

SEA KAYAK ROUGH WATER HANDLING

Doug Cooper

A PRACTICAL MANUAL



ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE FOR INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED SEA KAYAKERS

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THE AUTHOR

Doug Cooper

Doug works as the Chief Instructor at Scotland's National Outdoor Training Centre, Glenmore Lodge. He has a lifetime of experience as a paddlesport coach in sea kayaking and white water. Through this he has enjoyed many years taking people to remote and spectacular coastlines and

rivers, then helping them improve their paddling skills and understanding. A large proportion of his work has been training and assessing paddlers working through British Canoeing's coaching and leadership qualifications system. As well as the delivery of these courses, Doug has also been very involved in the development of British Canoeing courses. When not out on the water, he has also enjoyed many years working as a Mountain and Ski Instructor or at play in search of new crags or fresh powder tracks.

As much as Doug loves introducing people to new environments and challenging their skills, it is his days off, personal adventures and expeditions that he lives for. He has sea kayaked extensively around the world including Greenland, Alaska, Iceland, Norway, Ireland, Corsica, Croatia, Sardinia and Greece, and always has a new destination and adventure planned.

Doug is also author of *Sea Kayak Handling*, and the guidebooks: *Scottish Sea Kayaking*, *Skye and North West Highlands Sea Kayaking*, and *North and East Coasts of Scotland Sea Kayaking*, all published by Pesda Press.

So if it involves discovering new remote parts of the world, having an adventure or helping friends and clients; Doug will have a smile on his face and most definitely be having fun.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is always difficult to know where to start when it comes to offering thanks to those who have helped me. Over the years I have been lucky enough to paddle with many fantastic coaches and sea paddlers whom I have learnt from in many different ways. If I have ever been out on the sea with you, or chatted sea paddling over a beer in the bar, I have learnt from you and I thank you.

When it comes to getting an idea in my head into a book in your hand there are a few people who deserve specific mention. The biggest thanks go to my girlfriend, Lara Tipper. Pretty much all of the fantastic photographs in this book are down to her photographic expertise, patience and enthusiasm. Without her constant support, none of this would have been possible. In addition to Lara I also need to thank Olly Sanders for helping me out with a few photographs.

Throughout this book, you will see that a wide range of experienced coaches and paddlers have offered their own thoughts and words of wisdom. Their contributions have added greatly to the book and I appreciate their willingness to help me out.

Finally, I would of course like to thank all at Pesda Press who yet again have helped me out in every way I could ask for, producing another great book.

Photographs

All photos are by Lara Tipper and Doug Cooper except the Introduction and Chapter 1, 3, 4 and 9 heading photographs (which are by Olly Sanders), Chapter 5 heading photo (which is by Miki Miyashiro) and the good food and whisky photos in Chapter 8 which are by Dawn Horsburgh.

The main chapter photographs were taken at the following locations:

Chapter 2	North coast of Scotland
Chapter 3	Men of Mey Tidal Race, Pentland Firth; Falls of Lora
Chapter 4	Farr Beach (Sutherland); Grey Dogs Tidal Race (between Scarba and Lunga)
Chapter 5	Clachtoll (Sutherland)
Chapters 6–9	Various locations



INTRODUCTION

For the committed sea kayaker, the world's oceans offer constantly changing and challenging environments. Whether it is strong winds, rough seas, rolling swell, tidal races, surf beaches or open crossings, the ocean can be a very challenging place for the sea kayaker. In this dynamic environment the sea kayaker needs plenty of experience along with a high degree of skill not only to stay safe, but also to gain the highest rewards. For the sea kayaker who has the skills and experience to enjoy this environment, the challenges are endless. The pleasures that can be gained from these challenges, along with the places that can be explored, are out of this world.

The sea kayak that you are paddling has evolved through generations of experience and research, and nine times out of ten it will be the paddler who is the limiting factor when it comes to the boat performing in rough water. By getting to grips with the skills described in this book, putting in the practice and (most importantly) enjoying the learning opportunities, *Rough Water Handling* will hopefully open up a whole new world of exploration and challenge. I hope you enjoy the book and the opportunities it will provide for you, and I look forward to seeing you out there having fun on the rough stuff.

