

# Atlantic Kayak Tours

## How to Shop for Your First Kayak

Atlantic Kayak Tours Informational Booklet

Version 1.0, November 2002<sup>©</sup>

### Making sense of what you see at the boat store

Like shiny new sports cars, sea kayaks lined up in the store all look good. That yellow one over there. That's one hot-looking boat. Not like that gray slug I paddled with the outfitter. Yo! How much is the Turbo Orca? Somewhere down inside our cerebral cortex, we understand that we're not real sure what we're looking at, but meanwhile there's this little voice saying "It's you. It's SO you. This is the boat that'll make YOU the kayaker in the SUV commercial." That the voice turns out to be coming from the salesman doesn't make it any less compelling. He's a kayak pro, isn't he? And right now

he's making all kinds of sense about "secondary stability" and "rocker" and "righting moments" and the diamond-pattern deck bungees - the Turbo Orca signature, he tells you. Give me some of that! You're thinking. And at the same time you're wondering What is that?

This article won't tell you what kind of sea kayak you should buy. But it will tell you what you're looking at when you go shopping for one. So let's go shopping.



## How Much Boat

How much boat? Since we're looking for a sea boat, we can ignore all the whitewater kayaks that look like stubby stealth bombers, and the recreational boats that are basically semi-covered canoes. We're after one of those long, skinny jobs, the longest boats in the store. Sea kayaks range from about fifteen feet to eighteen feet or more. Tandem kayaks - the "two holers" - are even longer, over twenty feet, and rarely a great choice for a first purchase. (Tandems are next to impossible to paddle without a partner and it's easier to share a scenic moment when you're not trying to converse with someone who's five feet behind you.) Still, even a single sea kayak is a lengthy proposition. All other things being equal, a longer boat will make better speed than a shorter one, but unless you're planning an expedition or need to carry a mountain of gear, eighteen feet is a lot of boat to handle - too much for most first-boat paddlers. Sixteen to seventeen feet or so is a good range.

To get our imaginary shopping trip started, we're going to take a random sample of sea kayaks down from their racks and set them on the floor. As you place each boat on the floor, you'll see differences right away. Some will tilt over on their sides while others sit up straight. These flatter-bottomed boats will also feel more stable in the water, especially to the new paddler. They have what designers call initial stability. The ones that are obviously tippy are made that way to make it easier for more experienced paddlers to carve turns and lean into waves coming at them from the side. Initial stability is always high on the list for first-time kayak buyers, but quickly becomes less of a concern as skills develop: A bicycle

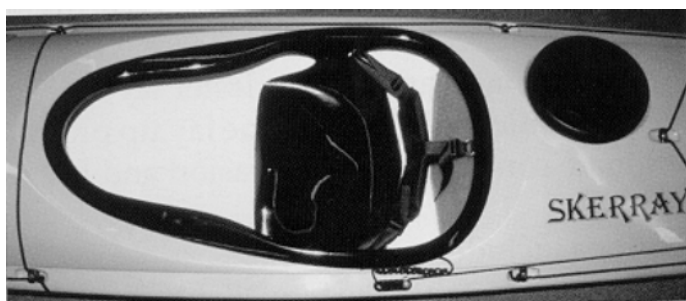


Figure 1) The key hole cockpit is preferred by some paddlers over the smaller ocean cockpit. The extra hatch is a favorite option to most experienced paddlers. It allows you to get to your safety equipment while on the water without sacrificing safety.

has no initial stability at all and most of us don't give it a thought.

Walk around your row of boats and look at them end-on. You'll see some are very skinny - no more than an inch or so wider than your hips - while others are a good deal wider. The difference in how these boats perform is pretty much what you'd guess by looking. A narrower kayak will be quicker and more nimble than a boat that's big and wide and, well, more boat-like. If you are interested in the "sport" of sea kayaking and want to carve turns and generally play in the water, the skinnier boat will serve you better, especially as your skills grow. On the other hand, if you simply want to enjoy being on the water, a wider boat may have some pluses for you. A wide boat (over 24") will feel more stable than a narrow one and obviously carry more gear. At Atlantic Kayak Tours, we often put nervous paddlers in our wider boats, but that's not to say that fat boats are for novices. There are a lot of long-time paddlers who simply aren't interested in sports car-like handling. They have other things in mind and like the feeling of having a lot of boat around them.

