

## **Common Misconceptions About Kayaking**

My experience leading kayaking trips with women has made me aware that many women have misconceptions about kayaking. Many women new to kayaking or who are considering a kayaking trip often have many worries about kayaking trips and kayaking in general. The purpose of this article is to educate you a bit about kayaking and dispel some of the myths about this wonderful method of experiencing the outdoors.

### **Kayaking is Hard to Learn**

Many people watch a graceful kayaker and think “wow – that must be hard to learn”. That couldn’t be farther from the truth. You might be astounded to learn that with only a few basic concepts under your belt – you’ll be able to paddle effectively and enjoy your kayaking experience. A good instructor or guide will teach you how to properly enter and exit the kayak and how to perform a forward stroke and a sweep stroke for turning. Armed with these skills and a few words about safety – you’re ready to enjoy your kayaking adventure.

### **Kayaking Takes a Lot of Strength and/or Athleticism**

Actually – a lot of strength is a drawback to learning to kayak efficiently. People with a lot of upper body and arm strength tend to rely on their arms to paddle – this is the most *inefficient* thing you can do in a kayak and it can quickly make you tired and sore. The proper way to paddle a kayak is to use the largest and strongest portion of the human body – your core or trunk. Your arms are for supporting the paddle, while your core and trunk are used to propel the boat forward. Many people think you make a kayak move forward by sticking the paddle in and pulling back on it. The correct method is to put your paddle in the water and rotate your body core, so that you almost pull yourself towards the paddle. Picture yourself grabbing a pole that is stuck in cement and scooting on your rump towards it!! This is a simple rotation of the body and a concept that most beginners grasp immediately. In fact, women – with their low center of gravity and inherent core strength – often grasp this concept quicker than their male counterparts. Pay attention to your arms – if they are really feeling tired and sore – you’re probably not using enough of your core.

### **My Body Will Really Hurt After a Kayaking Trip**

One of the wonderful things about kayaking is that you can go long distances without overly taxing your body or making yourself sore. True – if you try to “muscle it” and not engage your core and trunk muscles – your arms will get tired. However, if you spend just a little time learning an efficient stroke you can literally paddle for many hours, even all day without being overly tired or sore. Some women do experience blisters in an all day paddle – but a pair of inexpensive paddling gloves will easily take care of that issue.

### **I Have a Bad Back, Knee, Shoulder etc. So I Can’t Kayak**

Kayaking is amazingly easy on the body and in fact, is what many outdoorswomen resort to after a serious injury ends their ability to hike, bike, ski etc. The next time you're in a store that sells kayaks – ask to sit in one and note the shape that your body takes – legs in front, knees bent and slightly splayed, feet on the foot pegs or bulkheads. Then practice sitting that way in your home – you'll know if your injury prevents that position. If you can sit in the position required and can rotate your torso from side to side – it is very likely that you can not only paddle but paddle efficiently and effectively.

### **Worries About Tipping Over, Getting Stuck and Getting Back In**

You're worried that kayaks tip over easily. Well – some do, some don't. This is called stability and it comes in two flavors – initial and secondary. The trick is to paddle in a boat that meets your abilities. For beginners that means a boat with good initial stability (how the kayak feels when you first get in it and paddle on flat water) such as a recreational or day touring kayak. These boats are wide, have a large cockpit and are very stable – you would almost have to stand up to tip one over. For intermediate boaters you might select a more narrow boat with good initial stability. Initial stability means that it is hard to flip the boat when paddling and turning. For advanced boaters who want to practice advanced techniques you'll likely go for a very narrow boat with a hull structure that provides poor initial stability but excellent secondary stability. This means you'll have to have the skills not to tip initially or when when edging or leaning, but the boat will hang in there with you (secondary stability) once you do put her on an edge for faster turns, low-level bracing etc. The bottomline – choose a guide service and a trip offering the kinds of boats that match your skill level and objectives.

Even if you tip over (probably because you were showing off some new stroke), it is very, very unlikely that you will get stuck in a properly fitted boat. First, gravity still works – even when you're upside down. Unless you are too big for the opening of your boat you'll likely “fall” out of the upside down kayak especially if you are not wearing a kayak skirt. If you are wearing a skirt you'll first want to pull the loop on the skirt to loosen it before you exit the kayak. It is also a good idea to get an experienced instructor, friend or guide to show you the proper method for exiting the kayak – called a wet exit. This is a simple concept and can be practiced in a pool until you feel comfortable.

So you've tipped and gotten out of your upside down kayak. Getting back in a kayak in deep water is called, surprisingly enough, a deep water re-entry. There are multiple methods for getting back in your kayak and your guides will know what works best for you, your boat and the conditions. On many trips the guides will spend some time (in warm water) showing you several of these options so that you can learn and become familiar with the various techniques. Even if you've never done a deep water re-entry, guides on your trip can show you exactly what to do in the event you need to re-enter. They are even trained in how to recover an unconscious person and get them back in the boat. So don't worry – you'll get back in your kayak in the unlikely event you flip.

