



# Selecting the Right Paddle

By Harv Mastalir

On a recent visit to a local paddling shop, I overheard the salesperson explaining how to determine the length of a touring paddle. She had the customer reach up as high as he could and supposedly the paddle was to be the height of his outstretched fingertips. This might be an old formula for determining the length of skis, but it has absolutely nothing to do with determining the length of paddle to use! It will result in a paddle that is too long and inefficient. If this is the kind of information paddling shops are dispensing, we need help!

How tall you are has little to do with determining paddle length. If a person 5 feet 4 inches tall sits on the floor next to a person 6 feet 4 inches tall you will notice that both of their hands reach the floor equally well. This is effectively what happens when you paddle a kayak. The taller paddler may want a slightly longer paddle because they will want to spread their hands farther apart on the paddle shaft. Their torso will also be slightly longer so they will hold the paddle slightly higher than the shorter person, so they might pick a paddle 5 cm or so longer than the shorter paddler would.

There are 2 basic schools of thought on paddle length. One is that the paddle should be long so you can enjoy a long slow stroke. The other is that a short paddle is advantageous. I subscribe to the short paddle school. There are several advantages to having a short paddle. A short paddle will pull with less resistance, so it will be easier on your muscles and joints. To achieve the same thrust as a longer paddle you paddle at a higher cadence. When the wind and waves kick up you can respond faster with a shorter paddle. A shorter paddle results in a more vertical paddling style so the blade is closer to the boat, where it has more forward thrust and less of a turning component in each stroke. It also provides a shorter lever arm to catch the wind. Where you will really notice the difference, however, is paddling into a headwind. I have been out with my wife Susan, and after a few minutes of paddling into the wind we would switch paddles. Although my paddle was only 7 cm shorter than hers, she would

immediately start paddling faster and she would always comment on how much easier it was to paddle with the shorter paddle. It didn't take us long to get her a shorter paddle! In tests I have tried, I found that I can paddle faster, longer and farther with a shorter paddle.

So how long should a paddle be? (An old salt I know reminds me that it only needs to reach the water.) First of all, never buy a paddle without trying it out. To start out, I would try a 220 cm paddle. Don't be afraid to go shorter. Try a 215 cm. If the cadence is too fast (the shorter the paddle the faster the cadence) you know you want the 220 cm paddle. If your kayak is extra wide you may want to go up to 225 cm. If you are particularly large, you may want to try the 225 also. If your kayak seat is especially high you may want a longer paddle also. To give you an idea, my kayak is 21 inches wide and I use a 213 cm paddle. I use a 230 cm paddle in my double which is 30 inches wide. I know that plenty of kayakers in our club paddle with 230 cm or longer paddles in their single kayaks. Many of them would benefit from using a shorter paddle.

I prefer a short wide blade rather than a long skinny one. Mine measures 7 1/4 inches wide by 16 inches long. I prefer this blade shape because it allows me to have a shorter paddle. The extra shaft length I gain will give me greater leverage in sweep strokes and bracing. Also, because of its shape, it gives a more solid brace.

Another factor you will have to come to terms with in choosing a paddle is weight, and when we talk about weight we are also talking about cost. The lighter the paddle the higher the cost because the materials are more expensive. A paddle with plastic blades and an aluminum shaft will weigh 3 lbs. 4 oz. and cost \$38. A good fiberglass paddle will weigh between 2 and 2 1/4 lbs and cost about \$225. A carbon fiber (graphite) paddle will weigh about 23 oz. and cost over \$300. Some run over \$400. In spite of the cost, ultralight paddles are very popular and with good reason. I have never heard of someone buying an ultralight paddle and then wanting to go back to a heavier paddle.

You will have to decide if you want a 2 piece breakdown paddle or a one piece. A 2 piece is definitely easier to transport and store, but it is also weaker. Don't take a breakdown paddle in the surf! Also, eventually the joint wears and loosens. Even so, if you look around at club paddles, you will see almost all of the paddles are 2 piece.

While color may seem like a cosmetic choice, it has safety implications as well. From a distance, often a kayaker is only visible by the rhythm of the paddle on the horizon. A white paddle is much more visible than a black one.

There are other things to consider when choosing a paddle, (see sidebar) but these are the basic points in a nutshell. I am always happy to talk about paddles if someone has questions. Remember that on a typical 20 mile day, you will have put in more than 10,000 strokes. Your paddle is not the place to save money by buying lower quality. Choosing the right paddle will enhance your enjoyment of kayaking. Also remember, with any paddle, to water regularly. Happy paddling!

Here is a list of paddle characteristics that Matt Broze of Mariner Kayaks put together to help people evaluate paddles.

He likes paddles that:

1. Are light
2. Are strong and durable
3. Are well balanced
4. Are solid and predictable
5. Don't flutter, zigzag or circle
6. Don't leak
7. Don't cool your hands
8. Require little or no maintenance
9. Have plenty of oval over a long area of the shaft
10. Don't pick up and throw water
11. Have a blade size or shape that clears the deck at the start of a stroke without the paddle being too long
12. Does not ventilate (get a lot of air behind the blade on a hard stroke)