

Sailing a Kayak??

By Kevin Harding



After several times going through the temporary mounts and then making the changes necessary in the boats to do the more permanent mounts, I began "sea trials" in both boats. I wanted to go out in a variety of wind intensities with and without the genoa and see what would happen. I should caution anyone interested in giving this product a try to be careful about first efforts.

It would be a good idea to have a buddy paddling along to help if capsized. I have considerable sailing and kayak experience and float like a whale so I was not worried, but I still had a buddy come out to lend a hand if needed. It goes without saying that one should be wearing a PFD. I always wear an inflatable PFD when on the water because it seems silly not to. I should also say that, in all cases, using the genoa improved the performance and allowed both boats to sail closer to the wind.

After several trials in varied conditions I discovered the Scapa was a bit tender to carry the rig in anything except a light steady wind. Keeping my balance was a big part of the activity especially if the wind was gusty. It would have been easy to make a mistake that would have resulted in a wet exit. I wanted to go fast, but I also wanted to relax and enjoy the ride without having to focus on every gust of the wind.

On the other hand, the Aegean loved the wind! Even in 20mph gusts the boat was very stable with a reefed main and genoa and allowed me to enjoy the challenge without feeling like a roll was imminent. It was easy to shake out the reef when the wind quieted down and just keep sailing.



As a long time sailor I felt something was missing in my range of boating experiences when I gave up my last small boat (a 14' O'Day Javelin) several years ago. That boat was just too small and uncomfortable for a 64-year-old, 200lb man. So, in the interests of economy and because I have several canoes, kayaks, a rowing shell and a small motorboat, I decided my sailing days were over.

I live on a mountain lake of 2,500 acres and the winds tend to be erratic and unreliable. The ocean is two hours away but I've never liked trailer sailing with all of the rigging and setup required. So, although I missed sailing, I just thought my circumstances were just not right to make another investment in yet another boat.

Then I discovered "Kayaksailor" on the web last winter. I had looked into using a sailing kayak, but all the rigs on the market were essentially just simple sails to be used on a run. Reaching or beating were out of the question. If I was going back to sailing I wanted a boat that could really sail.

I'm a sucker for a well constructed web site and kayaksailor.com had great photos, great videos and the kind of detail that kept me coming back and giving this not inexpensive option (about \$700) serious consideration. The owners were very responsive to my questions and, as luck would have it, there was a dealer only about 45 minutes away.

I own two sit-on-top kayaks, a Bic Scapa (a solo) and an Ocean Aegean (a tandem that can be solo paddled). I wanted a rig that would be interchangeable but I thought the larger boat might work out better because it is wider and very stable. On a rare occasion I have even stood up in the Aegean!

I had bought the Bic because I wanted a faster, lighter boat (only 40lbs) as opposed to the heavy Aegean (70lbs). Of course, when I bought both boats I had no idea I would ever want to sail either of them. I am a fan of the sit-on-top style of boat for safety reasons. If disaster strikes, I simply crawl back on board (not a very athletic or dignified experience) and am on my way.

After consultation with the owners and local dealer I bought the 1.4m sail and the .4m genoa. These are really very small sails (the genoa seems like a large handkerchief) but the main is fully battened and both are well cut and carefully sewn. More importantly, the entire rig is quite sophisticated with well-engineered parts, excellent fits and all the components of a real sailing rig; leeboards, mainsheet, halyard, stays, downhaul, boom vang and jib sheets. Everything is very small to fit on a kayak, but it is all there.

The instructional video and written instructions are essential and well done. It is imperative to go through the entire process of fitting and setup that includes a temporary mount in order to get the rig to correctly fit one's boat. In some cases that may mean pop riveting or screwing attachments to the boat, but it is essential to get everything in the right place before drilling holes in a plastic boat.

I'm no expert, but it seems quite clear that although the rig is quite versatile, it will not work on all boats. Leg room in front of the paddler is needed to mount the rig still leaving plenty of room to swing a paddle. A short boat would probably not work.

Neither of my boats have rudders and I was having trouble thinking about sailing without a rudder, but both the owners and dealer advised me that, although not ideal, the rig would work just fine steering with a paddle. They were correct.

As expected, it was not as fast as the Bic Scapa, but it certainly was fun and I could just relax and enjoy the ride. It should be noted that the manufacturer does make a slightly bigger mainsail (1.6m) that is slightly higher that may have been a better choice for this larger boat, but I'm quite satisfied with the smaller rig.

As with all small sailboats, the rig is faster on a reach or a run, but it can beat into the wind (to about 45°) because of the very well-designed leeboards that can be easily raised and lowered. These leeboards are obviously a key component to the entire system and, although quite small, they seem to do the job quite effectively. If paddling while sailing one can enhance speed into the wind and make time.

Steering with a paddle takes a little practice, but it is not rocket science, and it occurred to me that even in a boat with a rudder, I would not want to put the paddle away as it becomes a very useful tool to maneuver quickly and brace if necessary.

There are several benefits to this kind of sailing that really appeal to me. First is simplicity. There is no need for a motor and all of the problems it can create. I am always going to get back to the dock with my paddle. The rig weighs only 10lbs and only takes 10 minutes to attach to the kayak.

The second attraction is that I can easily bounce back and forth between paddling and sailing depending on wind conditions and my goals for the day.

Third, I can now go further if I wish and not worry about running out of energy to get home as the wind will certainly help me out part of the way.

Lastly, sailing the kayak is really fun and adds a whole new element to the adventure. I can paddle out, do some bird watching and enjoy the scenery, or I can quickly raise sail and go for a ride.

There is a down side. For purists, the act of paddling should probably not be interfered with. A diehard sailor will probably want a bigger, more sophisticated, boat with all the gizmos that will provide the greatest possible speed and sailing adventure.

Trying to make a boat do a variety of things is asking for compromise. Kayaks are great boats to simply paddle around and enjoy the world, sailboats are great boats to use the wind to create an exciting ride, but a kayak-sailer is a great compromise that really combines the best features of both.