

Paddling 101

High Country renowned for kayaking

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Access to outdoor recreation ranks is one of the top reasons more people move to the High Country.

Besides hiking, biking and climbing, water sports stands out as a favorite activity.

Canoeing and kayaking has become popular enough locally to attract events like Sunday's "You Can Paddle Day" at Chetola Lake in Blowing Rock.

Hundreds of potential and experienced paddlers jumped in the lake — with a kayak or canoe under them — to test-paddle some of the latest models by Wilderness Systems/Wave Sport USA of Trinity, N.C.

Sponsored by Footsloggers, the demo day drew all types, from not-so-serious kids looking for something exciting to do to committed kayakers who all but had their checkbooks out ready to buy.

I dropped by Chetola with my two children in tow to see what I could learn about a sport I really don't know very well — unless renting a paddleboat counts.

"We're here to promote paddle sports in general," Wilderness Systems/Wave Sport USA representative David Blanding said. "It really offers something for everybody — from extreme whitewater to mild, scenic river running to wilderness touring," he said.

Since I'm the basic rookie, I decided to try out a canoe and a kayak with the idea of emulating a family outing — in other words, I needed crafts built for three or at least two and a half.

For my test drive, I first settled into the Explorer 16 canoe. With my nine-year-old son in the front seat, my six-year-old daughter on the middle beam and me in the back, we toured the lake at a leisurely pace. Once I taught my son the “paddle-on-the-left-to-go-right” concept (and vice-versa), we were able to concentrate on the ride which proved very smooth. My daughter — normally skittish in boats — remained calm and made quacking sounds at the ducks and yelled pirate jargon at passing kayaks as we glide effortlessly across the lake.

Like a ride at Tweetsie, my children sang “Again! Again!” before we again hit land.

So, we dragged out the Tarpon 130T, a sit-on-top, recreational kayak. With seats for two and two cockpit hatches, the Tarpon measures 13 feet long and 34” wide. The most surprising feature to this rookie was the holes in the bottom.

Ever since I watched my first Bugs Bunny cartoons (you know the ones with Yosemite Sam as the pirates), I've always accepted it as fact that holes in a boat are bad.

But, my guide explained the holes actually provide stability — which threatened to bend my mind, so I accepted the quirk of physics and shoved off.

Unlike the traditional sit-in-the-hull kayaks, a sit-on-top (or SOT to those in the know) allows for a smoother, more stable ride than its counterpart and is ideal for families who may not all have the concept of simultaneous paddling or navigation down pat.

As advertised, I found the Tarpon unbelievably stable and comfortable, despite having my daughter planted at my feet.

The adjustable fold-up seats made the ride more enjoyable and, by the time I reached shore, I was ready to chuck the kids' college fund for a

Tarpon. But, then again, \$7.99 just won't buy one so I saw that dream dashed on the shores of Chetola Lake.

Buying a kayak can be more complicated, but more fun, than many neophytes might think because there are so many different types. Between test drives, I spoke with Erica Lile of Footsloggers Paddle Shop about where and how to begin a new paddle-sport adventure.

Kayaking basically falls into four broad categories (see related article). "We have to figure out what they need. Do they want a boat that's going to fit a kid and an adult or do they want a tandem boat?" Lile said. Because of safety factors, beginners have to invest more time and money in whitewater kayaking. Safety courses are a must, Lile said.

"Safety-wise you can't just go out and start doing whitewater." Footsloggers and other regional outfitters offer roll clinics — a fundamental basic.

For students and faculty, Appalachian State University offers an introduction to whitewater class through its outdoor programs. Kayakers not affiliated with the university usually have to find an individual instructor, preferably one certified by the American Canoeing Association.

So, you've made a decision to buy a kayak? What else do you need?

When visiting an outfitter, don't get overwhelmed, Lile said. Entering any store, like Footsloggers or Edge of the World in Banner Elk, will open the newbie's eyes to an intense variety of gear, accessories and a few toys.

Concentrate on buying the Big Three first: the boat, the life preserver (like all sports, paddling has its jargon and these are often called PFDs or personal flotation devices) and the paddle. Make that the Big Four if you want to do whitewater by adding a comfortable helmet.

Buying a kayak resembles car shopping — there are several pricing levels and options.

Lile recommends buying a recreational kayak for first-timers because of its versatility.

“That’s what we try to sell because these are boats that can go on slow-moving rivers; boats that can go in the ocean and boats that can go on flat water,” she said.

A recreational kayak built for two — called a tandem — will retail for about \$700 new.

Individual kayaks can run anywhere from \$500 or more. Double-bladed paddles, essential to kayaking, will start around \$90. Life-jackets (or PFDs) range from \$35 to \$125 depending on how much comfort a kayaker wants.

Helmets will cost between \$30 and \$40. For more information on more detailed equipment, it’s usually best to talk with an outfitter or a veteran kayaker.

Although many outfitters sell roof racks for transporting a kayak, most new cars and SUVs feature racks as a standard feature so all that’s required are tie-downs.

After buying the gear and taking any necessary classes, finding a place to kayak in the High Country is as easy as finding a mountain — they’re everywhere.

“Whitewater is huge here because we have Watauga Gorge in our backyard,” Lile said.

Located off U.S. 421/321 near Sugar Grove and Cove Creek in western Watauga County, the gorge offers a whitewater adventure for beginners and experts.

“There’s a section right before the gorge — Section Three — which is really popular for beginners,” she said.

“The gorge is very intense for whitewater,” she said. “It’s renowned. It’s what put Boone on the map in terms of whitewater kayaking.”

Other locations within a short drive include the Nolichucky River and Wilson’s Creek. Experienced kayakers often check water conditions and levels by calling a local outfitter or checking the Internet (see related article for Web resources).

What if you spend several hundred dollars and take kayaking lessons, but suddenly discover your family and friends aren’t into paddle sports? As with all my questions, Lile had a quick answer: the Watauga Paddle Club.

Not only can the club provide valuable tips for newbies but they can also hook lone kayakers up with others who are looking for excursion buddies — and it’s never a good idea to try any water sport without a friend for safety.