

Kayak Car Topping 101 - Part V

Car Topping Tips & Suggestions by Tom Holtey

The fifth in a series on roof racks and the car topping of boats



We have covered a lot in parts 1-4. If you have not read them, I suggest you do so. In this last section we will discuss tips and suggestions to make car topping your kayak safe and easy, as well as discuss some kayak loading combinations.

While car topping your kayak take the following steps to ensure a good ride for you, your kayak and your fellow motorist. Keep your speed down. Most rack companies suggest no faster than 55 MPH. Take turns slower than usual. Avoid sudden stops and starts. Reduce speed in strong crosswinds. Crawl slowly over rough road surfaces. Be careful backing up if loaded with long kayaks. Watch for low overhangs.

Double check that the kayak(s) is securely tied down. Grab the kayak and shake it violently. If the kayak and car move as one the tie down is good. Even a good tie down can loosen up after a few miles. Make a pit stop shortly after you have started your drive to the put-in to re-check tie the downs, about 10 minutes, maybe 10 miles. Tighten

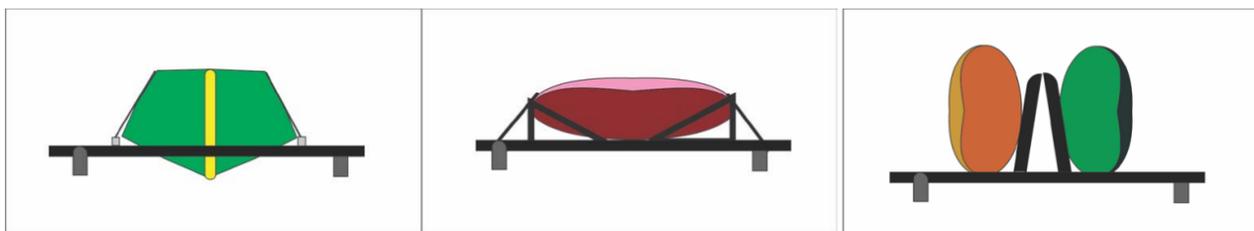
again as needed. Do this on the way home too.

Secure the hatch covers carefully. A loose cover will lift off the kayak at highway speed. Yes, they often have a keeper cord but at 50 MPH it will fail, the cover will fly off and possibly strike another vehicle. At the very least you will lose the cover and have to replace it, sometimes a tall order. If the cover does come off on the interstate, don't try to fetch it. Keep driving. It is not worth getting run over for.

Remove all the accessories from the kayak that can be removed. This includes, but is not limited to: sail rig, sit-on-top seat, knee straps and paddle leash, compass, rod holders, water bottle, bilge pump, paddle float, stray items in the cockpit and hatches, bow line and tow rope. Any of these items can blow off while driving, or be swiped at a rest stop. This will lighten the load on the rack, accessories are best stowed in the trunk or car. Do use a cockpit cover on your sit-in-side kayak. It keeps out the rainwater that can add a lot to the weight. Be 100% sure to tie or clip the cockpit cover to the deck rigging or rack strap, as well as tighten the bungee and very snug.

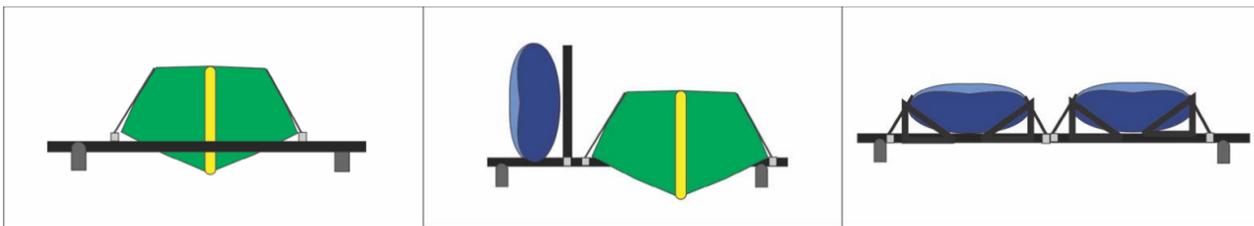
Pay special attention to the recommended weight limit of the rack on our car. Most sport racks will take about 200 pounds (about 3 kayaks). Most luggage racks will take about 100 pounds (about two kayaks). Touring kayaks, and recreational kayaks average about 50 pounds each. Tandem kayaks can be as much as 80 to 90 pounds or more. Lightweight surf skis and wave skis may be only 30-40 pounds each. Ten-foot recreational kayaks, surf kayaks and white water kayaks are not particularly heavy. A canoe can weigh about 40 to 90 pounds. The roof of your car is very strong; the rack is the weak link. Make sure your rack is in good shape. Dispose of old, rusty and broken racks.