CONTENTS

USING THIS BOOK	8	OPEN CROSSINGS	138
ASSUMPTIONS MADE	8	TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS	138
EQUIPMENT & ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS	9	TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS	140
LEARNING AND DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS	9	PHYSIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS	143
		PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS	145
HIGH WIND PADDLING	12	ROLLING	149
FORWARD PADDLING	12	THE ROLL	149
PADDLING INTO THE WIND AND WAVES	14	ROUGH WATER ROLLING CONSIDERATIONS	154
PADDLING WITH THE WIND AND WAVES	16	TROUBLESHOOTING	155
PADDLING ACROSS WIND AND WAVES	16		
TURNING FROM A STATIC START	18	PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS	160
TURNING ON THE MOVE: PADDLING DOWNWIND	24	DIET	160
TURNING ON THE MOVE: PADDLING UPWIND	32	NUTRITIONAL VALUE	161
TURNING ON THE MOVE: PADDLING WITH A SIDE WIND	37	HYDRATION	166
		FITNESS	168
MOVING WATER	43	PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS	175
MANOEUVRING IN THE FLOW	44	AROUSAL	176
FORWARD FERRY GLIDE	50	SELF-CONFIDENCE	177
REVERSE FERRY GLIDE	55	ATTENTIONAL FOCUS	178
BREAKING INTO THE FLOW	57	IMAGERY	180
BREAKING OUT OF THE FLOW	66	SELF-TALK	181
		PLANNING AND GOAL SETTING	182
SURFING	76	LAST WORD	185
BEACH BREAK SURF LAUNCHING	77		
BEACH BREAK SURF LANDING	81	REFERENCES	185
SURFING THE SOUP	85		
BEACH BREAK SURFING	89	INDEX	186
OTHER USERS – SHARING THE SURF	96		
TIDAL RACE AND FOLLOWING SEA SURFING	98		
ROCK HOPPING	111		
TACTICS	111		
TECHNIQUES: BLENDING STROKES	116		
LANDING ON AND LAUNCHING FROM ROCKS	134		



USING THIS BOOK

The best way of ensuring that you can handle your sea kayak in rough water is to make sure you can edge, manoeuvre and handle your kayak with complete confidence and efficiency in calm water. You need to understand what techniques work best for you and your kayak in calm water, and why they work best.

To help you with the essential calmer water skills, ensure you have read, understood and practised the skills covered in *Sea Kayak Handling*. This is essential as, throughout this book, I will be referring to many of these skills and looking at how we adapt and use them in the various rough water environments.

Assumptions made

All of the skills in this book involve sea kayaking in potentially very challenging locations. This book in no way covers the huge amount of additional knowledge that is required to paddle safely at these locations; careful tidal planning and a good knowledge of navigation and weather are essential for all of the locations at which rough water handling takes place. The associated safety equipment and knowledge of how to use it is also required. Paddling as a group is advised at rough water locations; correspondingly, the knowledge and ability to look after each other as a group

and perform rescues is essential. This book assumes that you have all this knowledge; if you feel you do not then there are other books to help with this (e.g. *Sea Kayak* by Gordon Brown or *Sea Kayak Navigation* by Franco Ferrero), but no book can replace training or coaching from competent or qualified sea kayakers.

Build up your experience gradually so that your theoretical knowledge is put to the test in manageable steps. The first time you go surfing, choose a gently shelving beach and wait for a day when the surf is small and the wind onshore. The first time you go to play in a tide race, go on neap tides. If you are not certain of the meaning of expressions such as 'onshore wind' or 'neap tides', read up on the theory in the above-mentioned books.

The final assumption I have made is that your kayak and equipment are suitable for the rough water environment. It is inevitable that you will get wetter out in the rough stuff and your boat will be challenged more (particularly in the wind). Good-quality sea kayak clothing is essential for your comfort, along with a sea kayak that is designed for exposed day and expedition paddling. Think back to the Connectivity section of the Foundation Skills chapter in *Sea Kayak Handling* and ensure that you are comfortably wearing your sea kayak!

