

Suitable Kayaks for Mountaineers Sea Kayaking



The Mountaineers Sea Kayaking



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Single sea kayaks, with approved flotation or bulkheads, are the craft you will be using for this course, and, very likely, for most of the Mountaineers Sea Kayaking trips you will take after graduation. Some paddlers may even say these are the only kayaks suitable for Mountaineers Sea Kayak trips.*

Many types of paddle craft may be suitable for easy, short trips in benign conditions on very protected waters. However, in keeping with the Mountaineers tradition of wilderness travel, exploration, and education, we prefer fully-equipped, seaworthy, single sea kayaks, capable of performing well in a variety of circumstances, helping us travel to exciting and remote locations, perhaps unreachable by any other means. Let's compare the alternatives to help explain our preference for "single sea kayaks."

Simplified overview of various types of single kayaks and related watercraft**

Length	Closed Cockpit (traditional)	Open Cockpit (washdeck)
Short (6-12')	rec ¹ , river ² , polo ³ , surf ⁴	rec/ww/surf sit-on-top ¹⁰ , waveski ¹¹
Medium (12-16')	rec touring ⁵ , sea kayak ⁶ , downriver ⁷	touring/fishing/diving sit-on-top ¹⁰
Long (16-22')	expedition sea kayak ⁸ , racing ⁹	expedition sit-on-top ¹⁰ , surfski ¹²

1. Short "recreational" kayaks are wide with large cockpits. Usually lacking in safety features.
2. Short river kayaks include playboats (freestyle), "river running", creek, squirt, and slalom.
3. Polo kayaks (for playing water polo) are like river kayaks, but with bumpers on the ends.
4. Surf kayaks are usually sharp-railed, with low volume sterns and significant bow rocker.
5. Recreational ("transitional") touring kayaks are a hybrid between "rec" kayaks and sea kayaks.
6. Medium length sea kayaks are fully equipped, seaworthy, and commonly used for day trips.
7. Downriver or "wildwater" kayaks are a form of river racing kayak. Not for casual recreation.
8. Expedition sea kayaks are fully equipped, seaworthy, fast, and have significant storage space.
9. Kayaks designed for flatwater or open-ocean racing are long, light, fast, and somewhat fragile.
10. Sit-on-top kayaks, often self-bailing, are popular for fishing, diving, whitewater, and surfing.
11. Waveskis are high-performance surf kayaks, like a short surf board with a paddler strapped on.
12. Surfskis are long, narrow, tippy, ruddered, washdeck sea kayaks for open-ocean racing.

* Whatever equipment you choose, whether it is your kayak, paddle, immersion wear, or anything else, it is the trip leader who will have the final say as to what is acceptable on their trip. If you have any doubt, please ask your trip leader about your concerns well before the day of the trip. Please honor their decisions, as it is their right and duty, as a trip leader, to decide these matters as they see fit. This basic aspect of good followership helps ensure our leaders continue leading trips.

** We list most common types of "human-powered watercraft, usually decked, and usually propelled with a double-bladed paddle from a low, seated position, with legs outstretched." The term "kayak" (qajaq) is an arctic term for a traditional skin boat, built with ancient techniques, used by Inuit hunters. Our kayaks are merely modern interpretations of that craft.





Sea Kayaks

For the Mountaineers Basic Sea Kayaking Course, you will use a single occupancy sea kayak. It will provide one seating position within a traditional "sit inside" closed cockpit. The cockpit opening is "traditional" as compared with the "washdeck" cockpit seen in sit-on-tops, or the oversized cockpit found in "recreational" (or "rec") kayaks. The cockpit usually has an egg-shaped or "keyhole" opening, up to two feet wide and up to three feet long. The cockpit area is sealed nearly watertight with a flexible sprayskirt (or spraydeck), keeping out rain, spray, splashes, and crumbs.

A "double" sea kayak will provide two cockpit openings. While double sea kayaks can be fast, efficient, and very suitable for sea kayak touring and expeditions, we do not use them for this course. Learning in a single sea kayak will allow you greater control over the kayak, with better feedback to help you improve your strokes. Through learning how to control your own kayak, under your own power, you will come to know your own abilities, bringing you more confidence as a paddler. You will enjoy being the "captain" of our own boat. Most Mountaineer Sea Kayakers, even those who have purchased double sea kayaks, prefer single sea kayaks for almost all club sea kayak outings.



double sea kayak

Sea Kayak Safety and Performance

A properly equipped sea kayak has adequate flotation to keep the boat mostly free of water, even if the sprayskirt becomes detached and water enters the kayak through the cockpit opening. This buoyancy facilitates quicker rescues in the event of capsize, so that the trip may continue without significant inconvenience or delay. The flotation is either provided by large air bags, inflated so as to occupy all of the unused space in the kayak, or by rigid (or foam) bulkheads which divide the kayak into sections. Sea Kayaks with bulkheads will almost always have openings for each section, allowing access to the compartments, with a hatch cover over each opening to provide a watertight seal. To be extra prepared, paddlers are encouraged to use air bags in addition to bulkheads for "back up" flotation.

