



DISCOVER

CANOEING

A complete introduction to open canoeing | James Weir

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For my family and friends both on and off the river
for their support and for all the good times.

First published in Great Britain 2010 by Pesda Press

Unit 22, Galeri

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Caernarfon

Gwynedd

LL55 1SQ

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ISBN: 978-1-906095-12-3

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Printed in Poland, produced by Polska Book.

FOREWORD

In my twenty-five years as a canoeist, I have been fortunate to canoe with many of the most amazing paddlers in the world. I have paddled with James in numerous countries and occasionally we have shared the podium after an international competition.

When I first met James he was national open canoe champion representing Great Britain as part of their national freestyle team. Playboating late into the evenings and racing down creeks we bonded as brothers, even though we both desired to be a step higher on the victory platform at the end of the weekend than the other.

James has always had the knack of knowing instinctively where to be in order to enjoy life to the fullest. Two of my favourite memories with James both occurred under full moons: surfing until dawn on the Isar River in Plattling, Germany, and a post dinner paddle in England to Kenneth Grahame's 'Toad Hall' where we "simply messed about in our boats".

Eventually we all grow up and feel the desire to leave something of significance for future generations. With this book James has made it easy for the next generation of aspiring canoeists to rapidly progress and develop their skills. James has combined spectacular photos with easy to follow instructions that help illustrate the fundamentals of canoeing. I hope that you find it helpful and enjoy the opportunity to share many wonderful adventures through canoeing just as James and I have.

Eli Helbert

World Champion Open Canoe Rodeo 1999–2003, 2006
www.thecanoeguru.com

THE AUTHOR

James Weir

Since discovering open canoeing in the summer of 1988, all James wanted to do was get out on the water and go canoeing. From the early days on the River Thames at Adventure Dolphin in Pangbourne, his enthusiasm for canoeing has taken him to five continents to explore rivers, take part in expeditions and enter competitions. Open canoeing for James started out as a hobby, turned into a lifestyle and is now a profession. In addition to vocational qualifications, he was awarded a sports scholarship to study Adventure Recreation with Sports Science at De Montfort University in Bedford, where he graduated with an honours degree in 2002. James continues to expand the boundaries of his sport and tests and develops products for several of the market leaders in adventure equipment. Presently living and working in the Swiss Alps, he coaches whitewater canoeing and guides rafts at the Kanuschule in Versam. His refreshing approach, experience and competition success make him one of the prominent characters of the sport.



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9	Safety equipment for moving water	94
		Equipping your canoe	97
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	10	Features found on moving water	99
		Skills for moving water	102
DISCOVERING THE OPEN CANOE	13	ROLLING	117
Canoeing for fun	14	Solo canoe rolling	119
Types of canoe	15	Tandem canoe rolling	127
Paddles	17	Rolling in control	131
Features and their effect	18	COMPETITION	133
Extra features for whitewater canoes	22	Healthy living	133
Materials	23	Know the game	135
Responsibilities of an open canoeist	26	Mental preparation	135
BEFORE THE WATER	29	Physical training	136
Software	30	Open canoe competitive disciplines	137
Hardware	39	ADVENTURE	149
Transporting your canoe	44	Planning and preparation	149
Access	47	Food	151
Warm up and cool down	49	Water	154
ON THE WATER	51	Clothing	156
Getting ready	51	Shelter	156
Basic skills	56	Hygiene	158
Intermediate skills	66	First aid	159
Advanced skills	81	Packing	160
New paddle strokes	90	Navigation	164
WHITewater	91	Portaging	165
River grading and guidebooks	91	Playing safe	166
Medical emergencies	94	INDEX	169



INTRODUCTION

This is a journey through the sport of open canoeing. It involves a new approach to canoeing: modern ideas and concepts applied to one of the oldest modes of transport known to man. Whether you choose to read this book cover to cover or just look at the photos, I hope you will be motivated to jump up and go canoeing.

