



Derek Hairon

# SIT-ON-TOP KAYAK

A BEGINNER'S MANUAL

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE FOR MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR SIT-ON-TOP





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## THE AUTHOR

### **Derek Hairon**

British Canoe Union Level 5 Sea Kayak Coach and Director of Jersey Kayak Adventures Ltd, one of the leading specialist sit-on-top kayak outfitters in the United Kingdom.

Derek has kayaked for over forty years. He first learned to kayak around the incredible coastline of Jersey in the Channel Islands (which has some of the largest tides in the world) after his father built him a sit-on-top kayak. He has undertaken many kayak expeditions, most notably a circumnavigation of Ireland in fifty-eight days and expeditions to Alaska, Canada, as well as whitewater kayaking in Nepal. Closer to home he has paddled extensively in the Channel Islands including thirty-five mile open crossings. He has kayaked most of the best coastal spots in the UK.

In his younger days he was a member of the Jersey surf kayak team and has been active in coaching sea kayaking in Jersey. Active in other sports too, he undertook a 12,000 mile cycle tour in 1984 and also is a keen skier and walker.

In 2004 he set up Jersey Kayak Adventures to offer tours and courses to cater for the growth in this popular sport.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **Oh boy. Just who do you thank?**

I guess Gary Kemp, formidable surf kayaker and sea paddler and co-Director of Jersey Kayak Adventures Ltd, for helping to develop our approach to kayaking. Kath Nicolson for proofreading the drafts. Krista and Nicholas Hairon for lots of background work and help. Renee Taraud for support, especially when the hard drive failed as the final draft was being prepared for sending to the editor. Then there are all the kayaking coaches and paddlers I have had the pleasure of kayaking with over the years, especially in the Jersey Canoe Club which seems to be a breeding ground for some great sea kayakers who simply get out and get paddling in waters that sometimes would scare the pants off me. When getting trashed in a serious rock hop full of whitewater and crashing surf it is always good to know others of similar ability are around to lend a hand and to help push my limits even further.

And then there is my Dad, Ack Hairon, who along with my kayak coach David Thelland helped start all this many years ago. If Mum had quite realised what Dad was getting up to on his kayak I doubt if she would have let me near one.

Finally, thanks to lots of clients on our courses who sometimes found themselves being the test bed for ideas.

*Thank you to all those who have contributed photographs including; Bob Campbell, Rob Jones, Scotty, Ocean Kayak, Gumotex, Valley, Lendal, Bic Sport, Crewsaver, Robson, Feelfree, Aquapac, Emotion, Palm and Wilderness Systems.*

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**What can you do with a sit-on-top?** You can surf, rock-hop, bird-watch, fish, dive, go camping and explore all with the same single kayak – and the same kayak can be used for all the family.





## WHY CHOOSE A SIT-ON-TOP KAYAK?

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*Of the people I paddle with, the youngest is three years old and the oldest is eighty-one.*

Sit-on-top kayaking is fun. It is the fastest growing paddlesport for this simple reason.

It is accessible to almost anybody who has a desire to experience nature and the outdoors. Anyone of average fitness can take part, there are many adaptations available for those with special needs, and age is not a big factor. You just need an open mind and to be willing to explore and discover our fantastic aquatic environment that is not easily reached by other craft.

Sit-on-top kayaks are the big development in paddlesport. Built in affordable modern plastics, they are durable and come in all shapes and sizes to suit different needs. Learning is rapid and you can pick up all the basics very quickly.

Sit-on-tops enable people to get afloat without fear of capsizing (you will simply fall off into the water). These versatile craft are designed to be stable and user friendly in many situations, from messing about with the family on a lake, fishing your favourite deep water spot, or exploring a rocky coastline.

Relatively easy to transport, a sit-on-top can be launched in almost any spot with much less hassle than moving a small dinghy.

Paddling is a social experience too. When you paddle with others you can choose how far you wish to go, and what you would rather not do; as you watch a paddler slipping into a cave you are part of the shared experience. You can explore and discover, on your own terms, places that other small craft can rarely get to.

