

Selecting a Kayak for the Trail

Lee Bumsted

In kayaking, as in other activities, the right tools make all the difference. Since your biggest tool is the kayak itself, selecting an appropriate one is key to your safety and enjoyment. Most islands along the Trail are in open water so you will want to choose a sea kayak designed to handle those conditions.

The long length of sea kayaks (usually between 16 and 18 feet for solo boats) help them track straighter, move faster, handle waves better, and store more gear than recreational and light-touring kayaks. The latter models are designed for calm waters and tend to have one or no bulkheads, not the watertight bow and stern bulkheads typical of sea kayaks. A pair of watertight bulkheads prevents water from flooding the bow and stern if the boat should capsize. This makes a self rescue or an assisted rescue faster and more effective. A stern bulkhead alone is not enough for ocean paddling as a flooded bow can sink, leaving only the stern above water.

Hull shape is another important consideration. Solo sea kayaks are typically 24 inches or less in width and have some V shape to their hulls. Recreational and light-touring kayaks are wider and have flatter hulls. While a sea kayak can feel tippier on flat water than its shorter cousins, it handles better and is more responsive in choppy conditions. A short, beamy kayak may feel stable initially, but once that wide, flat hull gets tipped on its side, the boat is more likely to go over.

Sea kayaks often have retractable skegs or rudders to help the boat track in windy conditions or strong currents. The cockpits are small enough to be sealed effectively with a spray skirt, and the seat backs are low and level with the cockpit coaming so they won't block reentry from the water during a rescue. Sea kayaks typically are outfitted with deck lines, providing something to hang onto if you end up in the drink. Many have criss-crossed bungee cords on the deck behind the seat to assist with paddle-float rescues.

When purchasing a kayak, choose the type of boat designed for the most challenging conditions you are likely to encounter. You can take a sea kayak onto a placid pond, but you can't take a recreational kayak safely onto open ocean waters--where rough conditions could arise quickly. Light-touring kayaks can be used in protected bays, but often lack the safety and performance features of a full-sized sea kayak.

Once you've selected the type of kayak that meets your needs, test as many models as it takes to find one that fits you well, handles the way you like, and will make you happy on your waterborne travels. (If you're concerned about the greater weight and length of a sea kayak, a small boat cart can help you move your kayak to the water's edge. Look as well for roof-top rack systems designed to make the loading and unloading of a long boat easier.)

The best kayak is only as good as the paddler sitting in it so invest time in training and practice. Wear and carry appropriate safety gear, and know how to use it.

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