After exploring the history of the canoe, advice is provided on preparing for your first canoeing experience, skills and paddle strokes for beginners and experts, skills and tactics for navigating whitewater rapids, Eskimo rolling techniques for whitewater canoes, an explanation of the various competitive disciplines for canoeists and, finally, tips and tricks for expedition canoeing.

Please be careful. Canoeing is not a dangerous sport, but a lack of appropriate safety equipment and training will increase the risk of misadventure in any activity, of which canoeing is no exception. Contact your local shop, coaching provider or club for advice and instruction before venturing out on your own. This book is not a substitute for attending a course run by a professional.

Stay safe and have fun.

James

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many, many thanks must go to all the people who have gone out of their way to help me realise this book; thanks to the many photographers who have provided beautiful images, to the models who repeated the same thing several times without complaining and to all the companies who provided equipment and advice during the project. Finally thanks to Franco and Peter at Pesda Press for giving me this opportunity and a huge thanks to my family and friends for being there for me when I need them.

Models

Alex Keller, David Lambley, Franziska Biechler, James Weir, Lilli Winter, Pamela Halligey, Susanne Spölmink

Images

Alex Keller – www.alex-keller.net
Andreas Fernekorn – www.deinebilder.com
Beat Ruetimann – www.wavedevil.com
Craig Hill – www.paddlepics.com
Florian Reithmeier – www.bushpaddler.de
Graham Mackereth – www.pyranha.com
James Weir – www.jamesweir.net
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Marilyn Scriver
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Micha Schomann – www.freestylefoto.org
Michael Cullen – www.canoemuseum.net
Michael Gähwiler – www.whitewater.ch
Michael Neumann – www.kanumagazin.com
Richard Mikosch – www.gesund-bewegen.ch

Sam Ward – www.loveitliveit.co.uk
Steffi Blochwitz – www.nordlichtphoto.com
Susanne Spölmink – www.sanneshome.blogspot.com
Tim Rowland – www.xpaddlers.com

Support

Delta Sportswear – www.delta-sportswear.com
Clothing and accessories for open canoeing.

Esquif Canoes – www.esquif.com
Open canoes for every occasion, from touring to extreme whitewater.

Gaia Sports – www.gaiasports.com
Environmentally friendly dry bags, airbags and canoeing accessories.

Kanuschule Versam – www.kanuschule.ch
Open canoe coaching and holidays from beginner to expert.

Kober paddles – www.kober-moll.de
Manufactures of canoe paddles for over 100 years.

Nookie Xtreme Sports Equipment – www.nookie.co.uk
High quality protective clothing and accessories for whitewater canoeing.



The first open canoes were carved out of tree trunks; this is a Haida dugout canoe from the Queen Charlotte Islands in the Pacific Ocean.

This dugout canoe shows the diversity of shape in early canoe design. The canoe is short and wide and was designed for manoeuvrability instead of straight line speed.



DISCOVERING THE OPEN CANOE

Open canoeing can trace its history back to the first person who sat on a tree trunk to float or paddle across a river or lake many thousands of years ago. Although they didn't know it these people were the pioneers of what is now one of the most popular water sports in the world.

The first active development in the history of canoeing was the dugout canoe. A hull was hollowed out from a tree trunk and paddles were shaped from branches. Paddlers sat inside the canoe and were able to stay dry whilst paddling. The people who invented dugout canoes also invented basic paddle strokes to enable them to paddle and control their canoe as efficiently as possible.

Around the world different cultures developed the canoe in different ways depending on the available local materials and their particular needs; outrigger canoes were developed to enable the canoe to be paddled between Pacific islands and in Canada voyageur canoes were built to transport large loads of animal furs from the wilderness to the market. The open canoe was an important tool for exploration, trading and for hunting. In many developing countries the canoe is still the primary method of transport across water; its simple design and construction allows everybody to access the water, either for fun or out of necessity.

Canoeing for fun



John 'Rob Roy' MacGregor was the pioneer of canoeing as a leisure activity.