Typically the average car topper will want to carry two kayaks, or one canoe. Most racks and vehicles can handle this without any trouble. On occasion you will be part of a paddling "event", on a hot summer day, and every one wants to pile into the van with a ton of boats strapped on top. This is sometimes possible, but must not be taken lightly. Take two or more cars if possible for an extra layer of safety and versatility. If you must use one vehicle, consider the weigh capacity for the rack. Once in a blue moon you can exceed it, but only by a tiny bit, for short distance. All the boats must be tied properly and independently to the crossbars, as well as bow and stern to bumpers Add a couple extra straps, over the whole load, tied through the open doors of the vehicle and cinched up inside the vehicle. Ensure the kayaks are not damaging each other by over crowding. Ideally the kayaks will not touch each other. If you have a stacker, touching is acceptable. Look for problem contact points, such as a deck compass, fragile hatch cover, rudder or fin, maybe a seat back. Plastic kayaks will dent badly when excess pressure is applied. Dents will pop out, most of the time, but not always. Fiberglass and Kevlar kayaks will crack under the same pressure, and this damage is permanent, putting the kayak into "dry dock" until the crack is repaired.



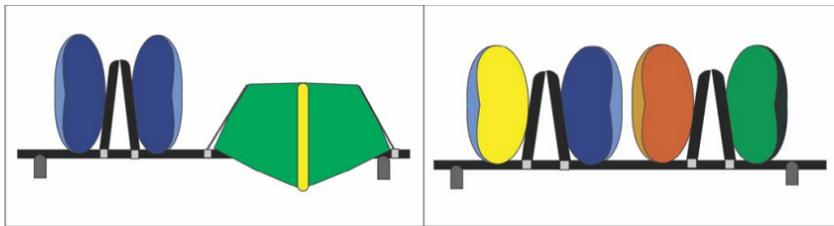
A standard luggage rack will typically carry the following combos:

- 1 wide tandem sit-on-top kayak.
- 1 canoe.
- 1 kayak in a saddle.
- 2 kayaks in J-cradles.
- 2 wave skis stacked.
- Maybe 2 surf skis in saddles.
- 1 sit-on-top, hull up directly on bars.
- And, in some cases 2 sit-on-tops, hulls up, if stackable.



In general terms an average sport rack can carry the following combos:

- 1 wide tandem sit-on-top kayak, possibly 2 if stackable.
- 1 kayak, in J-Cradle and 1 canoe.
- 2 kayaks in saddles.
- 2 kayaks in J-cradles.
- 3 white water kayaks with a stacker.
- 2 - 4 wave skis.
- 2 surf skis in saddles.
- 3 surf skis in J-Cradles.
- 2 sit-on-tops side-by-side, hull up.
- And, in some cases 2 sit-on-tops side-by-side, hulls up, with one more kayak, deck up, in the valley between the 1st two.

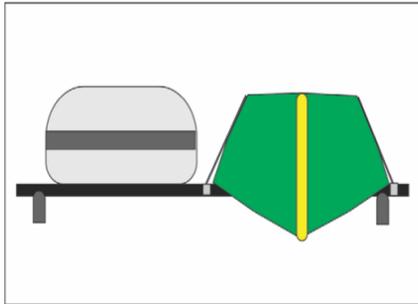


Sport racks with extra long bars can carry the following combos:

- 2 kayaks in J-cradles and 1 canoe.
- 2 canoes.
- 2-3 kayaks in saddles.
- 3-4 kayaks in J-cradles.
- 4 white water kayaks with a stacker.
- 2 - 4 wave skis.
- 3 surf skis in saddles.
- 4 surf skis in J-Cradles.
- 1 wide tandem sit-on-top kayak, possibly 2 if stackable.
- 2 sit-on-tops side-by-side.
- And, in some cases 2 sit-on-tops side-by-side, hulls up, with one more, deck up, in the valley between the 1st two.