Now walk around and look at the boats from the side. Some will have long straight keels that stay in contact with the floor for most of their length. Others will have keels that bend up away from the floor, like the rockers under a rocking chair. Which is why this bend is called "rocker". A boat with more rocker will be easier to turn than one with a long straight keel because your turning strokes don't have to twist so much keel through the water. The trade-off is that a long straight keel will "track" better. It will help keep the boat going in a straight line precisely because it is a little harder to turn. Neither quality should be a decision-maker by itself, since going straight and turning are both things you will need to do. And as your skills improve you'll learn how to keep the high-rocker boat on track - or get the good-tracking boat to turn on a dime.

Still looking from the side, study the shape of the whole boat, not just the keel. Some kayak hulls stand up high and proud as a ship, while others have a low deck like a submarine. Boats with a higher profile will have more room to carry stuff, including you, but will be more affected by the wind. High winds are more of a problem for sea kayaks than big waves. And like the difference

between a sedan and a minivan, you'll notice a boat's windage most when you're being buffeted by crosswinds.

Most British and "Greenland style" kayaks are designed for windy, exposed conditions so their decks are low to the water. The rear deck of VCP's Anas Acuta is barely two inches above the waterline. It can't carry a lot of gear, but the low profile makes it a joy to paddle on a windy day when others are struggling. Another striking feature of these boats is how the bow and stern rise up to peaks, even though most of the deck is low. The peaked bow and stern help keep the ends from "submarining" under steep waves and add buoyancy that makes the boat easier to Eskimo roll up in case of a capsized.

These boats were designed to handle rough conditions along exposed coastlines.

A different style of kayak evolved in the Pacific Northwest, where there are hundreds upon hundreds of miles of relatively protected waterways. They tend to have high straight decks with lots of room below and long straight keels. These boats are ideal for carrying lots of stuff on long Point A to Point B trips. The trade-off you knew was coming is that with so much boat above the water these kayaks can be hard to handle in windy conditions. Which is why so many of them have rudders.

### Rudders and Skegs

Rudders are the subject of almost religious debate among paddlers. Purists say going rudder-free makes you a better paddler, and besides, a well-designed boat ("Like mine," they'll tell you) shouldn't need a rudder. Pro-rudder paddlers dismiss the purists as a bunch of Inuit-wannabes who are being silly to pass up such an obvious convenience.

Weird as it seems, the chief benefit of a rudder is less to actually steer the boat than to help it go straight. In crosswinds, big, high-profile kayaks require more strength or technique to hold on course. A rudder makes it easy for paddlers at any skill level to stay on track. At Atlantic Kayak Tours, none of our guides' boats have rudders but about 25% of our fleet boats for clients do. Even so, we begin our trips with rudders in their "up"



Figure 2) Retractable skeg are available on some kayaks.

position. If the wind kicks up and clients are having control issues, we drop the rudders.

Some boats come with a retractable skeg: a little fin like the ones you see on the back of surfboards. The paddler can raise it or lower it from the cockpit. A skeg makes it easier to control the boat in high winds or strong currents. That can be a real plus if you are willing to add some weight (about 3 lbs.) and some cost (about \$200) and sacrifice some stowage space (which can be a lot of stowage space in a smaller-sized boat). As with rudders, boats that come with skegs are signalling you that they will probably need these devices in some conditions. So if the boat that fits your specs is offered with a skeg, it's an option you should probably take. Keep in mind, though, that skegs and rudders require maintenance and sometimes repair. Rudder fittings are exposed and can be damaged by unplanned encounters with other boats or obstacles that you failed to notice. Like the beach. Likewise, the cables that raise and lower skegs can get kinked and jam. There's a great deal to be said for kayaks that have no moving parts.



Figure 3) A single change on the hull can totally change the handling characteristics of the boat. Top boat; Nordkapp H, Bottom boat; Nordkapp HM.

## Construction and Cost

Construction and Cost. People ask us all the time, "How much does a kayak cost?" And the answer always depends on how it's made. The cheapest sea kayaks are made of rotomolded plastic. They're injection molded, like Clorox bottles, and range in cost from about \$1000 to \$1800. Fiberglass kayaks run from about \$2,000 to \$3,000. A boat made with Kevlar and/or carbon fiber instead of glass fibers will trim weight by up to 25%, and beef up the price by as much as 50%. As with everything else, it's all about trade-offs, but a big clue is that most of our fleet boats - and all the staff's personal sea kayaks - are fiberglass.