The 19th century saw the start of a new type of popular human activity, leisure; people had time to relax and enjoy themselves and to do something for no reason other than fun. A Scottish lawyer, John 'Rob Roy' MacGregor, pioneered canoeing as a leisure activity in Europe. He designed several canoes and journeyed throughout Europe and Africa with them. In 1866 he formed the world's first canoe club in London and in 1873 it became known as the Royal Canoe Club.

Competitive canoeing started in 1867 with the first canoe regatta at the Canoe Club in London. Sprint canoeing was a demonstration event at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games and was officially included as an Olympic discipline in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

Open canoeing has evolved in just over 100 years into one of the most diverse water sports in the world. It is possible to explore lakes and rivers, descend rapids, sail, race, go fishing, surf ocean waves, perform tricks on flat water or whitewater, go birdwatching and most importantly have a lot of fun in your canoe.

Open canoeing is a diverse and popular sport. People all over the world enjoy canoeing every day. These three boys descend one of the smaller rapids on the White Nile in Uganda.



A Nepalese dugout canoe, carved out of a huge tree trunk by skilled craftsmen. Some are large enough to carry as many as twenty people.



Types of canoe

Open canoes are built in many shapes, sizes and materials. They have evolved independently all over the world to suit the needs of the paddlers and the locally available materials.

Dugout canoe

The first canoes were made from hollowed out logs; these canoes are known as dugouts. Dugout canoes are still in use in many parts of the developing world and their construction is an art form passed down through generations of boat builders. Dugouts vary in size depending on the tree trunk they began as. Dugout canoes can be paddled using a single bladed paddle or propelled using a long wooden pole in shallow water.

General purpose canoe

A general purpose open canoe is the shape that most people imagine a canoe to be. They are typically 16 foot long and made of Royalex plastic, with two seats and a centre thwart. They are symmetrical with the ends turned up slightly at the front and back. A general purpose canoe can be paddled by either one or two people who are sitting or kneeling.

A general purpose open canoe being paddled by two people on a lake; this is a typical open canoeing scene. When paddling in tandem one paddler paddles on the left side and the other on the right using single bladed paddles.



Racing canoe

Canoes designed for sprint or marathon racing are long and thin to reduce water resistance and maximise top speed, and are typically constructed from lightweight composite materials. There are two types of racing canoes: sit and switch and high kneeling. Sit and switch canoes are paddled sitting down and the paddlers frequently swap sides to reduce fatigue. To paddle a high kneeling canoe, the paddler kneels with one foot forward on the hull of the canoe and the other leg bent so that the knee and the top of the foot are resting on the hull. High kneeling canoeists use a long paddle with a large area blade and do not swap sides when paddling. Racing canoes can feel unstable at first, but stability increases with speed.

This sit and switch canoe is made from Kevlar. It has been specially designed for racing and is built from lightweight materials.



Whitewater canoe

Open canoes designed for whitewater use tend to be shorter than a general purpose canoe. The ends are higher, making the canoe look a bit like a banana. Whitewater canoes have airbags added to increase flotation and reduce water intake. A foam saddle and thigh straps increase control over the canoe and allow the paddler to perform an Eskimo roll if they capsize. Whitewater canoes can be fitted with one foam saddle for solo use or two saddles for tandem use. They are normally brightly coloured for safety reasons. Whitewater canoeists kneel in the canoe and use a short single-bladed paddle.

This whitewater canoe is much shorter than a general purpose canoe and features extra fittings to allow for the safe descent of rapids.



Inflatable canoe

Inflatable canoes are easy to recognise. Designed primarily for whitewater use, they are constructed using strong abrasion-resistant rubber. An inflatable canoe is constructed of three parts: the floor and two side tubes. There are two seats that can be easily moved forwards or backwards to adapt the canoe for solo or tandem use. Many inflatable canoes are self bailing: at the back of the canoe on the floor there is a drainage tube to allow any water that enters the canoe to flow out. Inflatable canoes can be paddled sitting or kneeling or by one or two paddlers using single-bladed paddles.

