



I have just returned from a 3 day kayaking and camping trip on the River Murray, upstream of Renmark. What a fabulous experience it was.

The flow rate was nearing the highest in 30 years in South Australia and yet we were able to paddle safely downstream into areas that are normally inaccessible.

With experience and guidance this sort of activity is available to anybody to safely enjoy. I get ahead of myself though.

There are a number of skills to learn and knowledge to be gained so that instead of doing 'circle work' you can comfortably paddle in the right direction and enjoy the water.

Should I buy a canoe or kayak?

The first decision you will need to make is whether a canoe or kayak is best. If you are dead set on paddling on your own then a kayak is the way to go.

Yeah, you can paddle a small canoe by yourself but this requires a well-developed suite of strokes to do so efficiently. A Kayak sits low in the water and you sit with your feet out in front, as if you're on the floor at home.

Kayaks

Kayaks are paddled with a double-bladed paddle as a solo craft, so it's much easier to get your strokes down pat. In kayaks, sealed compartments are used for storing your equipment so you are limited in the amount of gear you carry and the way you pack it.

The stability will vary from 'twitchy' to very stable depending on the overall design, and in particular the hull shape.

Double kayaks are available but are usually for playing around for the day as storage is minimal. A kayak of some sort is best for soloists.



Small, unthreatening craft like kayaks and canoes allow you to explore the beautiful backwaters.

Canoes

A canoe is a large open boat that you sit in as though you are on a small stool (traditionalists actually kneel) and you paddle with a single-bladed paddle. The high sides mean that lots of gear can be easily stored inside. But it also means you catch the wind more readily.

Usually, paddled with another person, these are big stable platforms for beginner paddlers. Novices are often nervous about traditional 'sit in' kayaks because they worry they won't be able to get out if they capsize. Capsize drills with a skilled instructor will help overcome this fear.

SOT Kayaks

In an attempt to bypass this concern people now regularly turn to 'sit on top' (SOT) kayaks. SOTs are the same as a regular kayak in most ways but there is no cockpit. The paddler literally sits on top. All you can do here is fall off. The disadvantage is there is reduced space for storing equipment and it's all on the outside, as it is with an open canoe.

Beginners should hire a craft first to help make their decision and I strongly recommend you attend a 'get into paddling day' at your nearest [Canoeing Australia](#) branch.



Here you will be taken through the basics of paddling either a canoe or kayak on inland waters and introduced to essential safety skills and procedures.

Essentials on the water

Once you have experienced different craft and learnt the fundamentals about paddling it, you are ready to set off on a journey that could become a lifelong hobby, pastime, or passion.

I started paddling just over 50 years ago and still to this day love getting out on the water in a canoe or a kayak, experiencing the sights and sounds available to me because I am in a quiet and generally unthreatening craft.



This is the gear I took on my 3 day kayaking and camping trip up on the Murray River near Renmark recently.

PFD's

Whatever your choice of boat, there are some essentials that you need to venture off overnight or just for the day. The first is a Personal Flotation Device or 'PFD'. There is an almost overwhelming variety out there to choose from. You need to be aware that it is a legal requirement for you to wear a PFD in either a kayak or canoe.

Wearing a PFD should become as instinctive to you as it is to put on your seatbelt in your car. Since 2013, there has been an update and change in language about the type of PFD needed.



Formerly, you needed to wear a Type 2 or Type 3 jacket. The difference being the Type 2 was Hi-Vis while Type 3 could be in any colour or combination.

These types are now known as Level 50 and 50S. There is a Type 1 (or Level 100) PFD too, but their design is not conducive to paddling activities.

Buy the best you can afford, and one that is correctly sized for you so that it is a nice firm fit. Often overlooked, but really essential for safety, is a whistle attached to the PFD. This is used for easy communication in a larger group and also to attract attention in an emergency.

Put your essentials in a dry bag

A dry bag with extra clothing, first aid kit, and snacks is also necessary. Add adequate water and sunscreen to make for a comfortable and safe trip. One little addition I personally add to my kit is a towel or bandana that I can put over my legs, even my feet if the sun is really strong.

Footwear

Over the years I have seen many paddlers going either barefoot in their boat or just wearing thongs. This is not a good idea. If you capsize there are often obstacles in the water that can easily cut your feet up. Everything from broken glass to submerged tree boughs can turn a fun trip bad.

Wear footwear that is secured to your feet, and protects the whole of the foot. Suitable candidates are old track shoes, wetsuit boots, or Crocs.



Camping at places like this aren't always possible if you're on foot or by car. This is Headings Cliff in the Murtho Forest Reserve.

Prepare a float plan

Finally, be mindful of the weather and prepare a 'Float Plan'. A Float Plan left with a responsible person will tell them who is paddling, where they are paddling, when they are going, and when they are going to return.

Importantly, don't forget to let that person know you have returned, so that unnecessary anxiety isn't caused.

What to wear?

Be prepared! It's an important motto when it comes to a paddler's clothing. Firstly, let me say there is no need to build your outfit around bathers. Regular clothing, appropriate to the weather, is all that is needed.

The layer principle (see: [Layering Clothes for Cold Weather Travel](#)) is the all-abiding answer to variability in both air temperature and water temperature. In hot conditions, the predominant need is to protect yourself from the sun.

A broad-brimmed hat, long sleeves and collars on shirts, and as previously mentioned, something to cover your legs is the best way to go.



Kayaks, like this SOT, are great fun for the the little ones too.

Wear layers

With cooler temperatures comes the need to add layers. This allows you to maintain a comfortable body temperature while paddling or when idle. Polar fleece jackets will warm you but you may find that you need to add a windproof and waterproof jacket to the equation to find a balance between comfort and safety.

Having a dry sack handy with these extra pieces of clothing means you can easily adjust your layers as needed. In colder conditions, base layer thermals will provide a sound foundation to start the layering process. It is a good idea to steer clear of cotton clothing. Wet cotton will rapidly steal body heat and raise the likelihood of hypothermia.

Choose fast drying and comfortable materials

Fast drying materials that are soft and comfortable to wear will maximise your enjoyment. Bring sunglasses that are polarised. They should also have some form of band or cord to prevent loss. Sunglasses are really important as the glare from the water will intensify your exposure to the sun.

Many paddlers wear gloves to help protect against blisters, to keep the sun off, and to keep the hands warm in cold conditions. I wear fingerless sailing gloves in warm weather and either Sealskinz or skiing gloves in cold weather. This is because my fingers get affected by



the cold very quickly. Lighter wool or possum fur gloves may suit you better.

Camp clothing will still need to satisfy the above principles and are an important addition to your paddling kit. You may get wet or have a wet exit on the water and you will be thankful for the dry backup for when you're back on shore.

Now, go and check out Part 2 of Bob's kayak and canoe camping guide.