



Which boat to buy?

There is no such thing as a perfect kayak. There are some that go quickly in a straight line, others that spin on the spot, some you can relax in, others that threaten to throw you in at every stroke... Modern kayaks are specialised, and no one craft will do everything well.

It's size and shape that control performance. Other things being equal, which they won't be, a longer boat will be faster, a shorter boat slower. But the shorter boat will turn more easily. A boat with more rocker, the lengthwise curve of the hull, will turn more easily than one with a straight keel. A wider boat will have more initial lateral stability, but a less stable boat will often be more comfortable in a sea. All design is compromise.

Then there is the question of materials. Most recreational kayaks are of rotomoulded polyethylene, a material that can be moulded into complex one-piece shapes. These kayaks are tough and resilient, bouncing off rocks without too much damage. They do tend to be a bit heavier and slower.

Composite craft are made of a fibrous material such as glass or carbon fiber embedded in a resin, polyester (cheaper), vinyl ester or epoxy. These materials are lighter for the same stiffness and therefore produce a slightly faster boat, but one less forgiving of harsh treatment. Being hand made, they are more expensive.

Several manufacturers use a vacuum moulded thermoplastic material. This gives a light craft with a good finish, reasonably tough, and intermediate in cost.

Here are brief details of three classes of kayak.

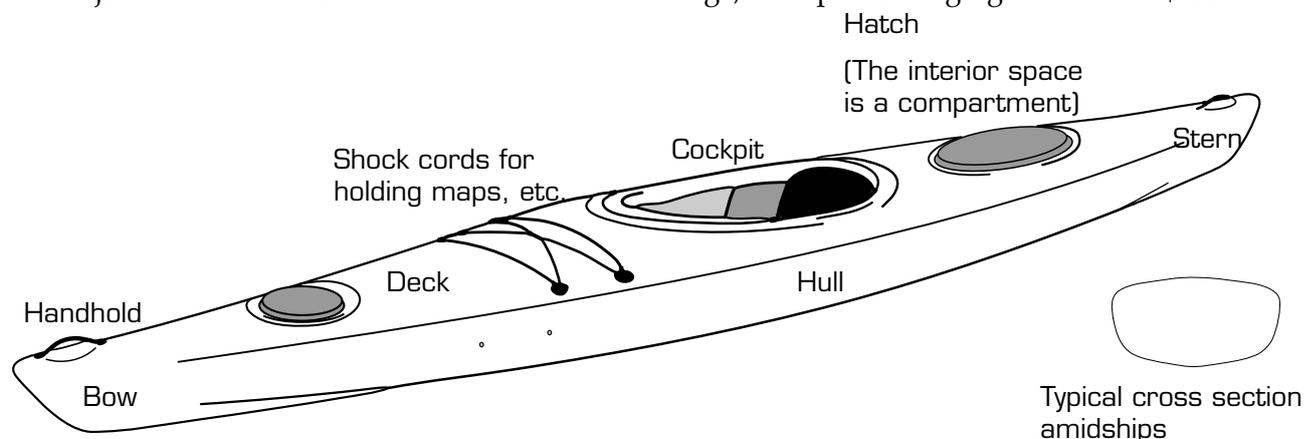
Touring kayak

These are generally between 3.5 and 4.5m in length and 60 to 65 cm in beam. The smaller craft, often known as day touring kayaks, may have an aft bulkhead only, unlike the longer boats which will have two, bow and stern. Many will have decklines.

Some of these kayaks come with rudders, which are really an unnecessary complication on boats this size. Rudders are not for steering, but to control directional stability when running downwind. Learn to paddle without.

Touring kayaks are meant for inland waters, so if your aim is to paddle the Murray backwaters, Barker Inlet, and the occasional foray on to a **calm** sea, these are for you. They're also ideal craft for learning the skills so a touring kayak is a good choice for a first kayak.

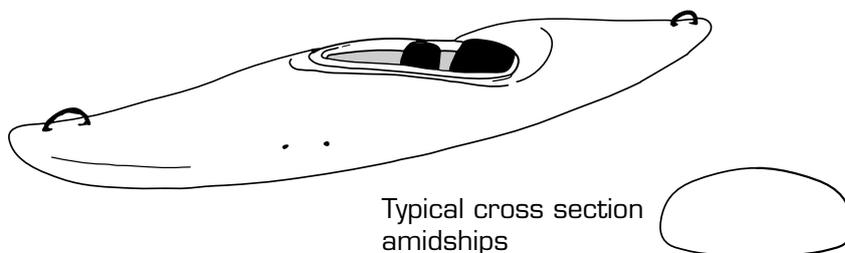
All the major manufacturers have at least one in their range, with prices ranging from about \$1500.



