

Your First Kayak:

What You Need to Know about Choosing and Using

by Linda Steiner

photos by Bob Steiner



Why is kayaking such a fast-growing paddlesport? How can you get in on the fun?

To answer these questions, let's go to someone on the frontlines of what appears to be not just a trend, but a new direction in recreational boating that is solidly here to stay.

Ryan Wiegel is the owner of Wiegel on the Water, a paddlesport specialty shop located on the shores of the Allegheny River, in Franklin, Pennsylvania. Kayaks have become primary in his customer interest and sales, displacing canoes. Wannabe kayakers are going to him and other kayak dealers across the state for the same reasons and with the same questions.

"Kayaking has become increasingly popular, because people like the convenience of a small package," says Ryan. "Kayaks are easy to operate, and you can paddle alone. Fuel costs are up, and people are looking for local vacations. Kayaking is economical and fun. They're even small enough to store in an apartment."



Linda Steiner in a "sit-on-top" kayak at M.K. Goddard State Park, Lake Wilhelm, Mercer County.

He jokes about two-person canoes being battleships, when the bow and stern paddlers can't get their rhythm together or want to go in opposite directions. "Not everyone is in tune with the same craft," he says.

In separate kayaks, two people can paddle side-by-side, rather than looking at their companion's back or just hearing a voice from behind them all day. "People can kayak together or each can cruise the shoreline at his own rate and experience different things," says Ryan. Some may want to fish a bit, then meet up later and continue paddling with the others.

"Being able to go out alone or with a group, makes kayaking attractive," he says. "A recreational kayak offers individual freedom on the water."

Kayaks appeal to newcomers, because the boats are very stable and using double-bladed paddles feels natural. "You can get into recreational kayaking for a couple hundred bucks," says Ryan, although there are plenty of good reasons to spend more.

Nine out of ten people who stop at the shop tell Ryan they want to kayak on calm rivers and lakes. "A lot of people are quick to tell me they don't want to do whitewater," he says. "People mistakenly see kayaking as an extreme sport."



Fishing kayak models have generous width and stability to handle the angling paddler's increased body movements not only when casting and reeling, but also when fighting fish.

Although there is still a misconception that kayaks are tippy and skinny wildwater crafts, kayaks actually come in models suitable for all ages and levels of paddling ability and water recreation choices.

Ryan calls kayaking “a portal to get people on the water.” It’s his job and that of other kayak dealers to walk novices through that door with customized advice, fitting the right kayaking equipment to each individual. “Choosing a kayak is as personal as picking a pair of shoes,” he says. “If you’re new to the sport, you don’t realize how important proper fit is.”

The main aspects to consider when getting fitted for a kayak are the paddler’s height, weight and physical agility. Beginners who don’t want to spend much money to get started shouldn’t just opt for the cheapest kayak they can find. The least expensive kayaks are likely to be the smallest. Large-stature individuals will be uncomfortable and even unsafe if they try to squeeze into a kayak that is too little for them.

Before he talks about specific boats, Ryan discusses the customer’s expectations about kayaking, his stage of experience and confidence on the water and personal recreation style. “Are you a ‘weekend warrior,’ do you want to do day trips, do you want to spend just a few hours paddling or what?” he asks them.

Most of the recreational kayaks Ryan sells are in the 9- to 14-foot range, with enough width for good stability and a roomy cockpit. Some customers opt for kayaks that they can sit atop, rather than sitting inside. He says that “sit-on-tops” are best for those who will be paddling in warm weather and water, as they’re likely to get splashed by waves.

For your first kayak, is it OK to go bare bones or should you buy one with more outfitting? Ryan explains that in kayak terms outfitting refers to options that add cost, but also



At a paddlesports expo, buyers can paddle a kayak before purchase and choose the model that works best for them.



increase the boat’s comfort and efficiency. There’s a reason the options are offered and they are usually well worth the price, making the kayak experience more fun from the get-go.

Entry level kayaks can cost as little as \$250, but Ryan says this is for a boat that is basically “a pumpkinseed floating on the water.” Outfitting add-ons buyers want to consider are padded, adjustable seats with lumbar support, foot bracing and thigh-brace pads. These niceties or necessities will up the price to about \$600 to \$700. The increased performance is worth the money because, as he explains, “Outfitting is what creates the man-to-boat contact that is the way you use the kinetic energy of paddling.”

Another recommended outfitting option is a dry storage compartment. This not only keeps extra gear from getting wet, but also increases safety. Double-bulkhead boats are also

(Top left) Marie Veon, Oil City, kayaking on Justus Lake, Venango County.

(Bottom left) Although there is still a misconception that kayaks are tippy and skinny wildwater crafts, kayaks actually come in models suitable for all ages and levels of paddling ability and water recreation choices.

Kayaks give couples the choice to paddle together or the freedom of separate boats.



more buoyant if they capsize. Those who plan to do extensive flatwater trips on big water may consider a kayak with a steering rudder and a skeg board to enhance stability.