Of course there are more possible combos, as well as bikes, sailboards, surfboards, cargo boxes and what have you, to make for even more combos. Saddles stackers and J-Cradles can be mixed and matched too. A saddle and roller combo for a center kayak, with 2 outboard J-Cradles is a nice 3-kayak package.

Remove all bilge water from inside your kayak to make it lighter, and to prevent dripping on your car. Even after the bilge has been drained some water may still want to drip out. Less water will drip when loaded deck up. If you car top a sit-on-top kayak, hull up with the drain plug open, place the cork end in the back, so water does not drip onto the windshield. Salt water on the windshield will cause visibility issues. Kayaks car topped deck up can collect rainwater, this will make them heavy after it rains, and will douse you when you take them off. Consider car topping sideways (with a cockpit cover for sit-in) or hull up, depending on what option is best for you. Never load a canoe right side up.



Roof rack straps can cause noise at highway speeds. The tie down straps should be in contact with the kayak as much as possible. If you have a rack strap across the open cockpit, sit-on or sit-in, it can hum, like a violin string with the kayak acting like a big base guitar. If you must run a strap through open space twist it several times to reduce the tendency for vibration. Loose tie-down straps and hatch straps on the deck of the kayak can slap and fray in the wind, secure them to prevent flapping.

Bow and stern tie down straps can be distracting to a driver if they vibrate much. If using straps twist them repeatedly to reduce vibration and/or reposition them out of the wind stream that causes it. Rope or very strong cordage (**parachute cord**) is less likely to vibrate, the thinner line the less obstructing to the field of view.

Vibrating bow and stern lines can mar the paint job of your car in locations of contact. Wind a strip of soft plush cloth wound around the rope or strap thickly and securely so it does not blow away. A short length of soft plastic tube with the rope or strap running inside can work well too.

It is perfectly ok for a kayak to hang out past the bumpers of the car. Check your local laws to be sure of the limits. A red flag on the back is typically all you need to be "legal" but do be careful while backing up. Red rear tie down straps, left long and flapping can help increase visibly of your overhang, both while moving and while parked.



Extra long crossbars on skinny and low roof cars can cause trouble. Place bars away from locations where you are likely to stand up while exiting the car. Put day glow color tennis balls, or pool noodles, on the 4 ends of the crossbars to soften the blow and add visibility. If your bars really stick out allot, try to park well away from the path of pedestrians.

Naturally your car will get better gas mileage without kayaks, or even a roof rack on top. If you are a penny pincher take the kayaks and the rack off the car when not in use. If you paddle a fair amount, leave the rack on during the paddling season, and take it off in winter. Or... remove the kayak saddling and put on the ski racks! If you are a complete kayaking fool, and you go paddling quite a lot, you can leave the kayak(s) on the vehicle making it easy to up-and-go at a moments notice, or after work on the way home. Yes, you will burn more gas, leaving the kayaks up there. If you do leave them up for extended periods, make sure the tie downs are secure and numerous, check them from time to time. Protect the kayak from theft with a **Lasso cable lock**. Ensure that long-term storage in the saddles or J-Cradles are not causing damage to the hull. Protect kayaks against UV light with a **protection spray**, or park in the shade.



Inspect your tie down straps regularly for frayed spots and sticky cam buckles. A sticky cam buckle can some time be corrected with WD40. Frayed extenders should be retired. Sometime you can cut them short for small jobs and rack straps.

Most of us have to drive to the put-in to go paddling. At the very least we all need to be able to bring home our kayak from the shop when we buy it. So most, if not all, put-in, kayak racks are top. Take the same attitude of skill and safety that you apply to paddling, while on the water, to your car topping and on-the-road time as well.