An inflatable canoe for whitewater, symmetrical with dramatic rocker at both ends.



Paddles

A canoe paddle; blade, shaft and T grip.

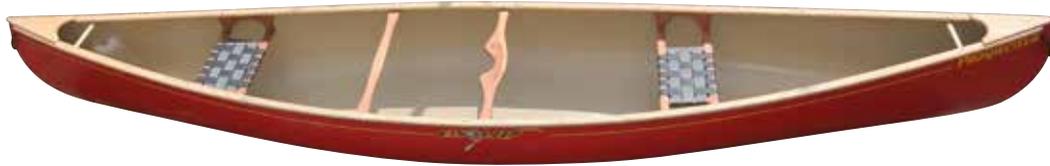


The first canoeists used trimmed branches to push off the river bed to propel their log canoes along. These poles were not effective in deep water and so one end was widened to increase purchase on the water: the paddle was born. The basic shape of a paddle has remained unchanged since its conception and comprises three parts: the paddle blade, the shaft and a T grip.

Features and their effect

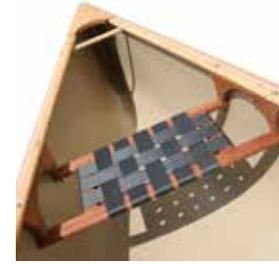
A 16-foot general purpose open canoe with wooden gunwales, two seats, a kneeling thwart and a carrying yoke.

There are eight basic parts that make up an open canoe: the bow, stern, hull, seats, thwarts, yoke, gunwale and deck plates. The bow is the name for the front of the canoe and the stern is the back of the canoe. Most open canoes are symmetrical and therefore the front and the back look the same. A high and rounded bow or stern is an advantage when paddling through waves or rough water as it deflects water away from the canoe. It is a disadvantage when the wind blows, however, because the large area will be caught by the wind making the canoe difficult to control.



Hull

Hull is the term used to refer to the bottom of the canoe; the shape of the hull affects the way in which the canoe reacts and responds. Rounded or displacement hulls, a feature of racing and fast touring canoes, travel through the water with minimal resistance but will have a slightly unstable feel. A flat hull will feel initially much more stable than a rounded hull, but will be trickier to handle in rough water as the hull will roll to remain parallel with the surface of the water. The classic Prospector canoe design has a flat hull. A shallow V hull shape is more stable in rough water than a flat hull. The slight keel effect assists travelling in a straight line but may slip over the water and feel unstable when making tight turns.



This is a webbing seat. Seat-belt-type webbing has been fixed over a wooden frame.

Seats

Most general purpose canoes are fitted with two seats, one at the front and one at the back. The positioning of these seats allows you to work out which end is the front of the canoe. The front seat is closer to the middle of the canoe than the back seat. If you find that you have very little space for your legs, you are probably sitting on the back seat facing the back of the canoe. Seats come in three main types: a moulded plastic seat, a wood frame with seat belt webbing or a wooden frame with woven cane. A plastic seat is robust and the best choice for club or rental canoes. They are the heaviest type of seat and uncomfortable to sit on facing the wrong way, making them unsuitable for solo canoeing. A wooden framed seat with webbing is fairly robust and is easy to repair if damaged; they are also lightweight. The major disadvantage of the wooden frame with webbing is that it takes a long time to dry, leading to some discomfort for the paddler. A wooden framed seat with cane is the least robust of the three variations, but also the lightest and very quick drying. For a careful paddler, wooden framed with cane seats are robust enough to last the lifetime of the canoe. However, they are difficult to repair if damaged.



On the right is a carrying yoke; note the cut-out for your neck. On the left is a kneeling thwart.

