

VOYAGEUR

FYI GUIDE to OUTFITTING

CANOES, KAYAKS, & SIT-ON-TOPS

For SPORTING USE

Paddle powered boats are remarkably efficient vessels for pursuing wildlife be it with rod, gun, or camera. Propulsion is quiet, gentle, and unobtrusive and without a motor to worry about fertile “grounds” previously considered inaccessible come within easy reach. With a paddle craft you can work your way far up the most obstructed streams and deep into the shallowest of marshes. Canoes, kayaks, and sit-on-tops also offer lightweight portability able to be dragged over oyster bars or carried over successive portages to reach an untapped high mountain pond. Most boats designed for touring and general use will work fairly well in these pursuits but there are ways of making the good even better and at minimal cost or modification.

Stability is a foremost concern for fishing, gunning, or camera wielding paddlers. Not only do you want the most solid platform under “foot” but with your attention focused on other things, a predictable boat is something to be appreciated. With your eye to the sight or at the viewfinder, not only are you not likely to see an oncoming wave or wake from a passing boat but it's also likely you're not going to be in the best position to recover if suddenly your boat rocks severely. And if you do recover, you don't want it to be at the cost of valuable equipment.

The days of being forced to opt for a wide slow boat from which to hunt or fish are happily gone. Today's sporting boats paddle much more efficiently than their counterparts of old. Additionally, a complete range of accessories have developed that can transform just about any canoe into a effective sporting boat and to keep you more comfortable and safer to boot. This guide is intended to take you through your options in selecting and outfitting your sport boat. It's by no means comprehensive so don't fail to talk with your local dealers and sportsmen to get the most complete idea of what's available and what works.

It all starts with the boat....

Stability, stability, stability—bottom line and crowning touch in canoes or kayaks destined for use as sporting tools.

Stability can either be designed in from the start or be augmented by accessories. Design stability results from the interplay of length, width (beam) and hull profile. Generally, the beamier the boat the more stable it will be though the amount of stability will be also affected by the bottom shape of the hull. Boat designers talk of initial and final stability. For boats whose primary purpose is to be actively paddled, a higher premium is placed on final or dynamic stability, how secure the boat is while underway and reacting to chop and waves. For a sporting boat,

initial stability, that comes into play when the boat is sitting stationary becomes a higher priority.

There is no hard and fast rule that determines that one hull shape is more stable than another. Generally, a flat bottom has the highest initial stability but at the cost of decreased final stability and since you'll be paddling your boat to reach your “hunting grounds,” dynamic stability remains something of a concern. Shallow arch and shallow vee bottoms usually trade off some initial stability for superior final stability. Multi-chined or staged hulls are another effective approach, often used in all types of paddle craft. A tri-hull cross section is often used on sit-on-tops because of its superior stability and ability to support a paddler re-entering their boat.

Also a factor in a boat's stability, even though you might not think so at first, is the hull shape above the waterline. A boat with flare, wherein the waterline beam is less than the beam at the gunwales will be more stable than a straight sided hull or one with tumblehome (beam at waterline is wider than at gunwale line). Conversely, a tumblehomed boat is more comfortable and efficient to paddle than one with flare. In evaluating different boats, make note of both waterlines and consider the potential impact on your paddling and your “sitting” use.

Bottom line is to choose a boat with which you are comfortable, regardless of its dimensions and shape. You can work from just about any boat as you become more comfortable in it and familiar with its' limitations and capabilities.

In addition to favoring beamy boats, sports minded paddlers often choose shorter canoes, ranging from 12 to 16', to allow easy handling of tight twisty creeks and sloughs.

If you anticipate sport use to be the primary use for your boat, you will probably be well served to select a boat that is designed expressly for that purpose. However, if you're like most paddlers and expect to mix in a little fishing and photography amongst other paddling activities, you'll be happy to realize that paddle craft are inherently versatile and there are accessories available to convert your “standard” canoe into a sporting boat.

Stabilizing Accessories...