### **It Is Hard to Make a Kayak Go Straight and I Will Have to Concentrate All the Time and Can't See Stuff**

Whether a kayak is easy to paddle straight (called tracking) depends a lot on the kind of boat it is and what the hull is like. Most recreational and day touring boats track well and are not difficult to paddle straight. Longer sea kayaks can be more difficult to paddle in high winds but they typically have a rudder to help you go straight. The other component to paddling straight is your paddle stroke. You'll be surprised how easy it is to learn a good paddle stroke that keeps you going in a straight line. A good instructor or guide can give you these skills in about an hour and you will make the little adaptations needed when you hit the water. As in many things with kayaking – choose a trip and a guide service that can provide you with a boat that matches your skills and objectives.

Once you get a few tips and techniques on paddling it is amazingly easy to paddle your boat. You'll be “in your groove” in no time and your body will act on its own – allowing you plenty of time to look around and enjoy the water and the nature around you.

### **I Can't Keep Up in a Boat All By Myself or You Have to Paddle Really Fast**

This is a valid concern and should be one of the questions you ask the guides before signing up for a trip. Like bike riding where cyclists pedal at different speeds – there is a wide variety in speeds between paddlers. Some paddlers like to go really slow and explore every nook and cranny along the water's edge. Other paddlers want to cover significant mileage between stops. Ask your guide how fast you'll be expected to paddle, how many miles you'll be covering and how many stops there will be. Also ask the purpose of the trip – is it to explore and see nature, or is it to make a certain location within a certain timeframe. Be sure and tell the guide your experience and what you're most comfortable with but rest assured – you pick the right trip and you'll be fine.

### **It Wouldn't be Fun if It is Windy or the Water Has Lots of Waves**

Part of the fun of a kayaking adventure is being on the water and spending time with Mother Nature. Wind, waves, and weather are all part of the fun!! There is nothing more beautiful than watching an advancing rain line across a body of water even knowing you're about to be drenched. Kayaking leaves you with wonderful adventure stories to tell your friends and if you're prepared you'll be safe and mostly comfortable. It is a good practice to be prepared for a variety of weather when paddling – always take a rain jacket and change of shirt in the summer – even on a cloudless day. In winter wear appropriate paddling gear to stay dry and warm and also carry extra dry clothes. You can also eliminate many weather extremes by where you paddle and what time of year. Ask your trip guide about the location of the trip and the potential weather and paddling conditions. Then choose a trip that meets your objectives and skill levels. But remember, even storms, winds or waves do not ruin a kayaking adventure if you're prepared – they just make it more of an adventure!

### **I Have Seen Pictures on the Web and Everyone is Wearing Funny Stuff and/or I Really Don't Want to Wear a Skirt**

You are right – kayakers sometimes wear some unusual looking gear – like the famous kayaker skirt!! Other kayaker gear includes, depending on what you’re paddling in, a helmet with faceguard (usually on whitewater rivers, ocean rock gardens and rocky surf zones), a splash jacket (to keep you dry and warm), neoprene paddling suit (for cold water conditions), and a dry suit (for extreme cold conditions). The kayak skirt is a simple piece of gear worn to keep water out of the cockpit. Skirts typically attach to your body in some way (suspenders or Velcro waist band) and also attach to the cockpit of the kayak forming a water-tight closure. You’ll welcome a skirt in the rain, waves, surf, rapids, or the cold. Most people don’t want to wear a skirt because they are afraid they cannot get out of the boat if it turns over. Skirts are easy to remove – even under water. You simply grab the loop at the front of the skirt and pull forward. Many skirts, especially those on recreational and day touring kayaks can be removed with your knees from inside the kayak. Skirts are not worn on all trips or on all kayaks. For example, many people do not wear a skirt on a recreational or day touring kayak. However, if Mother Nature serves up a rain storm – you’ll be glad to have a skirt, even in these boats.

### **It Takes a Lot of Equipment That I Can’t Afford**

Kayaking, like most outdoor sports, requires some equipment. A boat, paddle, PFD and a skirt are the most important. After that you’ll need rain gear, wicking clothes and possible paddling gloves if you’re prone to blisters. Some of this gear can be expensive but most of it is very easy to rent. Most paddling locations will rent a boat, paddle, skirt and PFD. Fully guided trips typically include these items as part of the trip. Rain gear and wicking clothes can be the same that you wear for hiking adventures and many people use biking gloves as paddle gloves – especially in warm weather.

### **Aren’t All Kayakers Crazy? Or Kayakers are Weird**

If you have watched videos of kayakers on whitewater rapids or in the surf zone – you might think all kayakers are crazy!! These paddlers enjoy the thrill of rapids, waterfalls, and calamitous surf – but not all paddlers aspire to this level of the sport. Many, many kayakers paddle for the sheer joy of being on the water and in control of your own craft. Kayakers paddle for solitude within a group and a sense of freedom. Some kayakers paddle for viewing wildlife, taking pictures, fishing, or relaxation.

### **It Looks Fun But.....**

So you’ve read all the common misconceptions but are still not convinced. You know it looks fun, but you’re still worried – especially about the skirt and the stability of the boat – or maybe keeping up with the group. But – it looks really fun, and you want to try it. Then try it!! Go to a local boat store and see if they give lessons on a lake. Look for a canoeing or kayaking club in your area – most of these clubs offer beginning kayaker lessons on a lake. Find a friend who kayaks and ask for a beginner’s lesson – or join a guided trip targeted at beginners or novices. You’ll be amazed out how easy it is – and kayaking is truly one of life’s joys that you don’t want to miss. Go ahead – try it!!