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SEPTEMBER 2004
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Exclusive Interview ARON RALSTON: THE SURVIVOR'S TALE

EXPLORING THE UNIVERSE (FOR \$4,000 OR LESS)

THE ESSENTIALS OF SEA KAYAKING ■ BOATS ■ SKILLS ■ DESTINATIONS

SEA KAYAKING BY BYRON RICKS

HOW DO I STEER THIS THING?

For many first-time kayak buyers, a foot-operated rudder is an attractive option. It helps a kayak track straight and makes it easier to turn. Conventional wisdom says to get one. Skip it. Without a rudder, your foot braces are rock solid, it's easier to carry the boat, and there's one less part to break. Besides, a rudder can become a crutch. Leave it behind and you'll learn to turn on a dime by leaning the kayak, and to stay on track by paddling efficiently. In the meantime, you'll have a truer sense of the kayak's limits, and your own.

- 1 BE SEA SMART:** Practice reading navigation charts. Winds, currents, and tides can tell you where to paddle.
- 2 GO LIGHT:** The boat floats, but you carry the paddle. Feathered carbon-fiber models are a wise upgrade.
- 3 TRY BEFORE YOU BUY:** A kayak's cockpit should feel snug but not tight.



Bowman Bay, Washington

ALL-ACCESS OCEAN The ocean is not only the world's largest wilderness, but also its most accessible. Leave shore in a kayak and you're off the grid, subject only to the rhythms of tide, wind, and weather. In warm water, close to shore, it's easy for beginners to dabble. And freedom expands quickly with a bit more gear and know-how. Learn to navigate and master a few critical paddle strokes, and thousands of miles of coast are yours to explore.

THE HULL TRUTH

Kayaks are pricey, and until you're committed to the sport, it makes sense to rent. If you are ready to buy, look for a boat that fits your body. The cockpit should be snug (giving you control and power) but comfortable—like a favorite pair of hiking boots. Plastic boats are the least expensive and most impact-resistant; carbon-fiber boats are the priciest and lightest; and fiberglass falls in between. Test-drive a Mariner Kayaks Mariner II (\$2,695 for fiberglass; www.marinerkayaks.com), which is part sports car and part pickup truck, able to speed along



SEALLINE, SEATTLE SPORTS DRY BAGS

on day paddles yet also handle a long-trip load. The Necky Nootka Outfitter (\$4,099 for carbon; www.necky.com) is a versatile tandem boat. The Necky Eskia (\$1,400 for plastic) is an affordable all-around touring single.

Choose a paddle with a moderate-size blade, such as the one on the 38-ounce Werner Skagit (\$125; www.wernerpaddles.com). For long trips, consider stepping up to a lighter model such as the company's 25-ounce carbon Kalliste (\$375). And remember to carry a backup paddle in case you lose or break

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAJ BUNE



KOKATAT PFD



CHOTA BOOT



MARINER II KAYAK



SEALLINE PADDLE FLOAT

one. Consider a paddle with a smaller blade, which will provide less power but place less strain on your body; switching off can reduce fatigue.

Anywhere north of the tropics, you may need protection from cold water in case of a dunking. Wet suits, such as the Deep See Farmer Jane (women's) and Farmer John (men's; both \$120; www.deepseeinc.com), offer insulation even while letting in water. Dry suits, such as the Kokatat Gore-Tex Front Entry (\$649; www.kokatat.com), are more comfortable, more protective, and less prone to mildew—but much more expensive. The Kokatat Gore-Tex XCR Action Jacket (\$222) is a lightweight

paddling top that can go over a wet suit for windy, rainy days. Pair it with a spray skirt such as Snap Dragon Design's Sea Tour EXP (\$125; www.snapdragon.com). Top things off with the Outdoor Research Seattle Sombbrero (\$46; www.oregear.com), a wide-brimmed rain and sun hat. Your feet and ankles can take a beating on rocky shores; the neoprene Chota QuickLace Mukluk Boot (\$95; www.chotaoutdoor.com) is both tough and warm.

Packing a kayak is easier when you buy drybags in various shapes and sizes. The SealLine Kodiak Taper (\$40 and up) and Black Canyon Bag (\$35 and up; www.seallinegear.com), and the

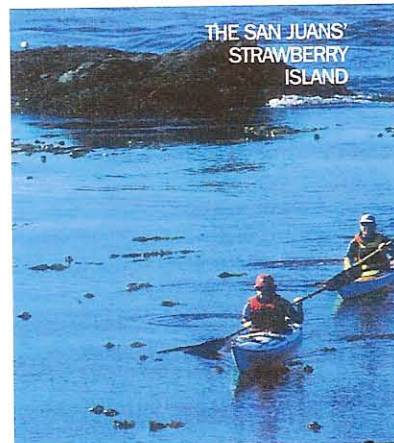
Seattle Sports H2Zero Diamond Dry Bag (\$12 and up; www.seattlesports.com), are all rugged, coated nylon bags. The SealLine Map Case (\$12 and up) keeps nautical charts dry.