Kayaking requires just enough concentration to enable the stress and everyday activities of our busy lives to be forgotten. It is a chance to 'decompress' and for a few hours to become an adventurer in a changing and often magical environment.

# WHERE CAN YOU PADDLE?

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*You can get up-to-date information on the changing situation of access from national governing bodies such as the British Canoe Union or the Inland Waterways Authority.*

It would be nice to be able to go afloat anywhere you see water. However, things are not so simple. It is important to judge for yourself the water and weather conditions, and also to ensure that you have the right of access to your planned launching and landing sites. Some waters may have exclusion zones (such as military firing ranges or nature reserves) and in other places land-owners may not allow public access.

## Rivers

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*The force of moving water should never be underestimated, so read the sections that cover safety on rivers with care. Forewarned is forearmed.*

Rivers, whether fast flowing in their upland stretches or lazy and meandering in the lowlands, give you a unique perspective on the countryside and its wildlife as you drift downstream.

Major rivers flow all year round. Larger rivers, particularly in their lower reaches become busy shipping navigations, and are often popular with other river users such as sailing and rowing clubs.

Throughout the world many rivers run wild, although there may be localised restrictions on boating in special cases such as drinking water catchment areas. Continental Europe has sharing arrangements for river use, with evenings given over to fishing from the banks, so try and find out what the local arrangements are.

*The best bet is to check with local kayak shops or canoe clubs to find out what the local situation is, or consult the BCU website.*

The situation in England and Wales is less enlightened, where people are less likely to be willing to share the riverside. Many of the larger rivers such as the Thames, the Trent and the Severn require a British Waterways licence (included in British Canoe Union membership). On other rivers your right of navigation may be contested by land-owners.



**JOIN YOUR NATIONAL CANOE SPORT ASSOCIATION (SUCH AS THE BRITISH CANOE UNION). YOU'LL GET LOTS OF INFORMATION ON WHERE TO PADDLE AND WHICH KAYAK CLUBS ARE IN YOUR AREA. YOUR SUBSCRIPTION MAY ALSO HELP THE CAMPAIGN FOR BETTER ACCESS TO RIVERS, LAKES AND THE COAST. SEE PAGE 88 FOR DETAILS.**



## Canals

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*Look out for other craft and sunken or floating junk. Water quality is likely to be poor, so don't swim in the canal.*

*Canal Locks are not suitable for kayaks and you will need to carry your boat around them (portage) on the tow path.*

Canals were the arteries of the industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th century. As such they run through the heart of many historic towns and cities. They provide safe and quiet passage through miles of countryside; interrupted only by the locks that punctuate the length of a canal to allow progress uphill.

The waterways licence included in the British Canoe Union membership package covers the entire British canal network. Their still and calm water can be a great place to discover kayaking.

## Lakes

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*Deep water lakes can be very cold once you leave the shallows.*

Lakes have varied characteristics and origins. They could be deep water lakes in dramatic glacial valleys, shallow ox-bow lakes separated from the meander of the river, or man-made lakes such as disused gravel pits. The same access considerations that apply to rivers also apply to lakes. Working gravel pits and quarries will be off limits for obvious safety reasons.

On larger lakes wind and waves may make paddling difficult. It is usually possible to launch at the sheltered end of the lake on a windy day. On small lakes the wind will blow you to the shore if you bite off more than you can chew.

## The sea

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The sea is perhaps the most popular destination for sit-on-top kayaking. It is, in suitable conditions, a wonderful playground... but it must always be treated with respect. Tides, currents and the effect of wind can change a seemingly safe coastline into a maelstrom of waves. Books such as *Sea Kayak Navigation* provide basic information about the effects of wind and tides.

*Avoid large and busy harbours. Ferries, yachts and power boats can appear from all directions and you will not be easily spotted by them.*

*Some busy beaches may be 'zoned' for bathers, surfers and other water users.*

*Paddle within the areas signposted for watercraft.*

Access is not usually an issue, the biggest problem may be finding a place to park. Never obstruct slipways and harbour areas in case emergency craft need to go afloat. Driving vehicles onto beaches will one day lead to you getting stuck in the sand or mud and usually it will be when the tide is rising. Use a **kayak trolley** (see page 31) instead of driving onto the beach.

