How to Choose the Right Kayak for **You**
Tips from the Experts at **Frisky Otter Tours, Inlet, New York**

In the past, many people have associated the word "kayak" with a very specific sub-category that is now widely recognized as the **whitewater** kayak. This type of boat is designed specifically for use in fast-moving, obstacle strewn rivers where maneuverability is prized and a snug fit is key for control and "rolling" of the boat.

Within the last 20 years, however, the emergence of the **recreational** class and further development of the **touring** class of kayaks have really opened up the activity to a much larger audience, across age and ability levels, as well as across a variety of paddling destinations, from lazy rivers and small ponds, to larger lakes, and even ocean settings.

In addition, **sit-on-top kayaks** have become increasingly popular of late, especially in the angler market, and can be found in all categories, from whitewater to touring. They provide tremendous stability and easy access, but do offer less efficiency, control, and protection from the elements than traditional **"sit-inside"** or "**decked"** kayaks, and will generally be significantly heavier due to their design contours.

With the "aging" of the paddling population, increasing numbers of women entering the paddling world, and more recent advancements in materials and construction methods, a variety of **"undecked kayaks"** or **"lost pond boats"** have populated the field. These super-light composite hybrids may resemble a canoe, but possess the seat back support and adjustable **footbraces** of a kayak, and are propelled with a double-bladed paddle. Most are solo craft and typically range in length from about 10' to 16' and weighing in from lower teens to the mid-20 pound range, making these popular with not only smaller and older paddlers, but also with backcountry sportsmen and women, birders, photographers, and racers.

With such a variety of options, it may seem overwhelming to determine the "right" boat from the catalog, internet or store display. However, armed with some background information, the process can become much easier, with a far better and safer outcome.

Within the category of recreational (sit-in) kayaks, choices range in length from about 9 feet up to about 14 feet. These are generally wider than their touring counterparts. This provides greater "initial" or "primary" stability, which is the feeling of steadiness when sitting on the water. Often, these boats may have a larger cockpit for a relaxed fit and easier access.

Recreational kayaks are highly suitable for the beginner on more protected waters such as a lazy river or small lake, and are popular for casual paddling, fishing, or taking the dog or small child for a ride in calm conditions. Increasing the length of a kayak will yield greater capacity (the larger the paddler or load, the more boat surface is required to keep the boat afloat), will propel the boat faster with less effort, and will also tend to make the boat **track** better, or stay in a straight line. This would be especially desirable in the presence of wind and waves or in paddling longer distances or for longer time frames.

By contrast, a shorter, more **maneuverable** boat would be preferable if meandering down a winding river or backwater stream, and would be adequate floating around on a small pond. Increasing the **rocker,** or curvature of the hull from bow to stern, will also make a boat more maneuverable, as opposed to keeping the **keel** straight throughout the length of the **hull**, or bottom of the boat.

For many people, a recreational boat is appropriate as their paddling locations and aspirations may be limited. As the challenges of the paddling location increase in terms of size, distance and potential conditions, considerations may point more toward the touring category.

Generally starting at the 13' to 14' length and usually topping out at 18', **touring kayaks** and their longer **sea kayak** siblings are designed to track better, be more efficient, handle wind and wave conditions more adeptly, and provide a higher degree of **secondary stability** (resistance to capsize when on edge) than their recreational counterparts. Often, these boats are equipped with either a **rudder** (a directional control mechanism that is manipulated with the feet used to steer the kayak) or **skeg** (a single fin which is deployed toward the stern of the hull to keep the kayak from turning into the wind), which can aide in tracking under adverse conditions.

Touring kayaks generally have smaller **cockpits** with **thigh braces** or at least **thigh pads**, affording more contact and therefore, greater control of the boat. Using the analogy of a shoe, a recreational boat would approximate the function and fit of a sandal, flip-flop or "Croc," and although suitable for casual use, would not be considered appropriate for more active pursuits such as running or hiking. The specific design and snugger fit of a more specialized shoe or boot would provide greater control and stability for their more challenging uses. In the same way, a well fitted touring kayak becomes more an extension of the paddler's body for optimal control of the boat's movement. Of course, we are not all built the same, so there are many fits to accommodate varied body types and sizes, often within a single model or style.

The smaller cockpit opening of a touring kayak also allows for the use of a **spray skirt** to keep water from entering the cockpit, which is crucial in rougher conditions or when water is dangerously cold. Although spray skirts are also available for larger recreational cockpits, they are much less effective, particularly in challenging water conditions.

One will readily notice the difference in seat design between the higher "lounge chair" type seats offered in recreational boats and what we have come to know as **day touring kayaks,** and the much lower, flexible seats or **backbands** found in the longer touring or sea kayak models. Although we all like to be comfortable sitting for longer periods, the lower touring seat back provides adequate lumbar support while not restricting the torso rotation necessary for paddling over time, distance or in rougher conditions. Certainly, developing proper paddling technique is advantageous for EVERY paddler, including the recreational paddler in a comparatively less efficient, slower, and often heavier boat. However, for those floating around on the water for limited time or distances and in protected conditions, the full use of the stronger core muscles as opposed to arm/shoulder muscles, is not as critical.