Different kayak models have different hull designs, choices that can be confusing to novices. A knowledgeable dealer can match kayakers to a go-anywhere hull design for all-around river and lake use or help them select something specialized for flatwater or flowing rivers. If the budget allows, consider getting two kayaks, says Ryan. That way you'll have a boat you're satisfied with in both settings.

Recreational kayaks need to be durable. For most buyers he recommends kayaks made of polyethylene and polymers. These boats weigh about 40- to 45-pounds. Ultra lightweight graphite and Kevlar kayaks can reduce this to about 30 pounds, but cost several thousand dollars more.

Manufacturers have responded to kayakers' desire to fish from their boats with features that anglers appreciate. Fishing kayak models have generous width and stability to handle the angling paddler's increased body movements not only when casting and reeling, but also when fighting fish. An anchor system, rod holders, work deck, gear-securing bungees, paddle holder and even a covered well to keep the catch in are some of the extras on specialized fishing kayaks

Kayaks have carrying straps fore-and-aft (from the bow to stern), because it generally takes two people to carry them. Solo paddlers should consider purchasing a small two-wheeled kayak cart, about \$100, for getting the boat from the car to the water's edge and vice versa. To transport the kayak to the lake or river means either car topping or trailering. A car top rack can cost as much as a kayak, but can be adapted for other recreational transport uses such as canoes and bicycles. Boat trailers can be customized to carry kayaks.

To move on the water, Ryan recommends a two-piece dual-bladed kayak paddle. Two-piece paddles can be taken apart to fit easily into vehicles and to store at home. Paddles start around \$30 to \$60 and come in a choice of materials and weights. Some paddles have the blades in a fixed position, while others allow offset angle adjustment. Adjustable drip cuffs on the shaft will help keep water on the paddle from dripping into the paddler's lap.

For sit-in kayaks with cockpits, a full or half spray skirt or splash deck is a worthwhile accessory. A half skirt will shade bare legs from the summer sun, while a full skirt lets paddlers stay warmer during spring and fall outings. Both help keep a paddler dry. Spray skirts cost in the \$30 to \$60 range.

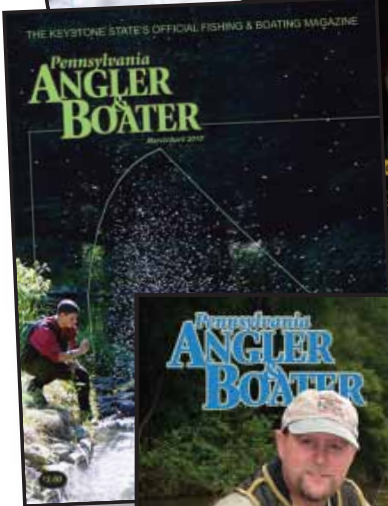
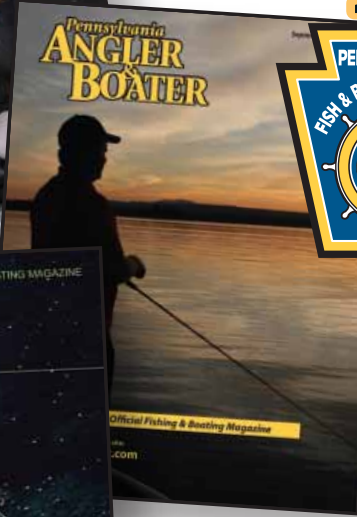
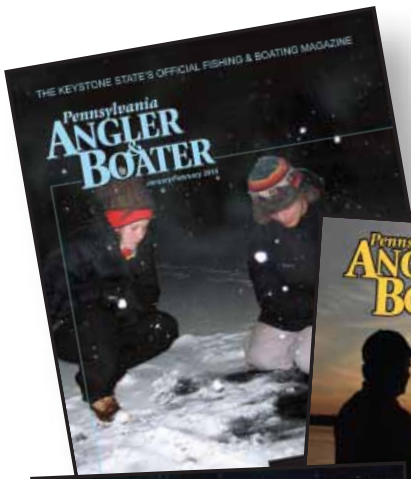
Life jackets (Personal Flotation Devices or PFDs) for kayaking, also about \$60, are smaller, slimmer, more comfortable and more stylish than ever. Kayak life jackets



Ryan Wiegel, Wiegel on the Water, shows some of the features of a kayak specialized for fishing.

have flotation where and when it is needed. These life jackets allow lots of shoulder movement for paddling. Don't skimp on getting a good quality life jacket. "Safety is not expensive," says Ryan. "It's priceless."

Wherever you buy your kayak, make sure you can try it on the water before purchasing it. Buy it somewhere that has water access or attend a paddlesports expo with a waterside venue. By listening to the dealer's recommendations and trying the models afloat, Ryan says that in the end, "Your body will choose the kayak that's right for you." ☐



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