

# Kayaking

Start With a Lesson By Don Oblak You shred Honeycomb Ridge on your snowboard, tackle Porcupine Rim on your mountain bike, lead 5.9 climbs and follow on 5.11 routes. Without a second thought, you do all these things and yet you've never taken a lesson. Somehow, you're just able to figure it out &hellip; eventually.

Most of us find our way into new adventure sports through friends via the trial-by-fire learning method. When we &ldquo;blow-it,&rdquo; we pick ourselves up and brush off the snow. We jump back onto the bike and ignore the road rash. Or, we use our belay to rest awhile before resuming the climb.

Now, fast forward to the Westwater Ranger Station on the Colorado River. You're with a group of buddies and everyone is excited as they watch you climb into a borrowed kayak. After a brief description of how to sit in your kayak, they attach a spray skirt and hand you a paddle.

Apprehension builds. But, your friends tell you &ldquo;not to sweat it.&rdquo; They assure you that there's plenty of time to practice before the rapids. As the group pushes off and paddles downstream, you're left feeling very tippy and unsure whether the next stroke will land you upside down. Trying to keep up with the group, you decide the safest strategy is to paddle close to the shoreline. Suddenly, though, the kayak lurches as it catches on an eddyline. You try to balance with a paddle in one hand and your other arm stuck out to the side. Before you can yell to your buddies, you're counting fish and wondering what comes next. Swimming the waterlogged boat to shore, glancing upstream and realizing the put-in is only 40 feet away, you think, &ldquo;This is going to be a very long day!&rdquo; Right.

Unfortunately, the trial-by-fire learning method for kayaking often leads to negative experiences. Many beginners give up the sport before gaining proficiency or even basic paddling skills. More over, well-meaning friends often have had no formal instruction themselves. These self-taught paddlers pass along good and bad advice, and occasionally, bad habits. Many beginners don't realize that quality kayak instruction can help someone start paddling and continue paddling. Generally, instructors are certified through either the American Canoe Association (ACA) or the United States Canoe and Kayak Organization. Instructors begin teaching with the correct equipment on the appropriate river sections. Paddling, unlike many sports, is counterintuitive. Basic instincts can sometimes cause big problems.

Typical instruction begins with boat and equipment comfort; underwater comfort; stroke mechanics; how river features work; how to master eddy turns, peel-outs, upstream ferries, and surfing; and of course, the Eskimo roll. Usually, three or four days of instruction is all that's needed to develop a solid foundation of skills upon which paddlers can build. When picking a school, ask important questions. What is the instructor to student ration? Four or five students to one instructor is standard. What is the typical class size? Four to eight students is ideal. Do the instructors have formal training in techniques and safety procedures from a nationally recognized organization? This is not necessarily required, but it is a good indicator of the company's level of professionalism.