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Boats Powered by Nature

In today's environmentally-conscious world many people are looking for the motor-free, noise-free and pollution-free boating experiences that canoeing, kayaking and sailing offer.

Whether powered by wind, water or human resolve, these boats offer a slower, simpler ride.

"What I love most about canoeing is the beauty involved," says Catherine Holeman, president of Paddle Manitoba. "Canoeing takes me places I couldn't otherwise see, or would see in a totally different light if I wasn't in a canoe. Everything is simpler."

"It's the sense of calmness and tranquility," says Mick Lutt about sea kayaking. He is the founder and head instructor of Manitoba-based WAVPaddling. Sea kayaking is usually done in flat open water and can include paddling through choppy water crossings. It's much different from white water kayaking where you're basically pitting yourself against the power of wild river rapids. "All types of kayaking provide a sense of individual freedom, a complete immersion in the sport and an opportunity to get in touch with nature," says Lutt.

Regardless of what type of kayaking you would like to do, Lutt suggests lessons. While he acknowledges that it sounds self-serving for an instructor to encourage those interested in kayaking to take lessons, people have often come to him claiming they're skilled kayakers, with years of experience, only to discover they don't know the crucial basics taught in a beginner class.

"You need to learn how to flip over and get yourself out," he says. You don't want to be trapped in your kayak with your head underwater. Other skills you can learn in a day or weekend course include understanding the balance of a boat, rescue techniques, paddling techniques and reading the water (hydrology).

Lutt says that if you're going to take lessons, you should only take them from Paddle Canada Certified Instructors. "Kayaking technique has changed a lot in the past 10 years. There are very specific changes to keep up with to make sure the students are having an incredibly safe, positive and enjoyable experience."

Learning how to get out of a capsized boat and re-righting it is also a crucial skill when it comes to sailing. “It’s the first thing we teach people,” says Janice Cameron. She runs Sail Thunder Bay in Thunder Bay, Ontario, a non-profit organization that offers learn-to-sail programs for children and adults.

Sailing lessons are also offered at yacht clubs throughout Manitoba, including Gimli, Victoria Beach, Falcon Lake and Pelican Lake, among others; and in northwestern Ontario at the Royal Lake of the Woods Yacht club in Kenora.

Lessons for canoeing are recommended by Holeman as well. “Canoeing can be a tricky thing to figure out,” she says, “and I wouldn’t want anyone to get themselves into an unsafe situation or be turned off of paddling because of frustration.” She says that it’s possible for an inexperienced paddler to rent a boat and go out for a leisurely trip with two or three people while the water is calm.

Those who want to try this should learn some basic strokes and how those strokes will move or turn the canoe. Holeman recommends the book *Path of the Paddle* by Canadian canoeing legend, Bill Mason. “Even though it looks silly,” she says, “you can practice the motions in your living room with a broom.” She adds, “Having the theory in mind can help, but it still takes practice to actually see and feel how the strokes work.”

Holeman strongly discourages beginning paddlers from trying unsupervised soloing and white water. Soloing is canoeing with only one person in the boat. This is difficult to do because you need to learn special strokes and how to position yourself correctly in the canoe. White water canoeing is running a boat through rapidly moving water, which requires very different skills and carries higher safety risks.

To increase your safety, it’s important to make sure you have the proper gear when you canoe, kayak or sail. Transport Canada has regulations about equipment that must be in every pleasure craft, motorized or not. On the top of the list is an appropriately sized, Canadian-approved personal flotation device (PFD) or lifejacket for every person in the boat.

Other safety gear you should carry with you are a 15-metre/50-foot floating rope, a sound signaling device, navigation lights if you’re out when it’s dark, and a bailer to scoop out any water that might splash into the boat.

“A capped bleach or laundry detergent jug with the bottom cut out works well,” says Holeman. “I usually use a short piece of rope to tie it to the boat.” Lutt sometimes uses a sponge when kayaking because it’s compact and lightweight. Wearing a white water helmet when kayaking is crucial, adds Lutt, and he

recommends it when canoeing too. He says an entry-level helmet costs between \$50 and \$60.

Most of this equipment will be included with any canoe or kayak rental, or can be rented for an additional fee. It's a little more difficult for the inexperienced sailor to rent sailboats and gear in Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario, notes Cameron. "Most places require people to be members because of insurance costs," says Cameron.