

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE



There's a kayak out

for every cottager and every budget. Here's how to find yours

BY CONOR MIHELL

I CRINGED WHEN my mother told me she'd just bought a kayak from a big box store. I've worked as a sea kayak guide and instructor on the Great Lakes for more than 20 years; I take pride in the fact that my sleek and seaworthy fibreglass touring kayak is worth more than my car. People like me use terms like "bathtubs" and "kayak-shaped floating objects" to refer to boats like the nine-foot, \$300 plastic kayak my mom asked me to transport to her cottage on Lake Huron's North Channel. I averted my eyes and cartopped it as fast as I could.

My attitude softened when I noticed how often my mom ended our phone calls with, "Okay, I gotta go paddling now." I understood the joy she'd discovered in gliding silently through narrow channels lined with polished granite and towering pines. As my mom came to love kayaking, she realized the limitations of her boat. She complained about its slowness and inability to track in a straight line. However, with COVID-19 driving a surge in demand and causing supply shortages for everything from bicycles to kayaks and cross-country skis, she couldn't have chosen a worse time to shop for something better. Fortunately, I knew a friend selling a used 14-footer. It had all the features of my touring kayak, but in a smaller, easier-to-handle package—perfect for my mom's morning outings. Soon, she was spending more time on the water than ever before in a sleeker, safer, and more comfortable kayak.

Tim Dyer smiles at my mom's paddling discovery. Dyer, the long-time owner of White Squall, a paddling centre and kayak retailer in Parry Sound, Ont., sees the inexpensive kayaks sold in big box stores as gateway vessels. "Our days of looking down on Canadian Tire kayaks are long gone," he says. "It's about getting folks to go paddling, so who the hell cares what they are using? We cheer them on for choosing a great way to recreate."

However, both Dyer and Kelly McDowell, the president of the Complete Paddler in Toronto, insist that cheap kayaks lack safety features, such as floatation chambers, that are important if you want to paddle in open water. "Cottagers think, 'We're not going long distances, we don't need an expensive kayak,'" says McDowell, who has been selling kayaks since 2002. "We ask them, 'How far away from shore will you paddle? If you flip, can you swim that distance dragging your flooded, partially sunk kayak back to shore?'" If these questions raise any doubt in the buyer, McDowell advises them, "You need a proper kayak." »