The easiest way to enhance stability is to increase the beam of your boat. This is normally accomplished by attaching “sponsons” directly to the sides of your hull or adding outriggers extended from the hull. Of the two, outriggers tend to be more expensive due to the support framework required whereas most sponson systems utilize webbing strap attachments.

Outriggers have a long history of enhancing stability and have been used for generations by South Seas islanders to roam the vast Pacific in slender, deceptively fragile canoes. Modern outriggers offer durability and rock solid stability and the boat can be paddled while the outriggers are deployed. Generally, a single outrigger is sufficient to

provide all the stability needed and simplifies installation and lessens cost.

On the down side, outriggers often require some modification of your hull to anchor the support frames (akas) and available systems may not be compatible or easy to mount on every hull. They also tend to be heavier than sponson systems, again due to the frame.

Sponsons have long proven effective and are available in hard shelled materials such as polyethylene or inflatable on-demand. Systems exist for open or decked boats. The hard shelled sponsons are more durable but heavier and are more difficult to install or remove while underway. They also do not stow on board very easily.

Inflatable sponsons offer a lot of advantages. They are comparatively inexpensive, light weight, deflate to allow for easy compact storage or minimal drag when underway. Their web strap systems require little or no modifications to your hull and can usually be configured to fit just about any boat.

Sponsons should be sized to your boat for best performance. Narrower boats like kayaks and sit-on-tops require smaller skinnier sponsons than do canoes. A kayak sponson may measure 6 ½” in diameter by 40” long and provide a nice balance between stability and paddleability whereas a canoe sponson is likely to be wider (11 –12”) in diameter and 36” +/- long. Dimensions are determined by the “righting” force needed to provide the desired reserve stability. This is determined not only by the width of the boat but by its depth as well. A taller, wider boat on the verge of a capsize will need increased buoyancy to cancel that tendency than will a shorter narrower boat.

There's no arguing that paddling a boat with deployed sponsons requires more effort and the boat will not accelerate or glide as well as a boat without sponsons. A nice feature to consider is the ability to deploy the sponsons while afloat. Some systems make this possible via the attachment system while others use compressive oversleeves to compress the uninflated sponson until the destination is reached.

Paddlers using sponson systems have found them to be useful for purposes other than providing a stable platform for fishing, photography, or gunning. Sponsons can be of value whenever stability is desirable. In fact, some sponson systems were originally conceived as deep-water rescue and re-entry aids for expeditionary paddlers. They've also been found helpful in coping with a sick or disabled paddler who is unable to paddle or keep their boat upright. Thus, a sponson system is something like a “standard” canoe; it's use and applicability go well beyond its original intended purpose.

Getting there without paddling.....

Sleek boats like canoes and kayaks are easily and efficiently driven by small electric or gasoline outboard

engines. There are square stern canoes manufactured expressly for use with small outboards. In most cases, these would be the choice of a committed sport paddler as they do not paddle as efficiently as a double-ender.

The best option for mounting a motor on a “conventional” double-ended canoe is to use a side mounted motor mount. Most install by clamping to the gunwales. These require a square or rectangular gunwale for secure attachment. The majority of side motor mounts are built so that the motor can be hung off either side to suit the user's convenience. Capacity of motor mounts will vary. Some are suited for mounting light weight electric motors generating less than 20 lbs. of thrust only. Often these light mounts are built of hardwood. Heavier duty mounts usually use a strong aluminum cross bar and will support electric motors up to 25 lbs. of thrust or gas motors of 2 ½ hp or less.

The suitability of a motor for side mount application will also be a function of weight. Maximum motor weight should not exceed 30 lbs, and lighter is always better. Remember this is weight that is dangling off the side of your boat, not exactly the best place to have it. Caution should always be used when working with a side mounted motor.

