



Choosing the Right Kayak For You!

By Ron Smith

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Congratulations! You're going to buy a kayak! You are about to embark upon a great adventure...one filled with many choices. And depending upon your decisions, your choices will dictate whether you and your kayak have a long and wonderful relationship exploring and adventuring or it becomes a doomed relationship of missed dreams and unmet expectations!

Ron's First Rule:

Don't Buy Until You've Paddled the Boat!

Garages, backyards, barns and paddling club newsletters are all filled with kayaks that didn't work out for the owner. In many cases these boats were bought without being paddled. No matter how the boat feels in the showroom, it will feel different afloat! Take the time, paddle before you buy! The money you save will be your own!!

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions

1. **Where are you going to paddle:** Inland lakes, streams, flat flowing rivers, the Great Lakes, large rivers, the ocean? There are many fine boats out there. Each has been designed to fit a purpose. Choose the right boat and it will lead to adventures that you'll remember all your life. Choose the wrong boat and your first adventure may be your last.

Ron's Second Rule:

You can paddle a boat "down" but it's risky to paddle a boat "up"!

By this I mean an expedition seakayak, designed for open waters can safely be paddled on an inland lake. You've paddled the boat "down" from its intended use. But take a flat-bottomed recreational kayak out on Lake Superior along the cliffs at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and you are putting yourself in peril. You've paddled the boat "up" from its intended design. The conditions may become more challenging than the boat is designed to handle.

2. **How do you plan to use your boat?** Are you looking for a boat for day trips, potential overnight trips, or extended expeditions. The ability of the boat to fit your needs is important. How much gear you plan on carrying will impact the boat length, number of hatches and other accessories such as compasses and day hatches and accessory straps.
3. **Speed vs. Maneuverability:** All things being equal, longer boats are faster than shorter boats. Boats with relatively flat keels looking front to back will “track” straighter and be faster. Kayaks with “rocker” turn easier but are usually slower. This is a trade off.
4. **Hull Shape:** Kayak hulls, like canoes come in various designs. From flat bottomed to shallow arch, rounded vee, deep vee, rounded bottom and hard or multi-chined. Flat bottom boats feel and are very stable...**on clam waters.** Deep vee hulls feel very tippy at first but become more stable in rougher waters with added skill.
5. **Initial Stability vs. Secondary Stability:** Initial stability has to do with how stable the boat feels afloat. High initial stability means the boat feels as solid as a picnic table beneath you. Wide flat bottomed boats typically have high initial stability. But a boat with high initial stability by design, typically has low secondary stability. Secondary stability is the ability of the boat to right itself when leaned. Most paddlers, as they become more skilled go for boats with less initial stability and more secondary stability as they learn to lean their boats, do rolls and paddle rougher waters. Often times beginners opt for a boat with too much initial stability, then quickly grow tired of the boat as it won't perform as their skills grow.

Ron's Third Rule:

Buy a boat that makes you say “uh oh” when you first get in. That boat will grow with you as you develop better skills.

6. **Boat Fit:** Proper boat fit is critical to your ability to grow as a paddler and to handle your boat safely. There are five main points of contact between you and your boat; feet on foot pegs (2 points), thighs against the thigh braces (2 points) and your bum (butt) against the seat back or back strap (1 point). You should be able to tense these five points while maintaining proper paddling posture. (torso straight up or slightly forward, knees bent at about a 60 degree angle and feet *slightly* forward on the foot pegs).

7. There should be no more space than the thickness of your hand between your hip and the side of the seat. As you develop as a paddler you'll learn to control your boat with subtle shifts in your weight and by slightly raising and lowering your knee or thigh. If your cockpit is so big that you can't maintain contact with the boat you'll not be able to control the boat, especially in more challenging conditions. Also it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to properly execute a high brace or kayak roll the boat if it doesn't fit properly. If the boat is a reasonable good fit to begin with, then, as most of us do, you'll customize the fit by gluing in closed cell foam.

Ron's Fourth Rule:

A properly fitted kayak should fit you like your favorite pair of blue jeans...snug but comfortable.