Plastic boats are cheap and they are rugged. You've seen plastic bottles washed up on the beach: How many are broken? It's no accident that all whitewater kayakers are made of plastic. Whitewater paddlers bang off rocks all the time. Collisions that would send a glass boat home for repairs are just another battle scar on a plastic boat. So what's not to like? Plastic boats aren't tough because they're hard; they stand up to beatings because plastic is soft. Which makes for a less rigid boat. You can hang a glass boat in the garage by its toggles for a month and it'll paddle like the day it came from the factory. Hang up a plastic boat and inside a week it'll bend like a banana. Okay, nobody hangs up plastic boats like that, but over time the hull will nonetheless bend in and out here and there, deforming slightly.

Given equal care, a fiberglass boat will have a longer life at its best performance than a plastic boat, about as long as a car. Is it worth spending the extra money? Not if the difference means having no boat at all. But in that case, most of our staff would still recommend a good used fiberglass boat over a new plastic boat.



Figure 4) The Greenlander is a Inuit style kayak. It is very fast and tracks well.

Kevlar is another story. The primary benefit of Kevlar and/or carbon construction is weight savings. Which puts a big smile on the face of Kevlar boat owners during the five minutes a day we're lugging our boats between the cars and the beach. On the water, there's no particular advantage to a lighter boat. And although Kevlar is used in bulletproof vests, that doesn't mean it makes a bullet-proof boat. Kevlar kayakers are actually somewhat less rugged than most fiberglass boats, and when they do sustain damage, repairs require more extensive (and expensive) work. A construction issue with some Kevlar boats is that the Kevlar fibers have more "give" than the hard gel-coat that covers them. An insult to the boat - some oaf sits on it, say - can flex the Kevlar with no harm done - but crack the stiffer gel-coat. The damage is usually cosmetic, but if you've just spent \$3,200 on a Kevlar boat it tends to make you unhappy.

If you have the money and use your boat gently, Kevlar may be a good option. Our staff guides like to paddle rock gardens on their own time and we do a lot of rescues on client time. We like a tougher boat and, so far, that means fiberglass.

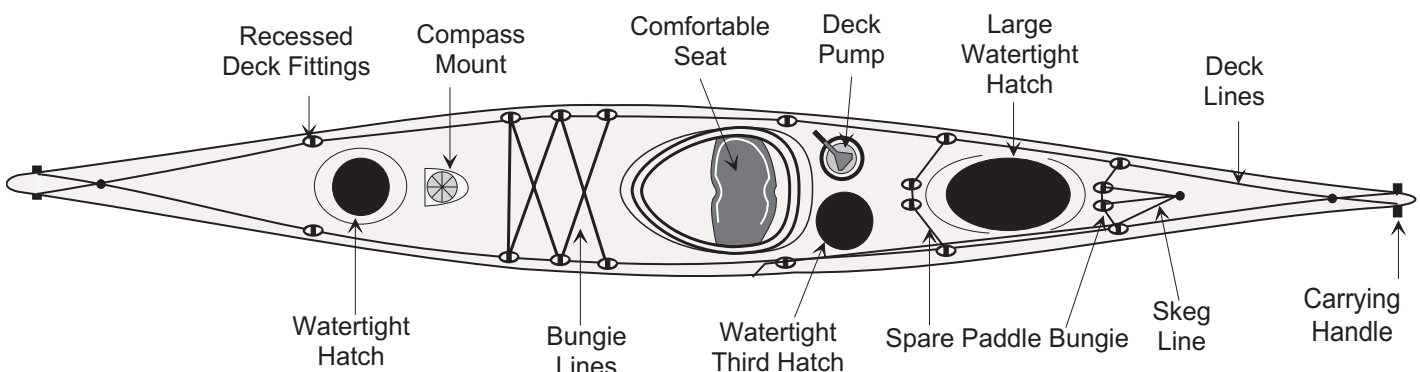


Figure 5) A sea kayak should have many features on it to make it a safe and enjoyable boat to paddle. The third hatch, compass mount and water tight hatches and bulkheads are some items we insist on for our personal boats.

## Boats you wear

Choosing a kayak is a lot like buying running shoes. There are probably a number of models that offer the performance characteristics and features you're looking for, but none of that matters unless they fit. Physical comfort is only the starting point for a great kayak fit - but, of course, it can be a real deal breaker. The sixteen-foot Romany from Nigel Dennis Kayaks is one of the best sea boats ever designed, whether you're a beginner or at the elite level. But it's just plain uncomfortable for a few paddlers in ways that are hard for them to describe. "It makes my back feel funny," says one. "I don't like the way my legs go," says another.