Electric motors are often favored because they're quiet and non-polluting and also because the heaviest part of the power train, the battery, is stowed within the hull rather than suspended off the side of the boat. Gas motors will feature either an internal or external tank. With an internal tank, the tank is built into the motor power head whereas the external tank is a gas tank stowed in the hull that feeds the motor via a fuel tube. External tank systems offer you greater range and less frequent fill ups and when a fill is required, are much more convenient. Just disconnect the hose and take the tank to the pump. With an internal tank, there is the real possibility of spilling fuel into the water.

If you choose an electric or external gas propulsion system and usually paddle solo, position the battery or fuel tank towards the bow of the canoe to balance the weight of boat, motor, and paddler. Install a battery box or strap system to firmly secure the battery or gas tank and secure the fuel or power lines firmly as well up under the gunwale with last kit strap eyes or similar fittings.

Side mount motor mounts don't work as well with kayaks as the availability of sound clamp or attachment points is limited. Some manufacturers do offer kayaks with electric motors mounted on the stern in place of a rudder system.

Now that we're here, how do we stay here....

An anchor is the obvious answer but not just any anchor. Most anchors designed for marine use are heavier and larger than needed for paddle craft. After all, you're paddling a small light boat, why overload with an anchor that's too big and overly heavy.

The most effective anchors have 3 or 4 flukes (arms) that are designed to dig in the bottom. A “block” style anchor is more susceptible to being dragged over the bottom and requires more weight to provide secure hold down.

A folding anchor is also to be preferred given the limited amount of available storage space you’ve got on a small boat. The ability to fold and lock the flukes in to the anchor shaft makes for a smaller package to stow and one with fewer sharp edges to worry about as well. The best folding or collapsible anchors have a sliding or locking collar that will keep the flukes closed when stowed and extended when deployed.

Due to their size and “windage” (amount of hull above the water and exposed to wind), canoes require heavier anchors than necessary for a kayak or sit-on-top. For canoes, look for a 3-5 pound anchor. For kayaks or sit-on-tops, an anchor in the 1-1 ½ lb. range is usually adequate unless you need to hold firm on exposed waters or over what you know is a rock bottom.

Given that paddle craft anchors are usually used in shallow waters, an anchor line in the 25-40' length is usually adequate. More line can become an onboard hazard threatening to entangle you or your gear unless carefully coiled. 3/8” diameter line is recommended for easy handling.

Make sure line is secured to a sufficiently strong fitting on your boat. Dropping an anchor off a canoe or kayak will usually result in the boat leaning towards the side from which the anchor is deployed. As long as you expect and accommodate this, it’s not too much of a problem although it can feel somewhat less stable, more so with canoes than kayaks or sit-on-tops. If you prefer to keep your canoe straight up, consider clamping an anchor outrigger to the deck of your canoe. The outrigger will guide the anchor rode (line) over the end of the boat and maintain the canoe’s balance. Some outriggers are equipped with clamps that control the line as well.

When two hands are not enough....

Picture this scenario. You’ve finally reached that remote untapped pond or stretch of river and it’s time to get your rod or camera out and into action. Now what do you do with your paddle?

Sure, the simple answer is to stow it in your boat. In a canoe that’s not too complicated but in a kayak or on a sit-on-top, it becomes a bigger challenge. In a kayak you can stick down inside your cockpit but odds are it’ll end up in your way before long. A take-apart paddle makes this easier but then it’s not ready for use should the wind pick up. And just what do you do with it on a sit-on-top? Wedge one blade under a deck rigging works, until you bang the other end and it pops loose.

And, by the way, just what did you do with your fishing rod while enroute? No doubt it fits well inside your canoe but that’s probably not the best place to leave a fragile

and treasured piece of gear; one wayward step or shift of your feet can have serious consequences. A sectional rod does make things easier in a kayak or sit-on-top but what happens when you find yourself in the middle of a hatch that can’t be missed. Not to mention the consequences of a capsized.....

