

# CHOOSING A KAYAK

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Choosing your first multisport kayak can be confusing. Let's go through a few of the common questions a new kayak buyer will have.

## Should I go to a sea kayak or a more purpose built multisport kayak?

This depends on your personal requirements and future ambitions. Sea kayaks are a very versatile kayak and can be used in many situations. They are fine to use on rivers but can also be paddled in open sea conditions. They are very safe because of their front and rear bulkheads which also allow storage for longer trips. They are very stable and consequently slower, their hull shape and rudder design are not ideal for river conditions but will still do the job. You will have the option of either plastic or composite construction. Because of the bulkheads' rugged construction they will usually be considerably heavier. This doesn't have a huge effect when paddling but is very noticeable when you are lugging your kayak around which you do a lot of at events.

If you are just focusing on one multisport event and want a kayak that you can use for other types of paddling the sea kayak could be a good option. Another factor is where will you do the majority of your training. If it is in sea conditions then a sea kayak will be safer.

If you feel that you would like to compete

in a few more of the multisport races that are available round the country then you should consider a purpose built entry level multisport kayak. Probably a little bit longer, still with good stability but maybe a bit less forgiving than a sea kayak. As long as you are prepared to put in some time practising in flat water conditions, you should be able to master this type of kayak easily. If your training is mainly in sea conditions, you might go for a kayak with one or two bulkheads for extra safety.

If we have decided on a multisport kayak the next question is:

## Which of the 60 or so multisport kayaks on the market will suit me?

If we only choose out of the genuine entry level kayaks and then we also take into account your size, weight and strength you will straight away reduce your choices to say five or so kayaks at most. If you are on a budget and buying new is out of the question you will have less choice again but there are still plenty of older boats that will do the job.

Don't let your ego get involved in the type of kayak you choose. The idea of choosing a fast unstable craft and growing into it just doesn't work for most. How can you develop a good paddle technique when you are struggling to balance your kayak? What most new kayakers don't realise is that your paddle technique has a strong influence on

how stable you feel in a kayak. So it is best to learn the paddle technique first in a stable craft and it will be then easier to progress into a less stable craft.

## How can I tell what a stable kayak is?

Stability comes in two forms: primary and secondary. Primary comes from having a wide flat bottom in the middle of the kayak as in figure 1. This gives you a clear feeling of stability when you first sit in the kayak on water.

Secondary only comes into the picture when the kayak is "railed" This is achieved by moving both knees to one side of the kayak; this transfers the weight onto that side of the kayak causing the kayak to tilt to one side. At the same time we keep our torso vertical. Railing should not be confused with leaning; if we lean our torso to one side we will simply fall over. Railing is demonstrated in figure 2.

If a kayak has good secondary stability it will feel quite stable in the railed position. This stability comes from the cross section shape of the side of the kayak which we call the rail or chine. A square rail kayak as in figure 3 will have poor secondary stability while a soft rail kayak as in figure 4 will have good secondary stability. The easiest way to feel the shape of a kayak's rail is to run your hand down the side of the kayak, in the middle of the kayak around the seat area and feeling the shape of the rail. The ideal

entry level kayak will have a wide flat bottom section combined with nice soft rail shape as figure 1.

## How long should my kayak be?

Choosing the correct length is a matter of matching the paddler's size and strength to the length of the kayak. For example a strong large paddler with good technique will be able to generate enough power to propel a long kayak of over 6 metres length up to a max of 6.5 metre, to its potential hull speed. Remembering that multisport paddling is an endurance sport and it's your average speed that is important, so not only do you need to get your kayak up to speed you also have to maintain this speed for a long time. In this article we are focusing on entry level kayaks that will have to be reasonably wide to give stability, so a wide long kayak is going to take a lot of energy to push at speed. To simplify this choice most manufacturers will give weight ranges for their different kayaks. As a rule of thumb, for an entry level paddler under 65 kgs you should be looking at a kayak not longer than 5.2 metres; a 65 kg to 80 kg paddler a kayak up to 5.7 metres; and 80 kgs plus up to 6.2 metres. If you choose a kayak which is designed for a heavier kayaker the kayak will float above its designed waterline and will be slightly less stable. Also a kayak will be easier to get up to its hull speed in down river conditions and harder in flat water.

## How much room should there be in the kayak's cockpit?

This can only be answered by sitting in the different kayaks you are considering. Put the kayak on a soft surface not in the water, hop in and adjust the rudder mechanism so your knees are slightly bent with about a golf ball distance between your knee caps. You should be leaning forward with your shoulders ahead of your hips. Then try turning your chest from side to side, which will force your hips to twist in the kayak. This is what we call rotation and is essential in your paddling technique. If you feel the cockpit is stopping you from rotating, you need a different kayak or you need a larger cockpit (some kayaks are offered with XL cockpits as an option). We are all different shapes and sizes and because you are going to spend a lot of time in your kayak it is obviously important that you feel comfortable. If your legs are too long for the rudder mechanism you have the option of getting the kayak altered or ordering one where the foot peddles are moved forward.

Any questions? Don't hesitate to email me on [theboatshed@xtra.co.nz](mailto:theboatshed@xtra.co.nz)



FIGURE 1.



FIGURE 2.



FIGURE 3.



FIGURE 4.