Equipment and environmental considerations

Due to the nature of rough water environments, the variables are endless and different sea kayakers will be affected in different ways. Every paddler is different, whether in size, weight, flexibility, strength or confidence. Considering this, Rough Water Handling is in no way meant to be prescriptive or advocate that what is shown is the only way of doing it. All I have done is put together what has worked for me, as well as what has worked best for the majority of students I have coached over the years. This should give you a balanced view of ways to handle your sea kayak in rough water. Try what is shown in the book, then feel free to modify it a little to make it work best for you. Key equipment or environmental considerations are highlighted in separate information boxes throughout the book.

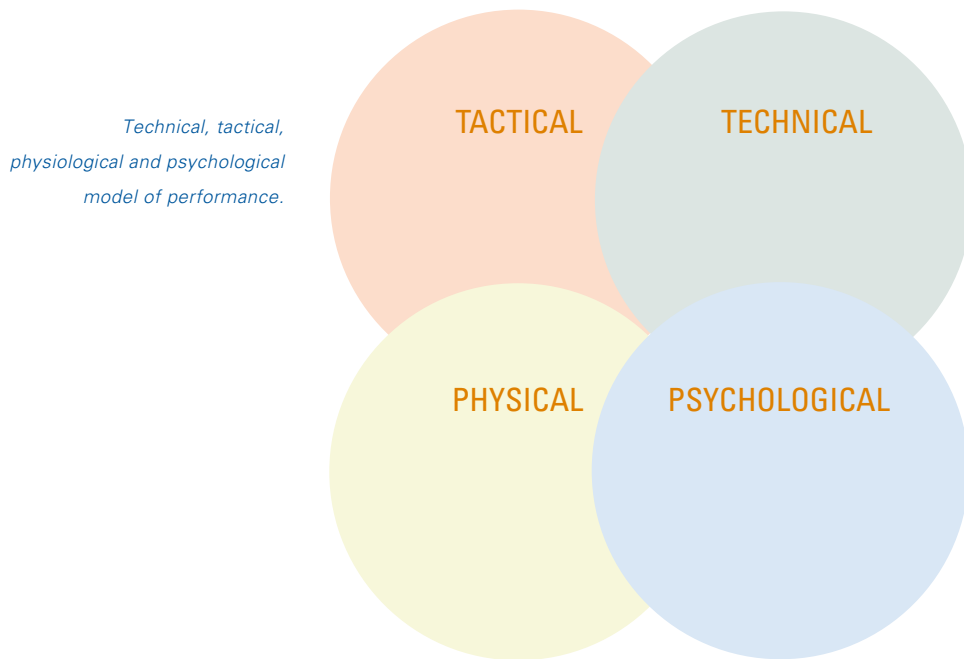
Learning and developing your skills

It is one thing flicking through a book and thinking that you can perform a skill; however, taking what is shown in a book and putting it to use for real it is quite another thing. The ideas and skills

in the book are just to get you started on the right road to rough water sea kayak handling; it will be up to you to fully learn, understand and master these skills. Make sure that you set yourself appropriate goals that allow you to gradually build your skills. Start learning and practising the skills in a realistic environment, but one that is also forgiving and not too committing. This way, you can focus on learning the skill without the stress of thinking 'what happens if I blow it?' From this, build up gradually to those more committing environments where you need to know your skills will work.

Moving on from sea kayaking in calmer conditions requires the perfect blend of ingredients. To become skilled at paddling in rough conditions, I have adopted the multi-component model of skilful performance: technical, tactical, physiological and psychological or TTPP (as depicted).

A skilful performance needs to focus on these four main areas. Think of a skill you are already familiar with, and see if you can identify the separate TTPP parts within it. Consider the model when reading the book and revisit it when out paddling; it should help you to identify which 'ingredients' you need to focus on in your own paddling performance.



By this stage, you will already have done a lot of learning to be able to paddle a sea kayak to a good standard. Everybody learns in different ways, and you will no doubt have your own preferred way. Before starting on some further learning and the associated practice, don't forget the following golden rules.

By following these simple rules you will get the most from the book and your practice sessions.