8. **Materials:** Modern day kayaks are made of a wide variety of materials. Canvas over frame in the traditional Greenland or Inuit style, wood boats, roto-molded plastic, fiberglass, kevlar, and carbon fiber. Weight and maintenance and cost become a factor. Wood and plastic are typically the heaviest boats, while Kevlar and carbon fiber are the lightest. Wood requires a lot of maintenance to preserve the beauty of the wood and protect it from the elements. UV rays from the sun can destroy an unprotected plastic boat in just a couple of seasons. Fiberglass boats are typically lighter than wood boats depending upon the layup. They are typically maintenance free, needing a coat of marine wax once or twice a season and can be relatively easily repaired in the field if necessary. Kevlar and carbon fiber are ultra light weight and are almost indestructible. But they can be very expensive...sometimes \$1,000 higher in price than an identical fiberglass kayak.
9. **Rudders, Skegs and Modified Hulls:** Rudders are designed to help the paddler keep the boat going straight in crosswinds and will help the paddler turn the boat. Rudders can be a great aid if you are going to do long trips. However, rudders are mechanical and mechanical things break from time to time. You will need to be prepared to perform emergency repairs on a rudder when venturing away from home. In addition, rudders can be a hazard if they break and the foot rests become sloppy robbing the paddler of a key bracing point. Many boat manufacturers put rudders on the boat not knowing if the paddler will ever take instructions and learn to paddle properly. There are a couple of rudder manufacturers who have solved the "floating foot peg" problem when the cable breaks. These rudder systems feature an articulated toe where the toe piece is separate and

controls the rudder cable. In these systems if the rudder cable breaks the main footpeg remains solid and only the toe piece is loose. This design is a significant improvement for both paddling efficiency as it allows leg drive without unintentionally turning the boat. It also is a significant improvement from a boat safety aspect as the foot peg still has integrity to allow for bracing off the foot peg if necessary. Skegs are another option. Skegs are typically retractable and help the boat track straight in crosswinds. They do not assist in helping turn the boat. Skegs can jam from time to time and cable actuated skegs can kink rendering them useless. Modified hulls have a straight keel which acts as an integral skeg and help the boat track straight. However, the modified hull can make the boat difficult to turn. So again, there are choices with no clear right answer.

10. **Cost:** Recreational kayaks cost between \$400 - \$800. Seaworthy seakayaks can cost between \$1,100 - \$4,000 depending upon materials and options.

Other Options:

Bulkheads: Every kayak needs floatation to stay afloat. This is provided either by floatation bags or watertight bulkheads. Bulkheads divide the boat into sections. The resultant “watertight” compartments provide the floatation. If floatation bags are used, they must be secured in the boats.

Hatches: Hatches allow access to the storage areas created by bulkheads. There are many designs of hatch systems and they aren’t created equal in terms of leakage. If you won’t be paddling in waves, surfing or doing rescue practice then leaking hatches aren’t an issue...but if you are....remember, the integrity of your hatch system largely dictates the water-tightness of your compartments and those compartments provide the floatation for your boat.

Decklines: Every kayak other than sit a tops should have deck lines running from the bow to the stern. The ability to grab onto a deckline is critical if you have to come out of your boat. Decklines are also invaluable in performing assisted rescues. Accessory lines and straps are helpful as well for storing gear and/or being able to park a paddle for a paddlefloat re-entry rescue.

Seats: Kayaks come with a variety of seat options. Ridge foam backed seats to foam padded seats to fiberglass molded and hung seats with adjustable back straps. The key is your comfort. Seats with various adjustments can be custom fitted for your comfort. Ridge seat backs can be comfortable at first but typically support the back too far up and can get in the way during rescues. Try them out while paddling. You need to

be comfortable in your boat to enjoy it. The longer you can sit in your boat, the further you can paddle and the more there is to see!

Color: Color is more than a personal choice...it has to do with safety. As kayakers we share the water with a variety of other craft. Visibility is the first element of safety when it comes to dealing with on the water traffic. A kayak makes a very small visual on the water and even more so when waves are present. In order for other boaters to miss you they first have to be able to see you. Secondly, things can go wrong, and you may need assistance on the water. If you are paddling on the Great Lakes or the ocean, the first response will be from aircraft. You need to be seen to be rescued.

According to tests conducted by the U.S. Coast Guard the order of visibility is: Magenta, International Orange, Signal Yellow, Red, and White. Other colors cannot be generally distinguished from their backgrounds unless up close. Consider this when purchasing your kayak **AND PFD**.

So, sit back, and do some homework before you grab for that checkbook. Then...

Enjoy Your New Boat and the Wonderful World of Kayaking!

And please... Paddle Safe!!!

~ Ron & Suzie Smith



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