From these comments, you can tell that A) comfort is a personal thing; and B) that it's best judged over the course of a day on the water and not a few moments sitting in the boat at the dealership. What you're looking for in fit is firm contact everywhere your body touches the boat: Your feet will push against the foot braces inside; your knees will be in contact with the hull; the tops of your thighs will be in contact with the underside of the cockpit rim; your lower back will be solid against the back-band; and your butt will have no wiggle-room from side to side. You don't sit inside a kayak, you wear it. And, in fact, many kayaks are designed for paddlers of different sizes.

## "Trying on" a Kayak

When you try on a boat, notch up the foot braces toward the seat until you have to sit with your knees touching the walls of the boat. (If you wind up sitting in the Lotus position, this boat is too wide for you.) Now sit up straight and push back hard against the back of the seat. Then try bringing the foot braces another notch towards



Figure 7) The Anas Acuta is one of the oldest boats on the market and still one of the best.

you and push back again. Remember you're looking for firm contact everywhere - without being uncomfortable anywhere. If there are experienced paddlers around, take a look inside their cockpits and ask for a test-sit. Many good paddlers customize the fit of their boats and this pays off in better boat control and more comfort over the course of a day. These modifications are rarely expensive. Most involve no more than a few pieces of mini cell foam and a little Contact Cement.

Some kayaks are sold with a real seat, that has a real back, like a chair. It makes a boat look seductive in the showroom, but unless you can make a deal with God that you'll never, ever capsizes, it's not a feature you want. A seat that sticks up higher than the cockpit rim makes it significantly harder to get back in your boat after a capsizes - whether you're doing a self-rescue or getting help from someone else. If the boat of your dreams has a chair back to its seat, have the dealer replace it with a low back-band.

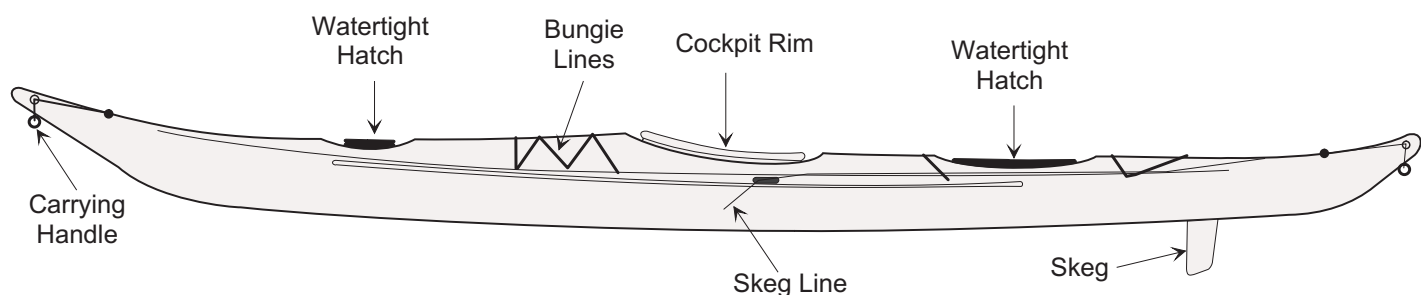


Figure 7) A skeg is a better option for experienced paddlers than a rudder, since your foot pegs stay solid. A skeg should be easy to adjust and fix in the field. Most kayakers turn into the wind/current. The lower you set the skeg the more downwind/current the boat will head.

## What's on deck?

Y-ou're going to spend a lot of time putting stuff into your hatches and taking it out again, so it's worth paying some attention to the hatches before you buy the boat. In a perfect world, every hatch cover would be a snap to open and 100% watertight in all conditions. Unfortunately, there's still no perfect hatch-cover. Our guides favor the simplest solution, the rubber ones that go on like Tupperware. The seal is as good or better than the more complex systems with cool-looking cross straps and inner liners, and there's a lot less to fool with, adjust, and fix.