- Do not focus on too many skills at a time; otherwise, you will overload yourself as the learner.
- Always work on each skill on both sides (this is known as bilateral practice).
- Begin learning skills in an environment you feel comfortable in.
- As soon as you feel comfortable performing skills in one environment, change the environment to something more challenging.
- Practise your skills little and often so that you do not overtire each practice session; this should ensure the skills are being practised well.
- As well as changing sides and varying the environment when practising skills, also try varying the speed, range and power.
- Ask a friend to observe and pass feedback on what your skills look like in comparison to the pictures in the book.
- Ask a friend to take photographs or video footage of you performing your skills; you can then compare these to the book.
- After challenging your skills, take the time to reflect on what went well and what could be improved. Consider using the TTPP model above to help with this.

By following these simple golden rules you will get the most from your practice sessions and this book. Additional information boxes throughout the book also provide some coaching top tips either to help you practise or help you teach the skills yourself, as well as top tips from some of the world's leading sea paddlers and coaches.

As with learning all new skills, there is never any substitute to getting some quality coaching from a qualified instructor. You may want to consider this to speed up your journey to sea kayak mastery.



OPEN CROSSINGS

To head off in a sea kayak across an expanse of open water without being able to see the next landfall is, for many a sea kayaker, the ultimate challenge. The total commitment of a crossing is a truly unique experience. Whether it is the first hour-long crossing out to an island or a seasoned kayaker's 12-hour exposed ocean crossing, the feeling of apprehension and commitment will always be there.

Regardless of whether you are a novice or a veteran open water paddler, many of the skills required to be successful when attempting these crossings are similar. Open crossings require a crucial blend of ingredients all coming together. To help understand this, the Technical, Tactical, Physiological and Psychological model I have used throughout the book is invaluable. I would suggest that, for open crossings, the most important areas to focus on would be the tactical and the psychological.

Technical considerations

When considering technical skills for open crossings, the main areas I consider are the paddling skills that will be required. Although it is fair to say that an open crossing is all about forward paddling, it is also important to consider some other technical paddling skills.

*Good forward paddling
is essential for the
open crossings.*



- Ensure your forward paddling stroke is as efficient as possible and is good enough to paddle the distance of your crossing.
- Have the ability to vary your forward paddling; this can allow different muscles to be used then rested while on a long crossing. Changing from high-angle paddling to low-angle paddling is one way of doing this, changing the cadence (stroke rate) is another.
- Ensure your forward paddling can stay consistent and efficient in a range of conditions that may be encountered on a crossing.
- It is essential to feel stable and balanced in the kayak, whether it is moving or stationary. Rests will need to be taken and, if rafting up is not the best option, being comfortably able to maintain stability is important.
- If solo, having a system to rest in rough water is important (a paddle float may be an option).
- Ensure you have the skills to deal with any rough water and swell that will be encountered.
- Launching and landing will be required, often on an exposed island or coastline; ensure you have the technical skills to do this safely.
- If with a group, rafting up will be useful. Be able to manoeuvre the kayak efficiently without wasting energy to get into rafted up position.
- If solo, self rescue skills are essential.
- In a group, self and group rescue skills need to be practised.

Tactical considerations

Without well-thought-out tactics it would be impossible to be safe, comfortable and efficient on an open crossing. Although being highly skilled is enough to keep out of trouble in many areas of sea kayaking, if good tactics are not in place on an open crossing it will be, at best, uncomfortable and hard work and, at worst, result in an encounter with Davey Jones' locker! The tactics for open crossings are all those items that take a bit of planning.

Getting the planning right is essential for the tactics of open crossings.



- Ensure the distance, navigation, tides and timings are all well researched (and checked) at home, well before the crossing.
- Decide on the upper limit of winds that you are happy with for the crossing, watch the weather closely and do not be tempted to start if the forecast is not perfect for you.
- Be patient; it will often take more than one attempt to get the right weather for a planned crossing.
- Use the ocean to help the paddling; adjust to a forward trim to gain speed going down waves, make the most of the shelter from the wind in the troughs and use the peaks of waves to see ahead.
- Choose the right group of people to go with; this is as important from a social aspect as it is from a paddling ability perspective.
- Choose the best kayak for the job: comfort, stability and speed are key considerations.