Yokes and thwarts

Thwart and yoke are terms used to describe the horizontal braces that are fixed widthways across the canoe. Most open canoes feature wooden thwarts and yokes although canoes with lightweight aluminium thwarts also exist. Thwarts are added to the canoe to improve the rigidity of the hull. A yoke is a specially crafted thwart designed to make carrying a canoe on your shoulders as comfortable as possible. The cut-out in the middle is for your neck and the bumps on either side are designed to rest on your shoulders. A yoke should be fitted in the middle of the canoe so it will be perfectly balanced when carried on the shoulders. A kneeling thwart is installed in a canoe to make solo paddling more comfortable. They are usually installed between the yoke and back seat.

The black plastic edge on the top of this canoe is known as the gunwale; it helps to keep the canoe rigid and can be used to fix thwarts into the canoe.



A deck plate.



Gunwales

Gunwales are added to an open canoe to increase hull rigidity. Fixed to the top edge of the open canoe, they provide a solid framework when combined with thwarts. Most general purpose canoes are fitted with plastic gunwales which are tough and require no maintenance. The disadvantages of plastic gunwales compared to wood is that they are heavy and, if broken, the entire length of gunwale must be replaced (but plastic gunwales are very robust).

Wooden gunwales are the choice of the connoisseur; a canoe with all wood fittings is much lighter and more beautiful than one with plastic fittings. The beauty comes at a price, however. Wooden gunwales are more expensive than plastic ones and must be regularly oiled or varnished to preserve their strength and appearance. Wooden gunwales are more prone to damage than their plastic alternative, but are easier to repair with basic woodworking skills.

Deck plate

Deck plate is the name given to the small plastic or wooden triangular feature at each end of the canoe. The deck plates are designed to protect the ends of the canoe and the ends of the gunwales. They complement the gunwales and are made from the same material. Plastic deck plates often feature a combined carrying handle; wooden deck plates will have a separate wooden carrying handle.

Rocker

Rocker is a term used to describe the height difference between the middle of the canoe on the hull and the point where the hull becomes the bow or stern of the canoe, a 15cm difference is considered to be a lot of rocker. Rocker is added to a design to maximise the turning ability of the canoe and to improve dryness

when the canoe is paddled through waves. Increasing the rocker makes a canoe harder to paddle in a straight line, reduces the potential top speed and will make the canoe trickier to control in wind. A canoe with pronounced rocker is suitable for whitewater use and a canoe with zero rocker is more suited to flat water racing or touring.

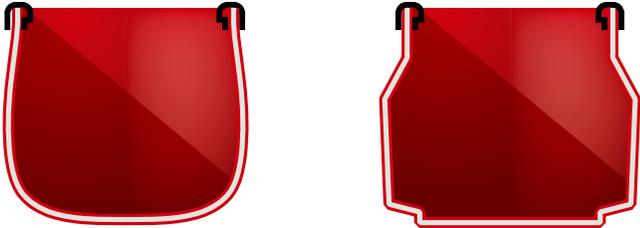
Rocker is the difference in height between the middle of the canoe on the hull and the point where the hull turns into the bow. A canoe with a large rocker looks like a banana.



Chine

Chine is a term used to describe the angle between the side and the hull of the canoe. A flat hulled canoe with vertical sides is said to have hard chines and a canoe with a rounded hull has soft chines. The chine or the edge of the canoe can be used by advanced paddlers to grip the water to stop the canoe slipping when turning at high speed. Racing canoes have very soft chines and whitewater freestyle canoes have hard chines.

The canoe on the left has soft chines; the edge is much less defined and the transition between sidewall and hull is much rounder. The canoe on the right has hard chines. There is a distinguishable edge between the side of the canoe and the hull.