Another notable difference between recreational and touring kayaks is that the latter will typically have at least two, if not three, **bulkheads**, which are cross-sectional walls that not only create dry storage for gear, but more importantly, floatation (air) chambers that will keep the boat afloat and prevent water from permeating the entire length of the hull in the event of a capsize.

In many entry level recreational kayaks, there will be NO bulkheads, only marginal foam to keep the boat from sinking in a capsize situation. Many mid-size or longer recreational models will have a stern bulkhead, which will at least confine water to the cockpit and forward, but will generally necessitate that the boat, now heavily laden with water, be hauled in to shore to be emptied. This becomes problematic and potentially life-threatening when far from shore on larger bodies of water and/or in colder water conditions.

In a touring kayak, these floatation chambers create enough buoyancy to keep the boat afloat so that a solo or assisted re-entry is possible. Of course, training in these procedures is highly recommended to ensure efficacy and safety, but knowing the intended uses, capabilities and limitations of any boat is an important first step.

Once potential paddling destinations and types have helped to determine the category and general length of kayak to consider, a knowledge of material is important. In general, there are 3 basic categories: polyethylene, ABS plastic and composites.

The plastic, **Polyethylene** is quite durable against impact and is the least expensive, but does scuff easily, can lack rigidity or stiffness which affects performance, and is the heaviest. **Rotomolded polyethylene** is what is most commonly used in whitewater boats and in the majority of recreational kayaks, as well as many touring boats. More recently, **thermoformed polyethylene** has offered additional rigidity, more abrasion resistance and a bit of weight savings at comparable or reduced pricing.

At the far end of the spectrum has been the composite category. This consists of **Fiberglass**, **Kevlar** or **Carbon Fiber** fabric infused with **resin** and most often coated with a colored protective **gel coat**. All of these materials offer much improved rigidity and performance, with significant weight savings, but are considered less durable against impact than polyethylene. Often, Kevlar is combined with the stiffer and heavier Fiberglass material, or the lightest weight, rigid Carbon Fiber fabric to produce a more durable, stiffer product. Kayaks made of any of these materials are designed to be used on open flatwater as opposed to rocky, shallow river locations. As a general rule (and holding all design factors equal), the lighter the weight, the greater the efficiency, but also the more delicate and costly the boat becomes.

As both consumers and manufacturers attempted to bridge the gap between all these functional considerations, another material known as **thermoformed ABS plastic** more recently emerged as a middle point between polyethylene and the composites. This is an extruded sheet plastic that is then heat formed around a mold, resulting in a much lighter, more rigid and abrasion resistant product than polyethylene, yet more durable and less expensive than the composites. It has become an increasingly popular option where weight is an issue and/or where performance characteristics and resultant ease of paddling, as well as cost, are considerations.

In summary, one needs to prioritize a number of factors in choosing an appropriate kayak. First, the primary destination(s), be it moving rivers or protected small lakes, or open water and/or windier lakes, distance paddling and/or sea kayaking, need to be ascertained. Beyond that determination, specific attributes such as weight, initial and secondary stability, efficiency, tracking, durability, personal comfort, and of course, cost, will help you in your final decision.

You may also want to consider who you may be paddling with, as that may determine where you will be going and what your needs will be. For example, many paddling clubs will require that you have a 14' or longer boat with two bulkheads as a prerequisite for participation in their outings. Some may require a rudder or skeg. This is intended to allow a greater variety of destination options, help to keep the group at a similarly paced as much as possible, as well as to ultimately insure safety.

Do not forget that being able to get that new boat on top of your vehicle or to and from the water are important considerations. The size and weight of the boat and/or ways to deal with those aspects should be investigated as part of the selection process, especially if you are smaller or not particularly strong, have a higher vehicle, or need to be able to perform these tasks completely independently.

There is little sense in purchasing an overweight or underperforming boat that will sit in your garage or basement. If you have to stress over these issues each time you consider going paddling, you will probably choose not to go nearly as often. These "details" can make the difference between being a very occasional paddler and becoming completely enthralled with it.

Hopefully, this discussion will have elucidated some points you may not have known or considered before, and will aid in your selection process. We would, however, highly recommend that you take a lesson BEFORE the purchase of a boat and accessories in order to really make the most informed decision, one that you will neither grow beyond in a season, put your safety at risk, or come to regret. At the very least, go to a paddlesports specific store, not the Tractor store or big box store, and spend some time with someone who asks the important questions, shows you the options, and offers you the all-important test paddle.

There is no better illumination of a point than to experience it and this holds particularly true in paddlesports. You certainly may not need to try every boat on the lot, and that may be confusing and exhausting, but narrowing the field and then trying the top few choices on the water will be highly educational. Remember also that trying a 16' touring boat in a 40' pond or a 10' boat in 3' waves will give you very little pertinent information, so try to match the paddling setting with appropriate uses in your anticipated paddling destinations. If you didn't get that lesson prior to purchasing the boat, it is still important to do so to help you become familiar with your new boat, its characteristics and limitations and, most importantly, to get off on the right foot in terms of paddling strokes and techniques as well as safety practices and procedures. The more you know, the better your paddling experiences will be, and the greater the probability that paddling will become a truly rewarding and healthful part of your life.