Other safety features include deck rigging, such as perimeter safety lines and deck "bungies." The safety lines are invaluable during rescues and reentry into the kayak after a capsize. They are often made from a strong synthetic rope with strands of reflective material interwoven to aid in nighttime visibility. The bungies are useful for attaching small items to the deck, such as a chart. In most modern kayaks, the deck lines and bungies will be secured with recessed fittings to keep the deck smooth, minimizing the likelihood of snagging on clothing during rescue procedures.

A sea kayak is a high-performance craft. This means the design of the hull will be efficient for forward motion, able to hold its course in wind, waves, and currents, yet still be maneuverable enough to change course as needed. It will be durable to withstand a high degree of abuse, so that sea kayakers can paddle in rocky areas, surf zones, and remote areas without having to worry excessively about equipment failures, enabling them to enjoy the experience more fully.





single sea kayak

River, Surf, Racing, and "Rec" Kayaks

Occasionally, a paddler will ask their trip leader if they may bring one of these types of kayak on a sea kayaking trip. River kayakers and surf kayakers are indeed handy on the coast, and we do offer trips and clinics where these kayakers are ideal. While river kayakers are often used by sea kayakers for rolling clinics, pool practice and ocean surfing, we do not bring them on routine touring outings because they are generally too slow, unwieldy, uncomfortable, small, and/or lacking in important safety features.

Likewise, racing kayakers, even those designed for the open ocean, usually lack perimeter safety deck lines and access hatches. Their ultra-lightweight construction may be too fragile to support common rescue procedures or paddling in rocky areas. They are long and narrow, making them relatively tippy and difficult to maneuver in tight spaces, such as near rocks or in kelp beds. Further, we do not generally paddle at a racing pace, so the speed benefit of a racing kayak will not be realized on most touring trips. In fact, the long length will result in extra drag at a typical touring pace of three knots.

"Rec" kayakers occupy the other end of the speed spectrum. While popular for their low cost, small size, and ease of use, they usually lack the safety features, speed, and handling we require on our trips.

whitewater river "playboat"



ocean surf kayak



"recreational" kayak



Open Cockpit (Washdeck) Kayaks

A kayak's dimensions and hull shape, rather than the configuration of its cockpit, are more likely to determine its best use. As you can see from the table (above), for almost any intended use, there are both open and closed cockpit variations. However, the sit-on-top is particularly popular for sport fishing and diving, especially in warmer areas, such as the Gulf of Mexico, California, and Hawaii.

In our region, you will often see sit-on-top kayakers used for casual flatwater paddling, surfskis for open-water racing (and surfing ocean swells), and both sit-on-tops and waveskis used for kayak surfing. As for





serious sea kayaking, a small number of high-performance washdeck models are available, but are much harder to find than equivalent closed cockpit models, especially here in the Pacific Northwest.

The Mountaineers generally prefer the closed cockpit configuration for protection from the elements, greater “positive” contact, lower center of gravity, and the opportunity to practice a greater variety of rescue procedures. Therefore, the traditional closed cockpit sea kayak is what you will use for this course and for almost all Mountaineers Sea Kayak clinics and trips you will likely take in the future.



open-cockpit sit-on-top

Skin-on-Frame, Folding and Inflatable Kayaks

Most Mountaineers generally paddle rigid kayaks made of fiberglass or plastic, especially for training events. Yet, many also own wood and “skin-on-frame” kayaks (such as folding kayaks). While most “rigid” skin-on-frame kayaks are handmade by home builders, a number of commercially available folding sea kayak models may be readily purchased. Given a suitable design, approved flotation, adequate outfitting, and seaworthy condition, skin-on-frame kayaks are usually acceptable to leaders.

Assembling a folding kayak, then disassembling, cleaning and drying it, for each and every time it is used, will lead many to prefer the convenience of rigid kayaks. Those unable to transport their kayak on a car, or having limited storage space at home, may find folding kayaks worth the extra effort.

Inflatable kayak models are available for recreational touring, expedition paddling, river running, and fitness training. Inflatables are often less expensive, lighter, more durable, and more easily stored and transported than rigid or even folding kayaks. For some activities, such as sea cave exploration, bird watching, fishing, running rapids, or touring, they may be an excellent choice. As with folding kayaks, inflatables are especially popular with apartment dwellers, bus riders, and travelers.

Despite these wonderful benefits, most inflatables come with serious drawbacks, such as decreased gear capacity, greater wind load, less efficient hull shapes, and less “positive contact” for the paddler. Since we often paddle in windy conditions, and require good boat control and the ability to make decent headway, our trip leaders are not likely to accept typical inflatable kayaks on club trips.



hybrid folding-inflatable surfski





We Paddle Sea Kayaks

Kayaking is often not intuitive, so start off trying what your friends use. Also try the alternatives, to see for yourself. "Try before you buy," but please do so in a safe and controlled setting. Don't gamble your life on cheap or unsafe gear. It's not about the gear, it's about exploration, companionship, and living. So try to experience all of the many facets of kayaking, as there is more to it than just "sea" kayaking. Many sea kayakers also like river kayaking, ocean surf kayaking, kayak polo, kayak fishing, sailing, racing, rolling, building... Just remember: when on our sea kayak trips, we paddle sea kayaks!