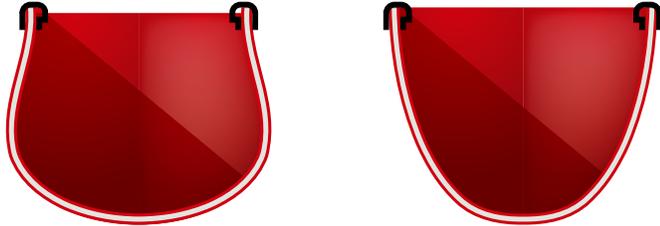


Tumblehome and flare

Tumblehome and flare are terms used to describe the angle of the sides of the canoe. When the gunwales are wider than the hull, the canoe is said to have flare. Flare helps to keep water out of

the canoe when paddling through waves or rapids. Tumblehome is the opposite of flare: the sides of the canoe curve in towards the gunwales, the hull of the canoe is therefore wider than the gunwales. Adding tumblehome to a canoe will make it easier to paddle as the canoeist need not reach so far out to place the paddle in the water.

The canoe on the left is wider at the bottom than the top: this is tumblehome. The canoe on the right is wider at the top than the bottom: this is flare.



Extra features for whitewater canoes

Whitewater canoes have extra fittings for performance and safety. Airbags should be added to all canoes used on whitewater. The space taken up by the airbags reduces the amount of water that can enter the canoe, keeping the canoe as light as possible. The additional flotation provided by the airbags also makes it easier to rescue the canoe after a capsize and less susceptible to damage as it floats down the river. Airbags should be securely fixed into the canoe using deck lashing and anchor straps. An airbag that is not fixed to the canoe may break free under pressure and the canoe will fill with water.

An airbag in a whitewater canoe: note that the lashing to hold the airbag in place extends over the airbag and down to the hull to keep the airbag fixed into the end of the canoe.



On the left is a bulkhead-style saddle system with thigh straps; ideal for advanced paddlers who require complete control. On the right is a pedestal saddle with a double strap system; much easier to adjust and it's easy to exit in the event of a capsize.

A foam saddle is glued into the middle of the canoe to provide a stable seating position. Foot rests and knee pads can also be added to increase comfort. To improve control, whitewater paddlers often add a foam bulkhead over the knees and quick release thigh straps to secure themselves into the canoe. The advantage of the saddle seating system is that it fixes the paddlers into the canoe and they are able to control the canoe much better. Saddle seats are also very comfortable when set up correctly.



Materials

Wood

The first open canoes were made from wood, when craftsmen hollowed out tree trunks to make dugout canoes. Wood is still popular and can be used in many different ways to make open canoes. Lengths of bark from birch trees can be sewn together with tree roots, stretched over a wooden frame and then waterproofed with resin. Thin strips of wood can be used to build very beautiful wood strip canoes; the strips of wood are glued together over a

A beautiful lightweight wood strip canoe for the connoisseur. Photo: Canadian Canoe Museum.



wooden frame and then waterproofed using epoxy or polyester resin. The finished canoe is lifted off the frame and then gunwales and internal fittings can be added. Planks of wood can also be used to build canoes using a similar technique. The planks are normally sewn together with wire or strong thread and then covered with resin to waterproof and protect the hull.

The primary advantage of a wooden canoe is that it is light; they are also reasonably strong and often very beautiful. Wooden canoes need to be looked after, stored in a sheltered place and regularly maintained, as a neglected wooden canoe will deteriorate very quickly. Wood is a good choice for careful owners.

Composite

Materials such as glass fibre, Kevlar and carbon fibre can be laid up in a mould and combined with epoxy or polyester resin to form a canoe hull. Modern thermoplastic composites such as Twin-tex can be vacuum packed then cooked in an oven to create strong and lightweight canoes. Early glass fibre open canoes were heavy but recent advances allow much lighter hulls to be built.

This whitewater freestyle canoe is made from Kevlar. It is lightweight and strong, perfect for competition use.



The principal advantage of composites is that very lightweight and stiff hulls can be built. Canoes built specifically for competition use are often made from composites. The main disadvantage of a



A Royalex canoe. Note the different layers of Royalex sandwiched between the wooden gunwales: two thinner layers of ABS on each side and an epoxy-soaked foam core.

composite canoe is its strength. If well looked after, a composite canoe will last a long time but they are easier to damage than a wooden or plastic canoe; they are, however, the easiest to repair if damaged. Twin-tex is difficult to repair. The technology to repair the material exists but is not readily available and a damaged canoe must be professionally repaired. A composite canoe is good for those paddlers looking for an extra competitive advantage.