COACH'S TOP TIP

Peeing at sea is an art form and the options for females are: sitting, standing or swimming.

When sitting in the kayak there are peeing devices such as a 'shewee' or 'you go girl', both of which are ergonomically designed funnels with a spout. Take your spray deck off and then insert the device through a relief zip. Slightly lift the weight off your buttocks by leaning on the back rim of the cockpit and get the device positioned with a good seal on the skin. This will need to be held in place with one hand while the other holds a bottle over the spout. This definitely takes practise, as there is a tendency for the device to drip on retrieval. In rougher conditions, you need to be well balanced or raft up. The preferred method I have is a large cup (a 2 litre plastic bottle cut down to about a litre and slightly shaped, with gaffa tape to seal the edges around the top). I wear an oversized pair of salopettes with a large waisted spray deck so that I can lift my cag and insert the cup down the salopettes. I prefer this method when I am out by myself as you don't have to take the spray deck off and you have a free hand to balance.

You can stand up and pee, although this needs a partner to help. Raft up with your partner (with their boat positioned slightly further forward). Take off the spray deck and use your cockpit rim or partner's buoyancy aid to help stand up and balance. With one foot on their back deck and one foot just in front of your seat it is possible to pee between the boats. (This is also a handy method when on a really long crossing if it's the time of the month.)

The final method is to jump in for a swim and have a pee. Recommended only in warm water and on a warm day!



Fiona Whitehead

Fiona is a Level 5 Sea Coach and works for the Outward Bound Trust. She aspires to enable as many young people as possible to have the opportunity to experience adventures and journeys in wild places. Some of this is through having her own adventures, leading expeditions or coaching other staff to lead expeditions and adventures for young people.

- Set the kayak up so that there is room in the cockpit to stretch out legs and move a bit. Ensure the fit is also good for forward paddling.
- Good paddles make a huge difference. If your paddle length or feather can be adjusted, this will help to vary forward paddling and give flexibility.
- Drip rings on paddles are great for crossings; dry hands will generally blister and rub up less.
- Get the clothing system right as being too hot or cold will lead to fatigue. A system that allows venting and adjustment is important. I avoid cap decks or drysuits on most crossings because of this.
- If on a longer crossing you will need to go for a pee; be prepared for this and have a pee system practised and in place.
- Have all-important equipment readily available for accessing while afloat. Consider which hatches are accessible, what can go in buoyancy aid (PFD) or jacket pockets and if a deck bag or bum bag is needed. Do not rely on having anything in the cockpit; chances are it may be too rough to release a spray deck.

Good planning so all the essentials are at hand is a must.



- Have a good hydration system in place and ensure you can access easy-to-eat food while afloat.
- A GPS receiver is invaluable when on crossings; know how to use one and have spare batteries at hand.
- Emergency communications are essential, along with a means to receive updated forecasts while on the crossing. Consider the pros and cons of VHF, satellite phone, emergency locator beacons, mobile phones and flares for the crossing being undertaken.

TOP TIPS

It is obviously much easier to go for a pee at sea for us male paddlers than for our female paddling companions. That said, it is a skill worth practising before being caught short. I find the majority of paddling trousers make it awkward to pee out of when sat down – check this out before you have to go! I generally choose to either not bother with paddling trousers for crossings if the weather is good, or use a set with an elasticised waist and no braces (ensuring it is not tucked up under my spray deck waist). Alternatively, a pair of mountain waterproof trousers with a zip and fastener at the front also works well.

Trousers sorted, a handy pee bottle will be required. Take something with as wide a neck as possible, as it will be surprisingly easy to miss. When it comes to going, a friend not easily embarrassed is handy to have around since being rafted up makes a huge difference (a paddle float is a possible second option if support is required).

Releasing the spray deck is easiest, but if this is not possible consider a spray deck with a very wide waist which will allow access. For most people it is then just a matter of sorting yourself out, usually lifting your bum slightly off the seat by resting back against the cockpit rim, and peeing away. I have one friend who seems not to need a pee bottle and can go straight over the side – I am sure his seat is raised higher than most!