The best answer is to install holders for your rods and paddles. Holders or brackets are available that will install on the sides of your boat or cockpit and keep your rod up out of harm’s way while you’re paddling. Fortunately, most holders will work equally well in securing your paddle when the time comes to set it aside. If your paddle won’t work with a holder that fits your rod, there’s plenty of room to install specific holders, often side by side with your rod holder since either your paddle is in use or your rod. Holders work fine on the water but should not be relied on when the boat is on top of your car. Stow your gear safely inside your vehicle.

Paddle/rod holders come in a lot of different forms and are generally quite inexpensive. Depending on your needs, you can opt for a holder that’ll simply clip around your paddle shaft or rod grip. If you head out in rougher conditions, consider a holder with a lash strap or tab that wraps around your rod or paddle to prevent accidental loss. Yet another option is to adapt a conventional D-ring for the purpose by adding a length of line or web strap. However you choose to do it, it’s always wise to secure your rod and your paddle when not in use.

It’s not unusual to want to park a rod while you grab lunch or want to troll. Rod holders are available to provide this capability. Upright rod holders will keep the rod oriented vertically but do require drilling a pretty sizable hole in the deck of your kayak or sit-on-top to accommodate the shaft of the holder.

Another option is a swiveling holder that can be positioned from horizontal to vertical and to right or left. These holders are usually mounted to a base that may require drilling a number of small holes in your boat to secure the mounting bolts although clamp on mounts are available. Clamp-ons may negate the necessity of having to drill your boat but beware that they are not as secure as bolted holders. Should the unfortunate occur, the rod holder can quickly become an anchor and is likely to take your rod to the bottom with it.

And let’s not forget comfort.....

Long hours patiently outlasting elusive wildlife pass much easier and are far more comfortable if you indulge in some creature comforts. This usually translates to back support and seat padding. .Combination seat pads and backrests are readily available for sit-on-tops and kayaks in varying sizes and constructions. The value of padded seats and backrests is evident in the fact that many manufacturers provide them as standard features in many of their kayaks. While comfort is the first thought that comes to mind, these accessories also provide

insulation and help lift the paddler out of the damps and dews of the bilge.

If your boat is not so equipped or you’re dissatisfied with your current backrest, you have the choice of foam padded or inflatable backrests. Make sure all foam used is closed-cell so that it will not absorb water. There’s nothing much less comfortable than sitting on a soaked sponge. Look also for a textured surface with a contoured profile. The texture helps hold you in position and prevent sliding and the 3D enhances air movement to cool and ventilate.

Inflatable backrests offer comfort and adjustability. Inflate to firm or soft as you wish. Some inflatable backrests feature dedicated lumbar and lower leg supports that can be individually inflated to provide customized comfort. Again, look for fabric with some texture to it.

Canoe paddlers are not forgotten when it comes to comfort and back support. Convertible back rests exist that will attach to your existing seat frames and often stow conveniently under the seat when not in use. Another option that has proven its value for years is the folding canoe chair. Canoe chairs are slung low so they keep a passenger down low in the boat for maximum stability but up and out of the bilge. They also provide a deluxe camp chair after a long day on the water. Some canoe chairs are made to fit right over seat frames allowing the paddler to enjoy comforts previously available only to their passengers.

A modern edition of the canoe chair is the camp chair based around modern camping mattresses. Smaller chairs using shorter mattresses can work well as a paddling chair but avoid big full length combinations as they are relatively unstable and can raise your center of gravity too high.

Whichever back rest/seat pad you prefer, bear in mind that the higher and wider the back rest, the more likely that they will intrude on your paddling stroke. Some paddlers rely on their back supports only when they are drifting leisurely along while others find them comfortable and desirable while paddling. If on-site comfort is your goal, consider the larger back rest. If you’d like to enjoy some support while paddling, opt for a lower backrest with tapered sides.

And the list goes on.....

You’ll find that there are a wide variety of paddling accessories that may not have been originally designed for sporting use but will improve the experience and could well enhance your success rate as well. Dry bags are one item that comes readily to mind.

Sport paddlers can also find PFDs, paddles, sprayskirts, etc., all with features to suit your needs and to improve your safety and comfort.