Your survival may well depend on your life jacket (aka PFD, or personal flotation device). The Kokatat Guide (\$181) can accommodate a sea-towing system (\$76) for helping a weary or injured paddler to shore. The Lotus Designs Locean (\$145; www.lotusdesigns.com) is a nice variation with a side-zip entry that leaves ample room for arm motion. The SealLine CO₂ Paddle Float (\$70) inflates using a CO₂ cartridge if you need to perform a self-rescue.

Seabound

San Juan Islands, WA

The orcas, minke whales, and Dall's porpoises of Puget Sound help make these rocky, forested islands a paddling classic. San Juan Kayak Expeditions (www.sanjuankayak.com) can set up a four-day trip (\$480). Or start from North Beach on Orcas Island for a three-day tour of the San Juans' outer islands—Clark, Matia, Sucia, and Patos. Shearwater Kayaks (www.shearwaterkayaks.com) can customize a tour.



THE SAN JUANS' STRAWBERRY ISLAND

WATER WAYS

Follow current events. Think of tidal currents as a river that switches direction about every six hours. Learning to read local tide tables will enable you to travel with the flow of water, logging more miles with less energy. It can also keep you out of rough seas. When the wind is blowing against the current, whitecaps develop fast. Then, when the current switches, the sea can flatten just as quickly, opening a paddling window.

Brace yourself. You need a handful of basic strokes in your quiver. Possibly the trickiest is the high brace—and it's the one that separates intermediates from big-water experts. The stroke rights a boat that's about to capsize in the surf. It sounds easy: Hold the paddle higher than your elbows, roll to the side, and slam the flat of the blade against the water. The first mistake is to reach out with both arms as you lean to the side. Don't. Keeping your nonbracing elbow close to your body with that hand near eye-level gives you power and control. Practice the high brace until you can nearly overturn the boat yet still recover, and you'll have mastered a critical skill.

Go to school. You can learn a lot on your own, out on the water. But it also pays to take some courses with an instructor in a swimming pool. You'll practice rescues with

READING THE CURRENTS

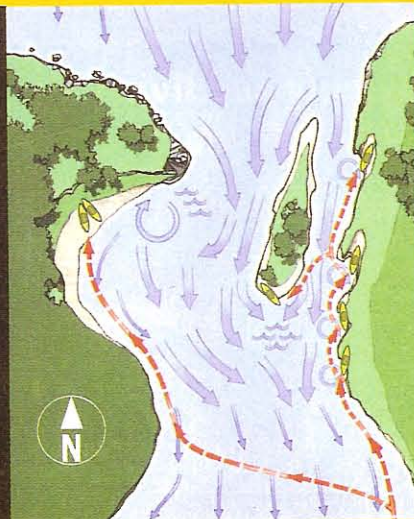
Go with the flow: Here, a northbound paddler opposes the current between two islands. It is sometimes wise to wait for the tide to turn.

Land safely: Choose a protected beach—even if it's only as wide as your hips. The kayak icons at right indicate good stopping points.

Ride eddies: A kayaker paddling up the righthand edge of the channel can move from eddy to eddy rather than battling the current.

Avoid tide rips: The water where currents collide is chaotic and choppy.

Beware the narrows: Currents speed up in tight spots.



paddle floats and paddling partners—and the more automatic the techniques become, the more confidence you'll have when the day turns choppy. And you'll learn to roll, righting a capsized craft. (It's a move that most people associate with white-water kayakers.) Practice your roll until it's bombproof.

Watch your back. What's the big injury among sea kayakers? Shark bites? Hypothermia? Actually, it's back strain. Once afloat, you're

golden, but entering and exiting the water are awkward moments, especially when the waves are crashing. A fully loaded single kayak can weigh 150 pounds; dragging that kind of weight over rocks can really hurt your back (not to mention the hull). Once you hit the shore, unload what you can onto the beach before lifting the kayak. Then, lift with your legs. If you don't have a paddling partner to help, use small drift logs, seaweed, or kelp to make it easier to slide the boat to high ground.

Glacier Bay, AK

These waters have been paddled by everyone from the Tlingit to John Muir. A classic route, which goes from forested slopes to glacial ice and back, follows Glacier Bay's Muir Inlet. Glacier Bay National Park (www.nps.gov/gjba) has info. Alaska Discovery leads eight-day trips (\$2,450; www.akdiscovery.com).

Hammocks Beach, NC

North Carolina attracts sea kayakers with 3,200 square miles of estuaries and sounds. Bear Island, about 25 miles from the town of Beaufort, in Hammocks Beach State Park (www.ncsparks.net), has a three-and-a-half-mile-long beach popular with endangered loggerhead turtles. Island Rigs Kayak leads day trips (\$45 for four hours; www.islandrigs.com).

Down East Islands, ME

The coast of Maine holds some of the East's finest ocean paddling. Set sights on any of the 200-plus islands of the Stonington archipelago, just southwest of Acadia National Park. Paddle along sheer headlands and past evergreens and pastures, and camp on granite islands. Maine Island Kayak Company offers a three-day trip from Stonington to Acadia's Isle au Haut (\$495; www.maineislandkayak.com). ▲