Having food and drink available is essential to keep the engine running.

Physiological considerations

Ensuring that there is enough fuel in the engine to complete the crossing is essential. As already indicated with the tactical considerations, making sure that the fuel is available while afloat is also

essential. In addition to this, it is also important to know that the body is fit and strong enough for the job in hand. Most of the physiological considerations for open crossings will be covered in the “Physical considerations’ chapter; a few specifics are listed below.

- Hydration is vital; it is all too easy to avoid drinking if water is not easily available or if trying to avoid going for a pee.
- Keep drinking little and often throughout a crossing. The chances are this will not necessitate extra pee stops, but if it does then it will still have been worth it from an energy point of view.
- Eat well and appropriately before the crossing, and have all the correct energy sources of food available to hand while afloat.
- Use food and drink that you have tried and tested; this is not the place to discover that a certain product makes you nauseous.
- Be organised with food, drink and rest stops when on a crossing; it is all too easy to just keep paddling until overtired, by which time it is too late to take on food and rest.
- I would recommend paddling for 50–55 minutes and resting for 5–10 minutes. Keeping this in hour blocks also makes the tidal planning and timing easier.
- While resting, take the time to gently relax and stretch the back, shoulders and legs.
- Look after your body when afloat; think about sun cream, lip salve, sun hat, sunglasses, etc.
- Do everything possible to avoid rubs and blisters; make sure the kit you use is tried and tested.
- Keeping hands as dry as possible can help prevent rubs and blisters. If blisters start on hands however, tape them up before they get too bad. Electrical tape works well for this.
- If rubs start under armpits, then Sudocrem® is a lifesaver. Vaseline® (petroleum jelly) can also be used.



Starting off on an open crossing is all about mind over matter.

Psychological considerations

As already indicated in the introduction, open crossings are as much a mind game as anything else. With a considered psychological approach, even the most committing of open crossings can become a positive and successful adventure. There is a saying that is used by fast jet pilots: “never take the body where the mind has not been before”. This could not be truer for open crossings, and the ‘Psychological considerations’ chapter will go into this in greater depth. There are a few key points for the paddler taking on an open crossing however, listed in the following.

- The unknowns are usually the main psychological constraints, so the key is to get rid of as many of them as possible.
- The length of time in the kayak without being able to land is often a key worry when embarking on an open crossing. To cope with this ensure you have spent at least as much time without getting out of a boat prior to the crossing, but on a coastal journey that is escapable if required.

COACH'S TOP TIPS

I learnt to sea kayak in the Channel Islands. Small islands, strong tidal streams, summer fog and committing crossings were the norm.

It is surprising how your own fears and insecurity can turn a pleasant paddle into a scary crossing. The trick is to build up your experience gradually and so create a 'psychological reserve'. Start with short crossings to large targets that are reassuringly visible. Only attempt your early crossings in settled weather and good visibility. When you start paddling out to small targets, make sure that you are fit enough to paddle twice the distance envisaged. That way, if you completely blow it you can paddle back to the mainland and, more importantly, you know you can.

Above all, remember that there is always a 'Plan B' (even if you haven't thought of it yet)! In the days before GPS, a few friends and I were crossing from Jersey to the relatively small island of Sark. About halfway across, the wind died and thick fog developed. Radiating a confidence I didn't necessarily feel, I paddled on our bearing and trusted my carefully calculated tidal vectors. When the anticipated crossing time had elapsed and there was still no sign of land, I announced that we would paddle for another 15 minutes. If there was still no sign of land after that, we would go for Plan B. Five minutes later, there was a collective sigh of relief as we heard the bell of the buoy that is just outside the tiny harbour.



Over a pint that evening I was asked what Plan B was. Simple! The tide would have been running north for another couple of hours, making an immediate return to Jersey impossible. On the plus side, there was no wind. We would therefore conserve energy and drift with the tide for two hours to the north and, after it turned, for two hours to the south. If the fog had lifted by then, we would go to nearby Sark. If it hadn't, we would paddle back with the tide to the much larger target of Jersey. No problem!

