23 ounce graphite paddle, borrow a lightweight from Harv Mastalir at a club paddle. Harv says no one has ever bought a lightweight paddle and then returned it to get their money back. Just like kayaks, paddles need to be sized to your strength, torso length, boat width and paddling style.

Does your stroke put the paddle up near-vertical and close to the boat, or do you sweep outward with the paddle held more horizontally? Look for an article on choosing a paddle in the next newsletter.

Building a Boat

You have two choices here: build a plywood boat from a kit or from plans, or build a cedar strip boat from plans or your own design. Many plywood kit boats are actually on par with the very best \$3000+ kevlar/graphite designs in weight, performance, durability and maintenance. You should clean and wax a fiberglass or kevlar boat once a year if you're particular. You will spend no more time varnishing a wood boat every other year. Plywood kits run about \$650, complete with everything but sandpaper and paint. If you buy the raw materials and build from plans it will cost you almost as much, and you can't cut the pieces as accurately as the kit manufacturers can. You only need a few hand tools, about 85 hours of spare time (equals 20 football games), very little skill, and you have a superb boat when you're done (instead of whatever people have after they watch a football game).

If you want to build a cedar-strip boat, better buy a few books on the subject, and get ready for a season of enjoyable work. This is a subject all its own, but the bottom line is that almost anyone CAN build one. They require much more time, but no more skill than a plywood kit boat, and produce a beautiful, durable, lightweight, low-maintenance and seaworthy craft. I've built one plywood boat from a kit and three "strippers", and am finishing my fourth, and I am emphatically NOT a cabinetmaker! The biggest flaws in my boats arise from my own design shortcomings, and you can avoid this by buying plans or kits.

Designing your own kayak is trickier than it seems. I thought from the wide range of shapes in the Sea Kayaker reviews that almost anything would work. Well, yes and no. My first design does in fact work, (it floats well and looks good) but it required modification to make it bal-

ance in the wind. The bow still tends to plow into waves, and the boat tries to broach in following waves. It's hard to turn without a rudder. It works, but its manners aren't good in rough water.

Bulkheads and Hatches

Much like rudders, you can take your choice. Above all, you need flotation! If your kayak is fitted with bulkheads and hatches, you've got flotation. If not, you need airbags or removable bulkheads. It is impossible to reenter and paddle a kayak that is submerged when you're sitting in it. In cold water or an offshore wind, this is not a good situation. Only one inch of water in the cockpit severely destabilizes a kayak. My latest boat will have no permanent bulkheads, since I was tired of building them and the necessary hatches. But it will definitely have removable 3" dense foam bulkheads to guarantee the boat will sit high in the water if I have to get out and get back in.

Hand in glove with bulkheads and hatches are bailing pumps. Nearly all of us have a hand pump we can strap onto the deck. These are okay for easy paddles, especially when you're paddling with others who can stabilize your boat in the wind and waves. Permanently mounted pumps, especially foot-operated, are vastly better, because they allow you to use your hands to balance the boat with. Remember, you didn't fall out of the boat because the water was too CALM.

Collapsible and Tandem Boats

Buy a folding or inflatable boat if you have no space for a hardshell boat, or if you want to travel a lot with your own boat. Collapsing boats do what they do very well (collapse), and they solve the space and shipping problem in a way that no other boats can, but they WILL take time to assemble or inflate every time you go paddling. Some collapsible designs are more difficult to paddle than others. This is NOT a property of the collapsible boat

per se; some of the folding boats are very efficient, good-handling designs.

Inflatables have much more wind profile, and less "keel" shape than hardshell boats, so they do not do well in wind. And they have limited storage space.

Even an easy paddling collapsible STILL has to be made ready while your buddies are doing something more fun than cussing and straining and pumping up (so to speak). Most collapsibles are considerably heavier than hardshells. This is no problem on the water, but getting off the car and to the water is less fun. We have noticed that owners of collapsibles don't show up at club paddles nearly as often as do owners of hardshell boats. Maybe they're travelling to exotic places with their boats rolled up in bags.

Tandems are like folders. They solve a specific problem very well. If you're a big strong guy, and your paddling mate is a delicate lady type person, she will NOT be having fun in the wind and waves that are such a delight for you, especially when you paddle off and leave her. This will result in the eventual loss of a companion to paddle with, and maybe to do other things with. Paddling is great, but it isn't everything. Tandems are referred to as "divorce boats" by some people, but the folks we know who have them, love them. Paula and I love ours, and the bottom line is that if I want to get a good hard workout and she doesn't, she will STILL get to the destination 6 feet ahead of me!

The tandem makes it possible for us both to enjoy the trip, each at our own paddling levels. Not to mention that the tandem can take on about 200 pounds of gear and only lose one inch of freeboard. Not to mention that the special *Someone* in front can reach around and hand out refreshment and directions, all under way. Not to mention that the *Someone* in front gets a 1.3 gorilla-power propulsion unit to push while she admires the scenery or visits with other paddlers. An all-around good deal.

And tandems are FAST: tandems have more drag and are heavier than any single-seat boats on the water. But remember that you have two power units, for only about 30% more drag. This translates into 10 to 20% more speed.

*Look for the last installment
in the next newsletter.*