



KAYANG KAYAK

by Carlo Santayana

I first took to kayaking in January of 2001. I was beginning to get a bad case of cabin fever and needed a diversion – some physical activity to get me outside my apartment. Although I biked extensively when I was a kid, the thought of huffing and puffing on a bicycle really didn't appeal to me now. Besides, I thought, everybody has a road in front of their home on which to bike, but not many people have a river on which to paddle. Might as well make use of it.

So I found a nearby canoe and kayak store that offered lessons, and signed up for a beginner's sea kayaking class. It was mid-January and the climate was heading straight into winter. Only after I signed up and paid the fee in advance did the instructor say that learning how to kayak in the dead of winter was actually better than learning it in the summer, if only because students aren't misled into thinking that the water will be nice and warm. "NOW he tells me," was the thought running through my mind.

Sea kayaking is quite relaxing compared to whitewater kayaking. It is not an activity wherein you are shoehorned into a short, round boat while shooting down the rapid water currents, jumping down waterfalls, and using your skull to destroy boulders that get in your way. Instead sea kayaking involves a longer, narrower boat and paddling out to where the whales and dolphins swim right next to you. The kayak and the canoe are the most ecologically friendly types of watercraft, since gentle paddling hardly disturbs wildlife and does not burn fossil fuel. It does, however, require energy in the form of food. Relaxing as it may seem, paddling is a tiring activity!

It was a brisk but sunny Saturday morning and I drove to the kayak store to attend the five-hour class. We started with the usual safety basics and went to put on drysuits, since it was still too cold to paddle in normal exercise clothes or even scuba wetsuits. Drysuits keep you completely dry except for your feet,

your hands, and your head. They are so air-tight that you will need to "burp" your suit once you put it on, much like what's done to a Tupperware container before being stored in the fridge.

My instructor, my classmates, and I started walking down to the dock. Six Tupperware containers burped and ready to be put into the frigid waters of the formidable Columbia River. We got into our kayaks and followed our instructor out to open water. Maneuvering was tricky with such long, narrow boats (about 16 feet long and 2½ feet wide) but we all got the hang of it. We found a cove and the instructor began to teach us some of his techniques. And then it happened! As we were practicing our turns, I got a little out of balance and in a split-second found myself upside-down, immersed in icy cold water.

The "Eskimo Roll" is a technique invented and perfected by Native Alaskans who would paddle their kayaks out in arctic waters during their hunting trips. Rolling allows them to quickly turn a capsized boat right side up again without having to climb out. Climbing out of their kayaks in freezing temperatures would usually lead to death by hypothermia... or a very bad case of the sniffles at best. Unfortunately, I didn't have any Eskimo blood in me to perform a roll, and therefore needed to bail out in order to get a now badly needed breath of air. The instructor helped me empty the water from the boat, and held it steady so I could climb back in. Later, the instructor made everyone do the same thing in order to practice.

This whole capsizing incident didn't faze me, though. At the end of the class I found that I had thoroughly enjoyed kayaking, and therefore proceeded to the next step: owning my own boat. This proved to be a bit of a dilemma. Because the car I drive is a top-down (ain't life grand?), there was no practical way I could put a 30+ pound kayak on top of it. On the other hand, I didn't want to own an inflatable kayak – those things probably don't last very long. My solution lay in a line of folding kayaks – boats that adhere to the centuries-old, tried and tested, skin-on-frame approach of traditional Alaskan kayaks. These boats were strong, seaworthy, and foldable! I could put an entire boat in the trunk of my car, or take it with me on a plane (although I haven't done this yet).

Apparently, the US Marines use the same boats when certain covert operations or "surprise attacks" need to be carried out. Some of them even practice assembling the boats in total darkness and silence. To achieve this, the parts of the frame in military models are engraved with their part numbers, so a soldier can "feel" and identify one piece of the frame from another, much like experienced Mahjong players can identify tiles without having to look at them. After lots of practice and countless nicks and scratches to my hands and knees, I can now build my boat in nearly the same amount of time it would take a trained soldier to do so. However, I'd need lights and would make a lot more noise than a soldier would.

I usually paddle during the day, sometimes up to 10 miles all in all, on the Tualatin River. This river runs less than 15 yards from the deck of my apartment, and it's a calm, gentle river with

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