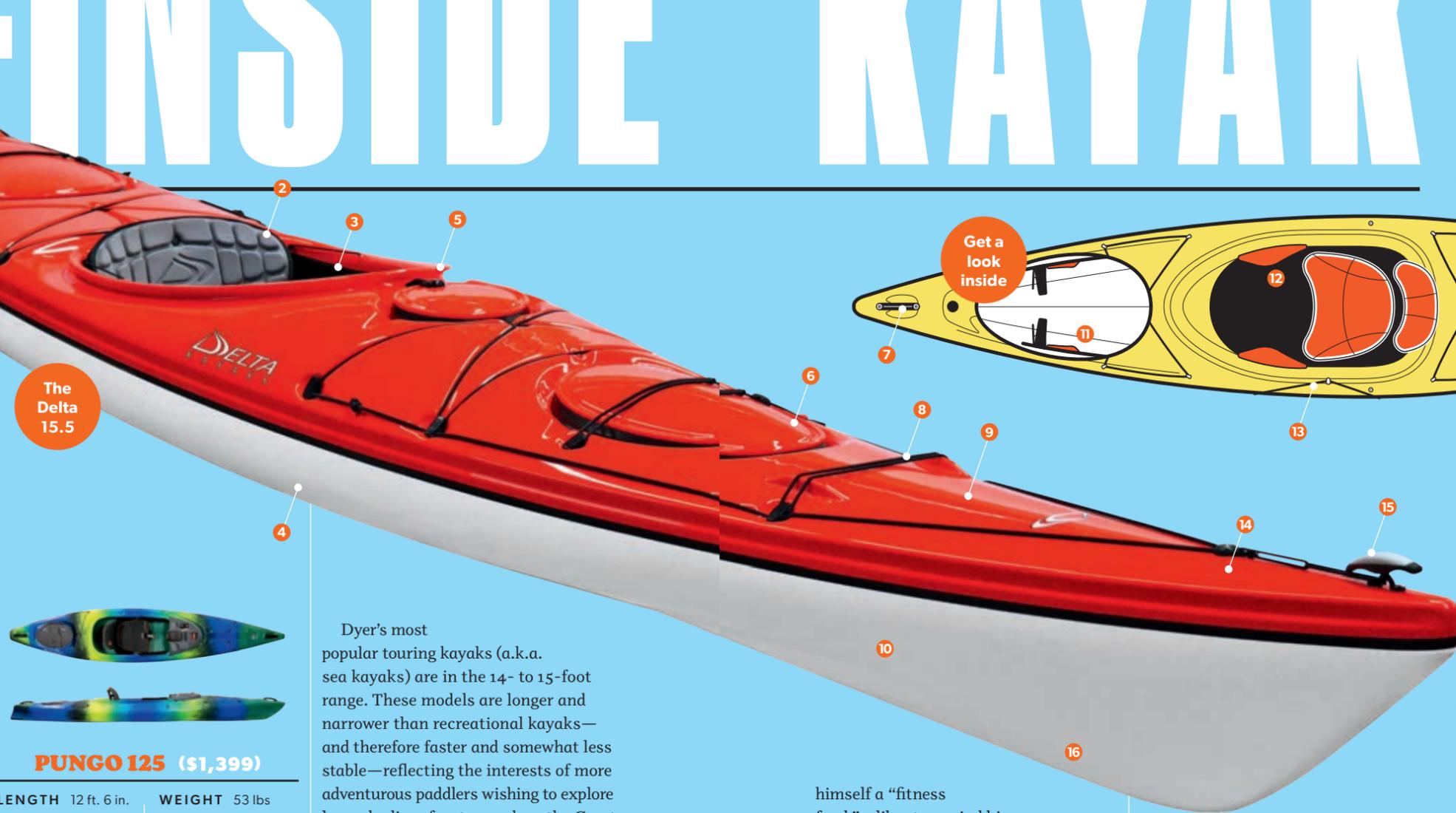
SIT-INSIDE KAYAK

5 THINGS TO REMEMBER BEFORE YOU BUY

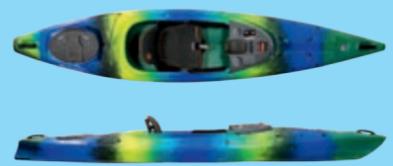
THESE KAYAKS ARE direct descendants of the Indigenous hunting vessels of the High Arctic (see “Rooted in Inuit Culture,” p. 70), featuring decks to shelter the paddler from waves, wind, rain, and sun. A ridge on the cockpit rim, called the coaming, allows a paddler to attach a sprayskirt for additional protection from the elements. Many types of sit-inside kayaks are available in several general categories.

The most popular recreational kayak that McDowell sells has a key safety feature that’s most often absent in kayaks sold at department stores. The **Wilderness Systems Pungo 125**, for example, has a foam wall (known as a bulkhead) separating the cockpit from a watertight rear compartment. Sit-inside kayaks without bulkheads have no floatation should they capsize; swamped with water, they’ll barely float and submerge if the paddler attempts to re-enter. A bulkhead (touring kayakers have watertight compartments fore and aft of the cockpit) keeps the kayak afloat when the cockpit is filled with water. But, “I still wouldn’t paddle the Pungo 125 too far from shore,” McDowell says.

Length is a factor in how well a kayak will track through the water, and width is a good determinant of stability. The 12.6-foot Pungo glides better than shorter kayakers, and it maintains a broad 29-inch width through most of its midsection for good stability. McDowell says the boat’s greatest selling point is its seat: a foam-padded, multi-adjustable version with a comfortable backrest that’s also found in Wilderness Systems’ kayakers. The Pungo 125 is “great for cruising the shoreline, fishing, or floating out on the lake with a coffee in the morning,” McDowell says. “It’s such an easy boat to paddle.”



The Delta 15.5



PUNGO 125 (\$1,399)

LENGTH 12 ft. 6 in. | **WEIGHT** 53 lbs
WIDTH 29 in. | **CAPACITY** 425 lbs



DELTA 15.5 (\$2,495)

LENGTH 15 ft. 6 in. | **WEIGHT** 49 lbs
WIDTH 24 in. | **CAPACITY** 400 lbs



EPIC 14X (\$4,495)

LENGTH 14 ft. 5 in. | **WEIGHT** 39 lbs
WIDTH 23.6 in. | **CAPACITY** 330 lbs

Dyer’s most popular touring kayakers (a.k.a. sea kayakers) are in the 14- to 15-foot range. These models are longer and narrower than recreational kayakers—and therefore faster and somewhat less stable—reflecting the interests of more adventurous paddlers wishing to explore larger bodies of water, such as the Great Lakes. The **Delta 15.5** is popular for Georgian Bay weekend camping trips. (The shorter Delta 14 has less volume and is easier to control if you’re primarily interested in day trips.) British Columbia-built Delta kayakers are popular for their thermoform plastic construction, a glossy laminate that’s lighter than both rotomolded polyethylene kayakers (such as the Pungo 125) and fiberglass, with a price point right in between. (The Delta 15.5 weighs 49 pounds.) This sleek material won’t withstand being dragged along the ground or dropped on hard surfaces as well as other plastics, says Dyer, “but we’ve been renting them for years and never had a major issue.”