Wildlife is one of the great attractions of paddling on the sea. However, some areas are particularly sensitive, such as sand dunes, feeding areas in estuaries and lagoons, and roosting and nesting sites on cliffs. Do your best to find out about and comply with any local restrictions or codes of conduct.





WEBSITES AND MESSAGE BOARDS  
CAN HELP SAVE YOU LOTS OF TIME  
– SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE HAS PROBABLY  
ASKED A SIMILAR QUESTION.

## GETTING STARTED

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*See page 88 for some good websites and useful contacts to help get you started.*

If you're not already sitting in your kayak, on the water, reading this book, there are a few things which may be worth considering or trying out before you take the plunge.

### Buy or hire?

---

*A growing number of outdoor centres offer tours and courses. Look for outdoor activity or watersports centres.*

Before rushing out to buy a sit-on-top it is worth considering just how often you are likely to use the kayak and all the equipment. For the occasional user, it may well be better to hire from an outfitter or sign up to a course or a kayak tour where all the gear will be supplied. You'll get to use quality equipment and go on trips you might not otherwise have undertaken. You won't have to drive with your kayak on your car and you won't have to make space to store your kayak at home. Best of all, at the end of the trip you leave someone else to wash and sort out all the gear.

### Get tuition

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*Tuition and courses will also put you in touch with other kayakers to paddle with.*

Learning from your own experience is invaluable, but you may end up learning poor technique, buying the wrong equipment, or progressing slowly. Signing up for a sit-on-top kayaking course will enable you to learn good technique and to paddle safely.

### Transport and storage

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#### **Moving the kayak**

Most paddling related back injuries happen when moving kayaks. This could be at the beach or just as often in your own back yard. See the section on 'Lifting and carrying' (page 31) before grappling with your kayak.

## Storing your kayak outside

Keep the kayak out of direct sunlight as some brands do lose their colour over time. In most cases the problem of the plastic becoming brittle due to exposure to the sun has been largely eradicated thanks to UV inhibitors added to modern plastics. Consider how you will secure the kayak to reduce the risk of theft. A chain run through the drain holes should deter opportunist thieves.

*Vertical storage saves space.*

*Make sure that whatever you tie or padlock your kayak to is strong enough.*



*Detachable roof rack roller.*



## Roof racks

Check out the cost of a roof rack for the car and whether your vehicle can accommodate a rack. Roof racks can be expensive options. If you use upright bars, remember to allow for your extra vehicle height when entering car parks.

A small trailer can be an excellent alternative. This eliminates the need to lift the kayak onto a car roof and lessens the risk of damage to your car. After paddling, your wet kit and clothing can be stored in the trailer box, keeping your car dry.

*Due mainly to weight restrictions, two kayaks is usually the limit on a roof rack.*

*A detachable roof mounted roller can help make it easier to load a kayak onto a car roof rack.*



*Straps are easy to use and don't require you to learn complicated knots. Ropes are more versatile.*

*Putting a twist in the straps can stop them from humming when driving. Threading the straps through any convenient strong points is also a good idea.*

Kayaks and paddles must be well secured when travelling. On any journey tie the kayak at both the bow and stern and also laterally across the roof rack. Do not use elastic bungee style cords, as these can detach suddenly. Use rope or straps and check that the weight limits for your roof rack are adhered to.

If you have a large amount of boat overhanging the front or back of your vehicle then you must ensure the overhang is clearly marked with a red marker or flag. Outside the UK, the law may require lighting and reflective boards.