Royalex

Royalex and Royalite are two similar materials more commonly known as ABS. Royalite has fewer laminate layers making it lighter but also slightly weaker than Royalex. Sheets of Royalex and Royalite are heated then moulded to the shape of a canoe hull. The combination of processes and materials produces an excellent canoe that is highly resistant to abrasion and heavy impacts. The Royalex material has incredible structural memory, a canoe can be bent (even folded in two) and it will pop back into shape with minimal permanent damage. Most open canoes produced are made from Royalex.

Royalex canoes are much stronger than composite canoes and lighter than plastic canoes. Royalite is noticeably lighter than Royalex but also slightly less robust. Royalite canoes are chosen when weight is more important than strength; touring canoes and solo canoes are often made of Royalite. Royalex is a good choice of material for everybody. Even a badly looked after Royalex canoe will last for years and can survive a great deal of mistreatment.

Plastic

Plastic can also be used to mould open canoe hulls. Small plastic pellets are added to a mould which is then spun around in a huge oven to coat the inside of the mould with liquid plastic. The canoe is then allowed to cool until it can be removed from the mould.

A small whitewater canoe.

Plastic can be used to mould complex shapes which are difficult to make in other materials.



Open canoes made of plastic are very strong but comparatively heavy. Plastic is not as rigid as other materials and this can lead to the hull flexing slightly in the middle, an effect known as 'oil canning'. Often used for whitewater canoes, the main advantage of plastic is the price. A plastic hull is much cheaper than a Royalex, wooden or composite hull in the same shape. Plastic is an ideal material for paddlers looking for good value or a strong whitewater canoe, as smaller whitewater canoes do not suffer from oil canning.

Responsibilities of an open canoeist

A good open canoeist is also a conscientious one. There are three areas I'm going to stress: safety, the environment, and fun.

Being safe is important. Always wear your buoyancy aid and don't go canoeing alone; it is safer and more fun with friends.



To really enjoy yourself, you and your canoeing buddies need to feel safe. Safety is about identifying and avoiding hazards and reducing risks. If you are new to open canoeing, enrol in a course

with a qualified coach; you will progress quicker and more comfortably with professional coaching. Prepare thoroughly for your canoeing experience: dress appropriately for the weather and water temperature and check that your canoe and equipment are in good working order. Tell somebody where you are going, what you are planning to do and when you expect to return. If anything goes wrong they will be able to alert the relevant authorities. Plan to keep within the limits of your ability as biting off more than you can chew is the most common cause of misadventure.

Planet Earth is a great place to play. We should all do our best to preserve it.



Planet Earth is our home and our playground and we should do everything in our power to protect the natural world from unnecessary damage and pollution. Canoeing is, generally speaking, an environmentally friendly sport. A canoe is human powered and can travel across water without leaving any trace of having been there. Responsible canoeists limit their impact on the environment by taking their rubbish with them to dispose of correctly and, where possible, tidying up any rubbish they find on their journey. When walking to or from the waters edge follow marked footpaths and take care not to break or damage vegetation when carrying your canoe. Repair or recycle worn out equipment instead of simply throwing it out; you will be saving money as well as the planet.

*Happy canoeists are good
canoeists so never, ever
forget to have fun.*



Fun is a very important factor for open canoeing; if you are not enjoying yourself then something is not right. A happy and relaxed paddler is less prone to injury, better prepared to learn and can concentrate 100% on getting the most out of their canoeing experience. Every paddler is responsible for enjoying themselves and making sure their paddling companions are also enjoying themselves. If somebody is struggling then help them out; if they are cold offer them a warm drink or a woolly hat. Open canoeing is a great sport and the more people who participate, the greater the sport will become. When out and about with your canoe enjoy yourself – there is no better advertisement for the sport than a group of happy people safely cruising down a river.