Whitewater kayak

Here the emphasis is on maneuverability, not speed. The short length, 3 to 3.5m, flat cross section and lots of rocker suit them to rapids or surf, not distances. As a first kayak you will find them frustrating at first although you will learn some boat control skills quickly.

The diagram shows a river runner kayak, relatively large. Freestyle boats are smaller. Recently on the market are crossover kayaks, essentially large creek boats with bulkheads and retractable fins that make them usable for playing in coastal waters.



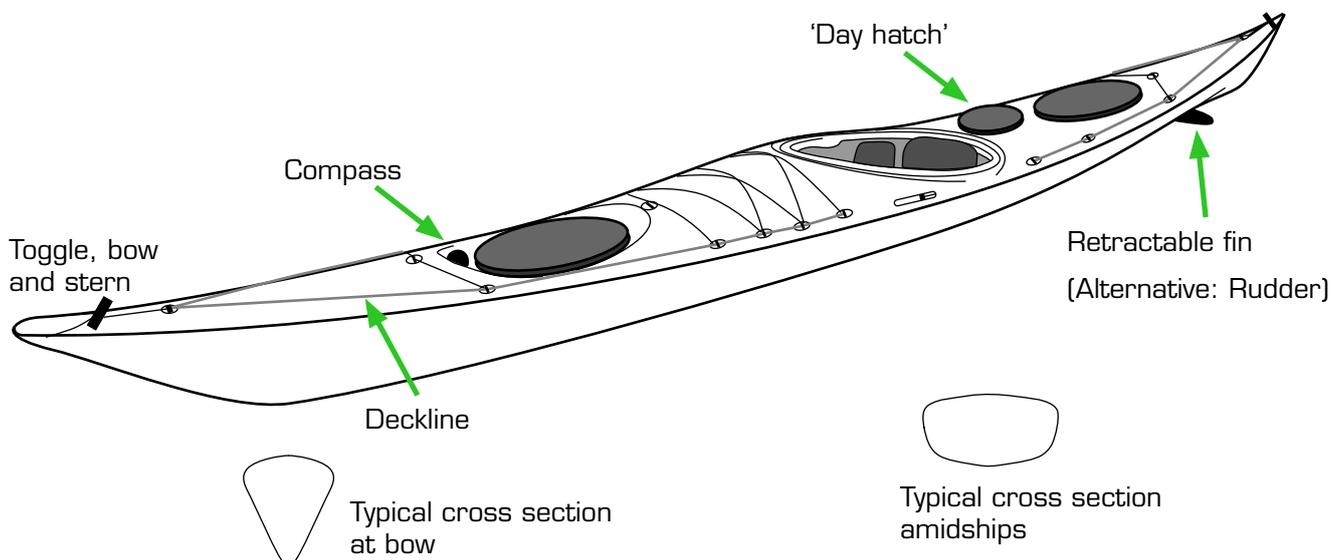
Sea kayak

This is where you do not rush out: prices start at \$3000 or so. There's not just the boat but all the equipment that goes into it: hands-free pump system, compass, spare paddle system, paddle leash, tow system, sail rig... Then there is the choice of rudder or retractable fin, one with many moving parts, the other with only one but some loss of stowage space.

At a length of 5 to 6 m, these boats are designed to run straight in rough water, to be controllable with the cockpit flooded, to be easy to roll and be rescued.

Several manufacturers now offer shorter (c 4.5 m) more rockered boats for playing about in coastal areas. Good fun, and capable of day trips, but not for long expeditions.

You can use sea kayaks on inland waters but they do tend to be cumbersome in narrow creeks.



Paddles and other gear

One item you must have is a PFD, often known as lifejacket. You want a Level 50 or 50S PFD designed for paddlesports. Obviously it must fit properly and be comfortable: you will be wearing it for hours at a time. A few pockets can be useful. Buy a PFD first while you're still trying boats.

The choice of paddle will depend on the choice of kayak. Short paddles go with short kayaks, and also with shorter people. With a day touring boat a paddle about 210 cm will be plenty long enough, while for a sea kayak 220 cm is a better length to start experimenting. Two-part paddles are more convenient for transport, and allow adjustment of feather angle and limited adjustment of length.

Materials, and prices, vary. The lighter the paddle the better, since you will be holding it for hours on end. Cranked shafts can help reduce loads on wrists.

Then there are items of clothing, waterproof bags...

Welcome to kayaking.