The persuasions of Bob Putnam, the co-owner of Deep Cove Canoe & Kayak in North Vancouver, often steer him to make a different kayak recommendation for new paddlers. Putnam—who calls

himself a “fitness freak”—likes to remind his customers that recreational boats are slow and inefficient compared to sleeker touring and fitness kayakers. He inquires about their other interests in outdoor sports. If they like road cycling and cross-country skiing, Putnam says, “they’re often best in a high-performance kayak.”

For Putnam, the 14.5-foot **Epic 14X** strikes a nice blend of speed, comfort, and safety. Most high-performance kayakers are 17 feet long or more; this model is sportier and far less cumbersome to maneuver for novices. Made of a high-tech mosaic of fiberglass, Kevlar, and carbon, it’s responsive yet reasonably stable, Putnam says. A foot-operated rudder adds directional control. “Inside the cockpit there’s a fixed footboard with hinged rudder-control pedals on top,” he says. “The paddler can engage their legs while paddling, allowing them to use bigger muscle groups to generate power.” >>



Aim for “just enough”

Consider how you’ll use the kayak and where you’re most likely to go paddling. “Some folks imagine themselves in a sleek, expedition hull doing longer trips,” says Tim Dyer. “But the truth is they’re only going to be day paddling. Purchasing a longer, bigger boat to accommodate the camping dream means you end up with a boat that’s way more than you need.”



Take a test paddle if you can

At White Squall, Dyer insists customers go for a test paddle. “Engage with the boat in all the little ways,” says Dyer. “Carry it to the water, try getting in and out, and learn the adjustments. It’s all a learning experience while you discover the attributes of a boat.” Of course, it’s not always possible to go for a test paddle. No matter where you’re shopping, take a moment to sit in the kayak to see how it feels: brace your legs in the cockpit; tweak the seat and footrests; and then get hands-on with some of the other features, like hatches and rudder. “You’ll know pretty quickly if it’s comfortable,” says Kelly McDowell.



Lighter is better (but more expensive)

Like most sporting equipment, a lightweight kayak (usually constructed from composite materials) will perform better than a heavy one. “The lighter the boat, the longer, faster, and further you can go,” says Dyer. “Your muscles will thank you, and the enjoyment dividend goes up.”



Floatation is key

Most kayak-related near-drownings and drownings have two common elements: the paddler wasn’t wearing a PFD, and the kayak lacked proper floatation. Your kayak is a serious liability if you capsize offshore and it starts to sink. You can purchase air bags to stuff into cheap recreational kayakers. Better yet, McDowell says, is to choose a kayak with a bulkhead that creates a watertight chamber within the hull. Touring kayakers with bulkheads fore and aft of the cockpit allow trained paddlers to perform rescues with such a kayak on open water, making it a far safer choice if you want to paddle offshore.



It pays to take some lessons

The first thing you should do after buying a kayak, says Bob Putnam, is to sign up for a paddling course. Paddle Canada offers one- and two-day introductory kayaking courses in all parts of the country. You’ll learn proper posture, efficient paddling strokes, and rescue techniques.

KNOW YOUR TERMS

- 1 **Rudder** Retractable fin for steering
- 2 **Seat** Area of cockpit designated for seating
- 3 **Cockpit** Internal area of the kayak
- 4 **Keel line** Bow-to-stern ridge of the hull
- 5 **Coaming** Lip around the cockpit
- 6 **Hatch** Inner storage area
- 7 **Carry handles** Handles for land transport
- 8 **Deck bungee** To fasten loose items to deck
- 9 **Deck** Topside of the kayak
- 10 **Hull** Bottom of kayak (contacts with water)
- 11 **Foot braces** Adjustable footrests
- 12 **Thigh braces** Pads under cockpit coaming
- 13 **Deck lines** Cord around kayak perimeter
- 14 **Sheer** The rise of the bow and stern
- 15 **End toggles** Loops at the ends for carrying
- 16 **Rocker** The curvature of the keel line

PREVIOUS SPREAD: BRIAN READY AND SHUTTERSTOCK

SIT-ON-TOP KAYAK



AQUA-BOUND TANGO FIBREGLASS 2-PIECE PADDLE
(\$420)



