Paddle the deep blue

It's a great workout, a healthy dose of fresh air, an opportunity to commune with nature – and cheap by comparison with some other outdoor sports. We paddle off on a beginner's sea kayaking course.

> BY SEAN WOODS

he old mariner's adage "the smaller the boat, the bigger the fun" could have been coined with kayaking specifically in mind.

Think about it: on the practical front, the inherent hassle factor of boat ownership is effectively nil. There's no trailer to maintain and license, unlike when you own a poweror small sailboat. You don't need a slipway, or any crew to help get it on and off a trailer – launch or retrieval are simple one-man affairs. Hull maintenance is effectively unnecessary and required storage space is minimal. To cap it all, after the initial expense on kayak and safety gear you're basically sorted for life.

On the fun side, the benefits are just as good. Scuba diving or snorkelling aside, you couldn't get much closer to our watery world if you tried. Whales, dolphins, penguins, seals, you name it – there's a chance you'll get to see them all up close and personal. Bird-watchers can indulge their passion in ways their counterparts on land can only dream about. Fishing fanatics can head offshore in pursuit of lunch. And, if all you desire is some peace and quiet, the ability to explore small inaccessible bays or to admire a pristine stretch of coastline, hey, you can do that, too.

There's a bonus: just by heading out into the deep blue and concentrating on having a good time, you're automatically improving your core strength and general fitness.



Safety matters

In the world of risky endeavours, sea kayaking is pretty low-key. However, given that wind and waves are intrinsic components of the offshore paddling experience, it always pays to play things safe. It seemed like a good idea to start with somebody like Derek Goldman, resident instructor at Paddlers Kayak Shop. So we signed up for their beginner's sea kayaking course.

The three-hour course starts off with a short, informal lecture that strongly emphasises safety. It also covers the correct sitting position, launching and landing the kayak, self-rescue techniques, the effects of wind and other conditions as well as basic paddle strokes. You then head down to the sheltered waters of Simon's Town's harbour, where the real learning begins.

Goldman has an uncompromising stance on safety. "Offshore kayaking is a safe sport, but it's only safe because of sensible paddling practice and habits. We've been in business for over 10 years and have never lost a paddler. River kayaking is much more dangerous. That's because you can go down a rapid, hit your head and drown."

With that out the way, I had to ask the obvious question. "No," laughs Goldman. "I've never heard of a kayaker ever being eaten by a shark!"

If you ever drove into the desert without taking any safety gear along, you'd be considered crazy, not to mention stupid. Well, the same goes here.

Essential gear includes:

- Life jacket
- Signalling mirror
- Flares
- Cellphone (in waterproof pouch)
- Paddle float
- Manual bilge pump
- Space blanket
- Water and food (such as energy bars and fruit)

Kayaking, especially around the Cape coast, exposes you to plenty of sun, wind and bitterly cold water. As a consequence, the risks of severe sunburn or hypothermia cannot be taken lightly. Goldman's advice: "Always wear a hat, apply a high SPF sunscreen and wear appropriate clothing. Wearing cotton is a bad idea, as it takes forever to dry and loses all its insulating value once wet. Rather go for polypropylene or fleece garments and keep a lightweight, windproof paddling jacket handy."

Another important safety aspect is understanding what weather conditions you're likely to encounter. Wind, says



Goldman, is your biggest enemy. "If you head out off Clifton unprepared and hit a strong southeaster 500 metres offshore, you could end up half way to South America before you know it."

Bottom line: if the conditions aren't favourable, stay in the pub. As a novice, never paddle alone. And never go beyond your limits unless accompanied by other, more experienced paddlers.

Having a "float plan" (that is, knowing where you're paddling to, and what time you expect to return, and then telling someone on shore about it) is another must. "Sticking to your float plan is critical. If you head off in a different direction and something goes wrong, rescue teams will end up searching in the wrong place."

Goldman also points out, whenever a serious incident occurs, it's never just one thing that goes wrong. "It usually takes a string of three or more successive mistakes before you end up killing yourself."

Check out this scenario, and you'll see what he means: while out on the water, you decide to change your route on a whim. An hour into your paddle, a surprise wave knocks you out of your kayak and you can't get back in again. Only then do you realise you've left your cellphone in the car. You look up and suddenly notice the weather has changed and you are now being swept out to sea. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to realise you are now officially in serious trouble. Says Goldman: "Safety is nothing more than common sense, really."

Paddling basics

As I've got the touring bug, I clambered into one of the school's sit-in kayaks and let Goldman adjust the foot braces to fit my body. Once done, both legs were slightly bent, with my knees pressing against the inside top corners of the kayak's sides where the deck meets the hull. This serves two purposes: firstly, the foot braces give your legs something solid to







Paddler's Kayak Shop's resident instructor Derek Goldman demonstrates how best to perform the basic paddle strokes in the calm waters of Simon's Town's harbour. 1) How to hold the paddle and twist your waist. 2) The brace stroke, used to prevent capsize. 3) Steering using the rudder manoeuvre. 4) The correct paddle orientation to use when moving forward.