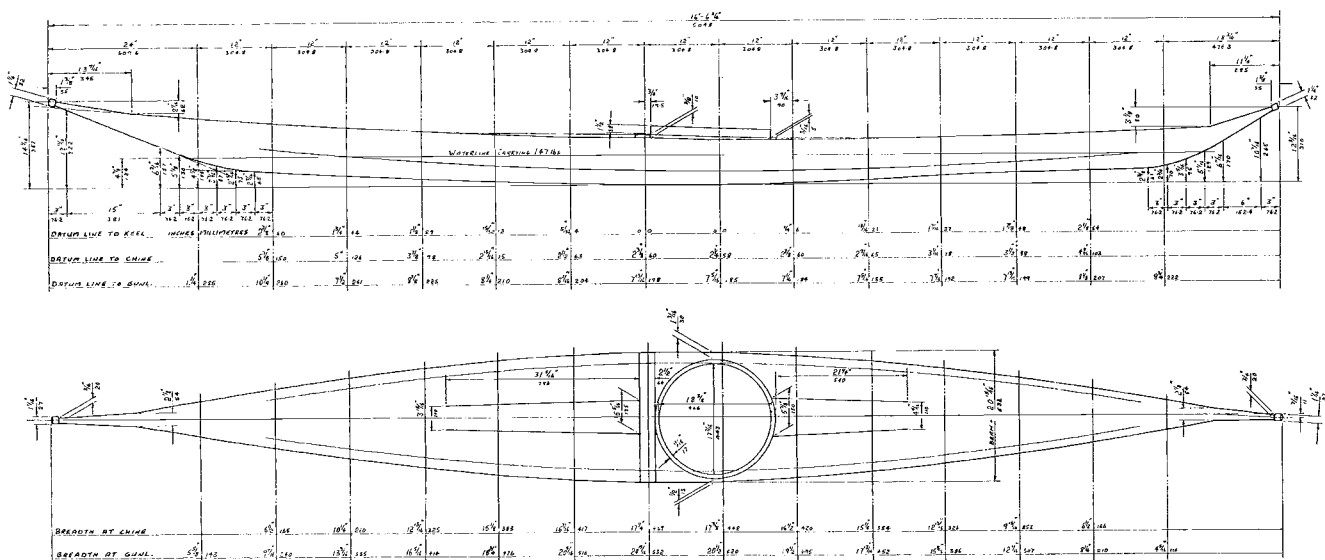
A transatlantic feature that's finally catching on among North American kayak manufacturers is the "day hatch" - a third hatch, right behind the cockpit, close enough to reach any time. This means you don't have to call over a friend to go into your forehatch and dig out your sunscreen or munchies when you're on the water. A less obvious advantage of having a day hatch is that it usually means there's a third water-tight compartment in the boat. Recently, we were doing some kayak surfing and had a traffic accident, the equivalent of a fender-bender, it seemed. In fact, the "victim's" boats' day hatch compartment had been damaged enough to flood completely. Had it not been a separate compartment, the whole stern would have flooded. Although the boat wouldn't have sunk completely, it would have been hanging straight up and down in the water, making for the very difficult rescue paddlers call the "Cleopatra's Needle" scenario.

Decklines are vital, but there are still some boats that are sold without decklines running all the way forward and all the way back. If you capsize, decklines are the indispensable "handles" that your rescuer needs to come to grips with your boat, get the water out of your boat, and stabilize it while you get back in. Like a boat without at least two fully watertight compartments, a boat without full decklines isn't a sea kayak. It's a beach toy.

## The Test Drive

There is no substitute for actually paddling any boat you are considering. You can eliminate some choices quickly, but beware of buying a boat you haven't paddled over the course of hours in a range of conditions. A fifteen-minute test drive can tell you a lot about a car but very little about a sea kayak. A road is a road. But the same body of water can change drastically depending on wind direction and strength, wave formation and currents. Different conditions will bring out different facets of a boat's paddling characteristics. Most outfitters keep a variety of boats in their fleets and some retailers offer day and half-day rentals. Spending a half day each in different types of kayaks is a wise investment.

Once you find a type of boat you like, ask experienced paddlers what other makes and models are similar, and paddle those. Relatively small differences - including price - may make the difference between a good choice and the perfect sea kayak for you.



Built at IGDLORSSUIT (north of Disko Bay) for Kenneth Taylor of Glasgow, Scotland in 1959.

Measured at "Old Manse", Inverkip on 17th + 18th October 1964.

To Bill Logan with best wishes  
1996

LINES of WEST GREENLAND KAYAK

*Duncan R. Manning*

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Figure 8) This is a copy of the original drawing that the Anas Acuta was based on.