AQUA-BOUND STING RAY FIBREGLASS 2-PIECE PADDLE
(\$170)



WERNER SHUNA BENT PADDLE
(\$502)



WERNER CYPRUS CARBON BENT TOURING PADDLE
(\$660)

PICK A PADDLE

Choosing a good paddle is almost as important as selecting the right kayak. You can get a paddle for less than \$100, but for \$300, you'll get a blade that's far lighter and more ergonomic to use. More expensive paddles have bent shafts to keep your wrists in a more neutral alignment while paddling—a boon that's worth the added cost for avid paddlers and those with stiff joints and carpal tunnel syndrome. Once upon a time, paddles were sized by measuring from the ground to the tip of your fingers, stretched overhead. That's changed. "You only want as much paddle as you need," says Tim Dyer. For most people, that means a 210- to 220-cm paddle "with smaller, more forgiving blades that are also easier on the shoulders," he says. "A shorter paddle tends to improve your paddling. Your cadence is quicker, so you go faster, and you'll enjoy the experience more because it's lighter."



THESE KAYAKS

DON'T have cockpits, so they're easier to clamber on and off and won't flood with water if they capsize. Recreational sit-on-tops look like surfboards. The **Ocean Kayak Malibu 11.5** is super stable, easy to paddle (but relatively slow), and makes a great inexpensive, durable, beginner- and kid-friendly boat for use on cottage lakes when the water's warm in the summer months. Putnam's favourite sit-on-tops, meanwhile, are surf skis. These fast, torpedo-shaped kayaks are popular for racing in coastal areas.

He recommends the rotomoulded plastic **Epic V5**, which is comparable to the sit-inside Epic 14X, as a solid beginner model. ➔

Conor Mihell is an award-winning freelance writer. He wrote "Taming the Surface Tension" in our May 2021 issue.

KNOW YOUR TERMS

- 1 **Skeg** Fixed fin on the bottom of the boat
- 2 **Tank well** Additional above-deck storage
- 3 **Carry handles** Handles around the kayak
- 4 **Keel line** Bow-to-stern ridge of the hull
- 5 **Seat** Area of cockpit designated for seating
- 6 **Hatch** Inner storage area
- 7 **Deck** Topside of the kayak
- 8 **End toggle** Loop at bow or stern of kayak
- 9 **Foot braces** Footrests moulded into deck
- 10 **Hull** Bottom of kayak (contacts with water)
- 11 **Scupper holes** Drain holes for water
- 12 **Deck bungee** To fasten loose items to deck

ROOTED IN INUIT CULTURE

The kayak was a hunting vessel for Indigenous people from Greenland to Alaska. Like so many other aspects of Indigenous culture, it was nearly erased by colonization. Noah Nochasak's grandfather was among the last kayakers in Nain, Nunatsiavut (Labrador). His stories inspired Nochasak, 34, to take up kayaking; paddling was also "cheaper than a speedboat," he says with a laugh. "Kayaking is up front. If you don't do something right, you'll capsize."

Nochasak is humbled by what his ancestors accomplished on the sea, enduring harsh conditions while hunting whales,

seals, and polar bears. He found it ironic to rely on external resources to build his first kayaks, using wood and canvas, then wood and nylon to recreate the boats that once plied the North Atlantic. When Nochasak sought out members of his community to learn more about kayaking, he uncovered stark differences in Inuit elders who stayed in the community and those who did not. "The people who knew the most didn't go to boarding school," says Nochasak, whose initial quest for tips on how to build a kayak expanded into an oral history project encompassing all of

Nunatsiavut. "They were more comfortable and proud talking about kayaks."

Nochasak trained as a sea kayak guide at Thompson Rivers University in B.C. After leading trips on Vancouver Island and Newfoundland, he returned home to be the Nunatsiavut government's "kayak revivalist," delivering kayak-building and paddling skills courses in Nain and other northern communities. He hopes the next generation of Inuit won't have to travel south to learn their cultural traditions. "A lot of people get enjoyment out of kayaking," he says. "Just remember when you're paddling that these skills came down from a culture that was oppressed."

IN INUKTITUT

KAJAK*
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KAJĀK
REFERS TO TWO KAYAKS

KAJAIT
THREE OR MORE KAYAKS

*Spelling in Nain, Nunatsiavut region



MALIBU 11.5 (\$969)

LENGTH 11 ft. 5 in. | WEIGHT 61 lbs
WIDTH 31 in. | CAPACITY 360 lbs



EPIC V5 (\$3,995)

LENGTH 14 ft. 3 in. | WEIGHT 35.3 lbs
WIDTH 23.6 in. | CAPACITY 280 lbs