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PRIMITIVE CRAFT

At any time of day, kayaking is a peaceful way to enjoy the natural beauty of the Cape

By Tom Keer Photography by Barry and Cathy Beck





I remember the first kayak I ever saw, and it was on a black and white television set, the kind with tubes that required a minute or more to warm up. There was a man sitting in a long, sleek boat that wrapped around his torso, on top of a rock cliff overlooking a deep pool. This was a peculiar situation. Why would he sit in a boat on land? With a whisk of his two-bladed paddle, he pushed off, plummeted a dozen or so feet, crashed through the water's surface and disappeared. The boat surfaced, bottom up, and I thought for sure the man was dead. In an instant there was a great commotion, water churned everywhere, and suddenly he was upright and vertical, paddling down the river. I was awestruck.

One time I wondered about the name Kayak. It's an odd word for sure, two k's, two a's and one y. It's a symmetrical word—a palindrome—much like the vessel it describes; a word that unfolds and then seamlessly folds back up. Literal thinkers favor the direct interpretation as “man-small boat,” which makes sense. Figurative thinkers arrive at a different view, that being “clothing for going in the water.” The original kayaks were tailored to a person's size, much like custom-made clothing. These boats had a home in the Northern reaches of North America, mostly for hunting but also for navigating the shallow waterways. I look down at my floating bathtub, happy for the stability.

Many years have passed since I watched that man on television, and I still have never paddled a boat as sleek as his. I do paddle a lot, but I favor a more generic boat. My hard-chinned, open cockpit kayak more closely resembles a floating bathtub than a hydrodynamic, long-distance paddling machine. I need no special skills to maneuver it. I use no Eskimo rolls, no acrobatic insertions into the water, and no technical gear. I simply drag it down the sand to the water's edge, toss my gear inside, and go. If I swamp, so be it. I just swim away, no harm, no foul, and just a little wet for the wear. And on a hot day, not much feels better than a good dunking, except for maybe an ice cream.

Kayaking around Chatham is a little slice of Heaven. I vary my trips through the back bays, tidal flats, and creeks, planning my sorties around time, destination, and activity. I let my mood govern my itinerary.

Time

Time seems to stop when you're so close to the water's surface, but the tides do not. Glance at a tide chart to be sure you paddle with the current, and then go.

First light brings beautiful colors, with blues, lavenders, and slivers of orange and yellow. If you're an early riser, a sunrise paddle whets the appetite for an enormous breakfast on the Chatham Bars Inn veranda. It does not get much better than savoring eggs Benedict, sausage, toast and copious amounts of coffee while studying a recently paddled bay. Sun-lovers favor the blue sky, heat, and, of course, the vitamin D from the midday rays. Paddle until you sweat, then take a dip and lay out on the sand. A wake-up call comes in the form of the rising tide's water lapping at your legs. Of course, there is the romance of a sunset excursion. The sky is ablaze in orange and red, the air is cooler, and the water is less crowded. Be sure to schedule a late dinner reservation, and leave time for a cold glass of white wine or a beer.

Destinations

Chatham offers so many water types that it is virtually impossible to cover them all in a month. There are ponds, rivers, bays, harbors, creeks, and flats to choose from. No matter, allow your mood to tell you where to go. If you feel spunky, put in at Oyster Pond at high tide, paddle down the Oyster River on the dropping tide, and arrive at Morris Island. Drag your boat onto the sand, perhaps dig some steamers on the flats, and take a swim. When the wind kicks up you'll know that the tide has turned, and you can return from whence you came. Ponds, rivers, and flats, all in one relaxing day that seems to pass oh-so-slowly.

On a summer day, your options seem limitless. Pleasant Bay is protected by the Nauset Beach Break and makes for a nice jaunt. Nearby Cockle Cove Creek and Mill Creek are easy to maneuver. Or try Ryder Cove on the high tide. Leave some time to watch the boats sail in and out of Chatham Harbor. A popular trip is from Stage Harbor to North Monomoy Island. If you're quiet you'll see schools of striped bass swim under your boat.

Activities

Many paddlers depart from Stage Harbor for North Monomoy to see the seals. The harbor seals are cute, but my favorites are the horsehead seals. The latter are significantly larger than their brethren, and they have a giant snout, much like their namesake. And as I pass the seals I am reminded of one of life's little ironies. Some 3,000 years ago, an Eskimo created the first kayak by attaching sealskin to a wooden frame. The Eskimos favored the seal's skin because of its natural water repellency.

Monomoy Island is a birder's paradise, with over 285 avian species that travel back and forth between the islands and the mainland. Common shore birds are gulls, among them the evil black-backed gulls, the comical laughing gulls, the omnipresent common gulls, and the seasonal gannets. I like the gannets the best, for they fly high in the sky and then plummet to the water and swim with their wings to catch a herring. Cormorants, those prehistoric-looking birds, stand post with their wings extended. They have no oil glands and if they did not periodically dry their wings they would sink like a rock. The Chinese used them to fish with, by tethering a rope to a tight ring, placed around their neck. When the bird tried to swallow the meal, the ring prohibited the feast. The bird was reeled in to shore and the owner extracted the fish from the duck's mouth. Oystercatchers, with their fast footwork and bright, orange bills, race along the water's edge. There are many more birds to watch; from peregrine falcons to a dozen varieties of sea ducks. Don't forget your binoculars.

Of course, you can also toss in a fly rod to catch striped bass, a rake to dig clams, or a bucket to collect seashells, sand dollars, or sea stars. Your possibilities are seemingly endless. ♦

Getting Started

Some companies in the Chatham area offer lessons, guided tours, or, if you prefer to go on your own, kayak and gear rentals. Here is a brief list to get you started on your adventure.

CHATHAM KAYAK COMPANY
391 Barn Hill Road
West Chatham, MA
508-241-5389
www.chathamkayakcompany.com

OSPREY SEA KAYAK
ADVENTURES
Pleasant Bay
South Orleans, MA
508-240-1211
www.ospreyseekayak.com

GOOSE HUMMOCK SHOP
Route 6A
Orleans, MA
508-255-0455
www.goose.com

RIDE AWAY
3700A State Highway
Eastham, MA
508-247-0827
www.rideawaykayak.com

And what kayak adventure would be complete without commemorative pictures? If you don't have a waterproof camera, check out the Aquapac Hard Lens Case. Not only will the housing keep your camera dry, but the hard lens means you can shoot photos underwater. Aquapac also makes waterproof bags for clothing, cell phones, and, get this, iPods. For more information, visit www.aquapac.net