**DON'T CUT CORNERS WHEN TYING YOUR BOAT ON. THE EXPERIENCE OF A KAYAK OR PADDLES DETACHING FROM A ROOF RACK AT HIGH SPEED IS HORRENDOUS AND LIFE-THREATENING.**

## Choosing a kayak

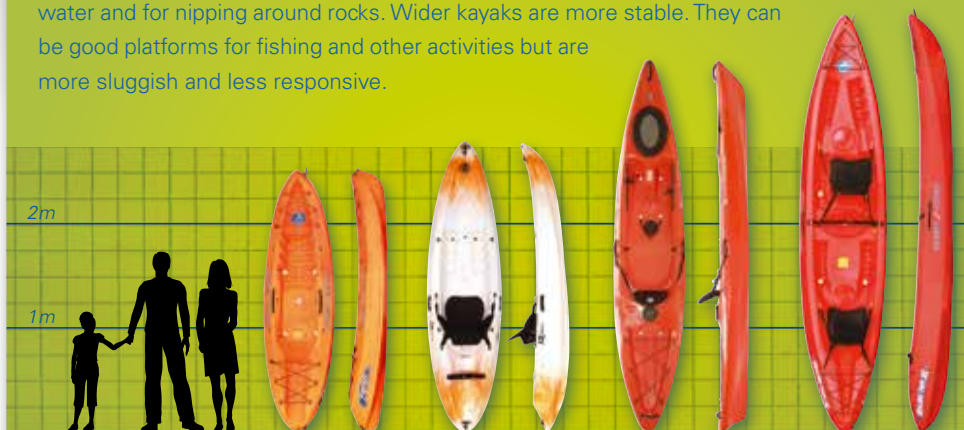
Sit-on-tops come in a bewildering range of designs and sizes. Like buying a car there is not one design that suits all requirements. A little time spent thinking about what you plan to do with the kayak and who will use it can save you from buying something inappropriate. Try them out before you buy. What initially feels reassuringly stable may, after a few trips, seem like a cumbersome barge as your skills improve.



One kayak can do it all, but some are better for fishing, fun, family or surfing.

## THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

Long, narrow kayaks will go in straighter lines and are better for touring and paddling distances. Shorter kayaks are more manoeuvrable and responsive; they are fun in surf and moving water and for nipping around rocks. Wider kayaks are more stable. They can be good platforms for fishing and other activities but are more sluggish and less responsive.



## THE PADDLER

You also need to bear in mind that paddlers also come in different sizes, builds and ages. What may for one person be an ideal kayak to surf and play will be uncomfortable for another to paddle any distance or cast a fishing line from. Seats may be too large for a small child or there might be extra storage wells in which a toddler or pet could sit.



Narrow your choice down to a few designs. If possible try them out afloat. If you think you may be using the kayak to fish or for longer trips then some storage space will be useful.





*A big problem is that they are relatively light and therefore float high on the water. They are more prone to the effects of wind and can become hard to paddle in even moderate winds.*

### **Inflatables**

Inflatable sit-on-tops have proved themselves to be ideal craft for anyone who is planning to travel into remote areas where it might otherwise be very hard to transport a rigid kayak. For anyone with very limited storage space an inflatable has definite advantages.

The down side is that you get what you pay for and well-designed inflatables tend to be quite expensive. They also puncture more easily and suffer from the effects of abrasion, though a good quality inflatable will allow you to make repairs.

## **Essentials**

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Along with a sit-on-top and paddles (see Paddles on page 17), you'll need at least a buoyancy aid (see Flotation on page 27) and clothing appropriate to the environment (from a bathing suit to a wetsuit, woolly hat and windproof – see Clothing on page 22). Other items might also be advisable, depending on the type of paddling you intend to do...

# EQUIPMENT AND ACCESSORIES

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As optional accessories to your sit-on-top kayak there will often be a seat and back rest system available as well as thigh straps and rudder options.

## Back rests and seats

Back and upper body support is essential to developing good technique and allows you to use larger muscle groups when paddling. It also reduces fatigue.

*Seats and back supports come in various designs. Whether the support includes a padded seat is optional.*

*A good upright sitting position is achieved when the base of the spine is in contact with the lower part of the back rest. The rest of the spine is supported but mobility is not restricted.*



## Thigh straps

Thigh straps can give extra control when making turns and other manoeuvres. In rough water and surf they allow you to be in full control of the kayak.

*Thigh straps can be used when needed. Most photos in this book do not show thigh straps in use, as many people find them restrictive and they are simply an additional complication.*