Franco Ferrero

- Being able to cope with the conditions is another worry; prior to the crossing get out in worse conditions than the forecast would ever throw up on your crossing, but in a safe escapable environment. That way you will know you can deal with any conditions that may arise.
- Build up the distance of crossings gradually; start with an hour, then maybe two and so on. Unknowns then become manageable.
- Trust your equipment and be totally familiar with it and the spares being carried. Again, get rid of any unknowns in terms of how gear may or may not perform.
- Prior to setting off, find a safe spot and practise anything that may be needed on the crossing that you have not done before. Going for a pee, eating, drinking and resting while afloat are all examples of this.
- Plan the trip, then plan it again, then check it and then check it again. Finally, get someone else to plan it independently and compare your results. If you know what to expect and are prepared for the job, it is half done.
- Being totally at ease with those around you (or not in the solo case) is essential. Trusting yourself and your fellow paddlers is fundamental for maximum confidence.

PERFORMER'S TOP TIP

In the grand scheme of things, such a small number of serious crossings have been done that there is no single authority on the subject and no textbook way of doing things. You will learn something new every time you venture out because the dangers always vary. In the Channel it's shipping, the Minch is renowned for steep vicious waves, and the Irish Sea and Pentland Firth have currents that have to be seen to be believed. Your kayak, the weather, water temperature and wildlife are a few additional factors that might determine how successful/safe you are.

My first tip is obvious: know exactly what you are taking on. Have sleepless nights working out what might go wrong and then develop and test systems and kit to deal with the worst. For the first time in 40 years of paddling, Mike Berwick came out of his boat

this year. He seldom needs to roll and had never needed a self rescue. He was shocked at how difficult it was and humiliated by the fact that he couldn't do it. Practise is everything.

One factor that never changes is the need to be organised. Everything you need has to be accessible. Prioritise, colour code all your bags and have a home for each bit of kit. If all team members pack their boats in the same way, this can save hours on a long trip and save lives when things go wrong.

Discipline is another must. Establish the routine you need and stick to it. Five minutes rest an hour is generally enough to reorganise, refuel and recover, but five easily turns to ten if there is no one focused on the clock. Now your troubles really start as you miss tide changes, weather windows and possibly your ultimate goal.

If paddling in excess of ten hours, someone in the group will at some point feel grim. You have to have the strength to stay behind them. Your turn for misery will come, and only then can you appreciate the psychological benefits of leading and navigating. It may not always be fun, but enjoy what is essentially a unique experience.



I recommend having with you: a satellite phone (pricy but priceless); a kayak which has a skeg or rudder; a Blizzard heat pad; and a Reed kayak tent (proven lifesaver). Rhythmical paddling is the key to easy distance, whichever technique you use make sure it works in all conditions. Finally, ensure that you can paddle left- or right-handed in case of tendon inflammation.

Patrick Winterton

Patrick has spent the last six years pushing his limits of open sea crossings. His latest include a 2200 km voyage retracing the route of St Brendan 'the Navigator' and the first kayak expedition to make the 3-day crossing from Scotland to the Faroe Islands. His presentations combine stunning footage and entertaining anecdotes that may tempt you to venture further out to sea. Contact Patrick via pww@patrickwinterton.com.



ROUGH WATER **HANDLING**

A PRACTICAL MANUAL

Using crystal clear text and stunning sequences of photos, Doug shows you how to make the most of your sea kayak in rough water. The techniques needed to cope with high winds, skilful handling of your craft in surf, the psychological and physical preparation needed for open crossings; all aspects are covered.

In addition there are 'Top Tips' from many of the UK's top sea kayak coaches and performers. Great insights gained out there on the edge.

Doug Cooper – British Canoe Union Level 5 Sea Kayak Coach and Head of Paddlesport at Glenmore Lodge, Scotland's National Outdoor Centre. Doug is one of the leading sea kayak coaches in the UK.

HIGH WINDS

MOVING WATER

SURF

TIDE RACES

ROCK HOPPING

OPEN CROSSINGS

ROLLING

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