MARCH 2013 ● www.popularmechanics.co.za









PERFORMING THE 'COWBOY SCRAMBLE'

- 1. To get the most out of your offshore kayaking experience, you must learn how to reenter your kayak after capsizing. First step is to tip yourself into the drink.
- 2. Once you've floated to the surface, you flip the kayak over and then hold on to the hull behind the cockpit, letting your legs float the surface. Next, you kick like crazy and drag your torso on to the hull.
- 3. Getting back inside isn't easy. The precariously balanced kayak dumped me back into the water numerous times before I managed to get it right.
- 4. After clambering on to the hull, you straddle it by swinging over your one leg, and then carefully inch yourself towards the cockpit.
- On reaching the cockpit, you keep your weight down low and delicately slip yourself inside.



Lastly, before heading off on your way, you pump out the partially filled hull using the manual bilge pump.

push against when paddling. Secondly, having your knees pressed against the inside top of the kayak not only helps give it more stability, but also allows you to control the amount of sideways lean (or "wobble") with your hips.

If you're planning on covering serious distances without expending unnecessary energy, learning the correct paddling technique is a must. With the right stroke technique you can paddle strongly all day, even into the wind, says Goldman.

But relying on your arms for propulsion will get you nowhere fast. Just like a boxer planting a knock-out punch, the correct paddling technique requires that you use your entire body. "Your abdominal and back muscles are much stronger than your arms," Goldman says. "If you execute strokes by rotating your torso, rather than by reaching with your arms, you'll go faster and further with much less strain."

To start with, make sure you're sitting upright: slouching prevents you from putting enough power into the stroke. To move forward, you start by planting the paddle's blade into the water as far forward as is sensibly possible. Simultaneously, using the leg on the same side, you press against the foot brace and force your buttock into the base of the seat. Keeping your arms relatively straight, you then twist your torso around and follow the stroke through. When the paddle has reached your hips, it's time to pull it out of the water, unwind your torso and switch over to the other side. Says Goldman: "Think of it as pushing the paddle away from you."

For maximum efficiency, the blade should face squarely in the direction you're pulling. It should also be fully immersed to the point where it meets the shaft, because you want as much surface area as possible pushing directly against the water.

To turn, you can choose between



RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB

Whether you go for a sit-in or sit-on-top kayak depends largely on what you intend doing with it. If you intend doing a lot of fishing or only go for the odd short paddle, a sit-on-top makes perfect sense. However, if touring is high on your agenda, then a sit-in kayak is your best option.

Goldman elaborates: "There's a reason why the Eskimos invented the sit-in kayak. As their centre of gravity is much lower than sit-on-tops, they're inherently more stable when hitting waves. They can also carry more gear, and protect your lower body from the elements. If you want to, for example, paddle to Cape Point from Simon's Town, then a sit-in kayak is what you need."

either the kayak's rudder (if it's fitted with one), the sweep stroke or rudder manoeuvre. The sweep stroke is an extension of the forward stroke; you sweep the paddle past your waist to the stern, causing the bow to turn. The rudder manoeuvre is a simple way to steer the kayak by dragging the paddle in the water at the stern and levering the blade one way or another.

If a capsize seems imminent, you'll use the bracing stroke. That's where you reach over the side of the kayak that is tilting towards the water, then slap the flat face of the paddle forcefully into the water.

Self-recovery

Murphy's law dictates that some day you will capsize. After demonstrating a couple of rescue techniques involving another paddler (where you use their kayak for support), Goldman introduced me to the "cowboy scramble". It's as inelegant as it sounds, but, with a little practice, it works. Essentially, instruction involved him sitting comfortably in his kayak with a grin on his face, and me attempting time and time again to get back into mine.

Here's the drill. After forcefully tipping the kayak over, I extract myself, float to the surface and right the hull. (Trust me, that bit is easy.) Next, I hold on to the kayak behind its cockpit and let my legs float to the surface. Then, kicking frantically, I haul myself chest-down on to the hull. So far, so good.

Next, I'm required to swing one of my legs over and straddle the hull facedown, carefully edging myself forward towards the cockpit. Phew, not so easy. The delicately balanced kayak dumped me back into the drink so many times I could've been pitting my wits against a bucking bronco at some rodeo. It was exhausting, but eventually I got it right. It not only made me realise how vulnerable I would have been if tired and cold. But it succinctly rammed home Goldman's earlier point: "As a novice, never go paddling alone."

Fortunately, beginners like myself needn't worry about perfecting the Eskimo roll just yet – that comes later, when you've got some experience under your belt. When is it most likely to happen? Goldman says that nearly all sit-in paddlers he knows have never capsized at sea. "It mostly happens when you're coming in on a wave. Even then, you're maybe 10 metres from the shore, so it's not a life-threatening situation. Anyway, as a novice you should never be at sea when high waves and strong winds make capsizing a possibility."

• For more information, contact *Paddlers Kayak Shop* on 021-786 2626 or visit their Web site: www.paddlers.co.za









Top to bottom: Getting into your kayak. Start by sitting directly into the seat sideways while being careful to place your weight in the centre. While swivelling straight into the seat, swing over your leg. Finally, pull both legs inside, making sure your knees are pressed against the top inner sides of the hull.

Below: The paddle float is an essential piece of safety gear. Using two inflatable chambers to pinch firmly on to the paddle blade, it provides great leverage for those needing to clamber back on board while offshore.



38 www.popularmechanics.co.za ● MARCH 2013 MARCH 2013 ● www.popularmechanics.co.za