

Kayak Car Topping 101 - Part IV

Cars & Kayaks by Tom Holtey

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

In part three we covered the sport rack accessories common to paddle sports. In this section we will cover the needs of different types of kayaks and the capabilities of certain vehicle types. Some general tips will follow at the conclusion.

Touring Kayaks or long boats:

Sit-on-top and sit-in-side touring kayaks are best transported in saddles, deck up. Touring kayaks can also be transported very well in J-Cradles. Some sit-on-top kayaks can be loaded directly on cross bars, hull up. Sit-in kayaks should not be loaded directly onto cross bars as this will cause dents and deformation. Longer kayaks must be secured well, bow and stern, to the front and back bumpers. Most cars will accommodate two kayaks, in saddles or J-Cradles. Sometimes you can load three kayak on wider cars in J-Cradles.



Recreational Kayaks or short boats:

Recreational sit-on-top kayaks often have flat gunwales. Loading them directly onto the crossbars, hull up, can be the best option. Some rec sit-ons are stackable, like spoons or bowls in a cupboard; with such you may be inclined to stack them very high. Please take into account the weight capacity of your roof rack. Remember that each kayak should be independently tied down with its own pair of rack straps. Other recreational sit-on-top kayaks can rest well in saddles or J-Cradles, depending on the hull shape.



Recreational sit-in-side kayaks do not load well upside down, on the cockpit coaming. Loading them directly on crossbars, hull up, or down, will cause dents and deformation. They must be loaded on saddles or J-Cradles. Typically you will be able to load only two rec kayaks, sit-in and/or sit-on, per car, maybe as many as three, on wide cars, outfitted with J-Cradles. Even shorter kayaks should be secured, bow and stern, to the bumpers, when ever possible.

Tandem Kayaks:

Tandem sit-on-top kayaks are generally wide and have flat gunwales. Loading them directly onto the crossbars, hull up, is often the best option. Some sit-on tandems will load well into saddles, rarely J-Cradles.

Sit-in-side tandem kayaks are best loaded onto saddles or J-Cradles. Longer kayaks must be secured very well, bow and stern, to the bumpers of the car. Typically you will be able to load only two sit-in-side tandem kayaks per car. Two tandem sit-on-top kayaks will fit per car, if they are stackable hull up, or, if your car is outfitted with long bars and saddles for deck-up loading.

Whitewater Kayaks:

Both sit-in and sit-on white water kayaks are best secured sideways using a stacker or J-Cradles. Remember that each kayak should be independently tied down with its own pair of rack straps. Firm flat bottom kayaks can be loaded deck up on crossbars. Whenever practical short white water kayaks should be secured, bow and stern, to the bumpers of the car.

Surf Skis:

Long skinny sit-on-top surf skis for racing and speed are best transported in kayak saddles, or in J-Cradles. Because surf skis are so skinny and light you may be able to get as many as four on one vehicle. Surf skis are fragile and must be protected from the stress and strain of car topping. Pay special attention to point loading of the hull, over tightening of tie downs, and prevent see-sawing when on bumpy roads. Longer kayaks should be secured, bow and stern, to the bumpers. This can be a challenge for surf skis, as they may not have the grab handles common on touring kayaks. Also extra care should be taken not to over tighten bow and stern lines, as this will bend the kayak.



Surf Kayaks:

Surf kayaks are much like white water kayaks. As such a stacker, possibly J-Cradles, could be used. Sit-on-tops with flat gunwales (load hull up) and sit-in surf shoes with flat hulls (load hull down) might be placed directly onto **padded rack bars**. Figure two surf kayaks per car, hull up or down, maybe as many as four per car when loaded sideways. Surf kayaks with fins are a two-edge-sword. The fins are fragile and sharp, so close loading can be a problem, remove them if necessary. Fins can help prevent the kayak from slipping out of its tie downs. Place the kayak with fin(s) to the back, and strap forward of the fins, to prevent the kayak from moving forward if the car comes to a sudden stop. If set up with 3 fins try to run the strap between them for extra security. If possible surf kayaks should be secured, bow and stern, to the bumpers of the car.



Wave Skis:

Wave skis, sit-on-top surfing kayaks, can be loaded similarly as surfboards, but wave skis have foot straps and seat belts to contend with on the deck. Wave skis are best loaded hull up, or down, directly onto padded rack bars. I recommend that you do not use stackers or J-Cradles, unless you have soft chine plastic skis. Generally speaking you can load two wave skis side by side. You may stack a second layer of skis on top by placing padding (**OK Soft Rack**) between the 1st row and 2nd row. Largest skis on bottom, smaller skis on top.

A third layer is not necessarily advisable, even though you may still have weight capacity for 6 skis. Remember that each ski should be tied down with its own pair of rack straps. It is not practical to secure the bow and stern of skis to the bumpers of a car. The leash anchor can be used, for a bumper tie down if you feel it is necessary. Take extra care to fasten the waist belt in a manner that will not let it flap with the wind. A loose seat belt buckle can do some damage to the ski or the car's paint job. A bungee to the foot straps can help with this issue.



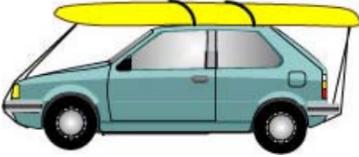
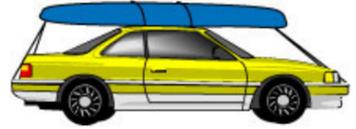
Canoes:

Canoes are best loaded directly onto cross bars, hull up, on their gunwales. In most cases you will only be able you fit one canoe per car, except with the widest of bars. A canoe should not be loaded onto a kayak saddle. Yes, they may fit some saddles, but the tie down straps will put too much stress on the gunwales, distorting them inward, and this could cause damage to the canoe. Canoes should never be loaded on the side. **Foam canoe blocks** are often the best way to load a canoe.

Automobile Types & Placement Recommendations:

Different vehicle types have different abilities, pros and cons, as they apply to the kayaker. The best kayak car is actually the car you drive every day. No need to go out and purchase a new car for your kayaks, you will only be car topping once a week, or probably just a handful of weekends per year. Make your car work for the kayaks you paddle. On the same note, don't buy a kayak to fit your car. Some people think that because they have a small car, they need a small kayak. All you need is a red flag, if the kayak hangs past the back bumper. Get the most appropriate kayak for the type of paddling you plan to do, and then set up the car with a rack to handle that kayak.

Sedans - Sedans are very popular, get good mileage and in general are practical. A sedan can typically handle two sea kayaks or rec kayaks (one canoe) when outfitted with a **sport rack**. Wider luxury sedans may be able to handle three kayaks. A two-door sedan will often have cross bars spaced very close. The two-door needs to have a SRA (Short roofline adaptor) to space the bars wider for carrying long loads. A sedan has a trunk, great for loading wet paddle gear. The trunk will prevent use of rollers, so select an **extension bar** for help with lifting heavy kayaks.



Hatchbacks - A Hatchback car is much like a sedan in many respects, easy to reach the roof, small and efficient, reasonable storage for cargo. Some hatchbacks are two-door and need to have an SRA (**Short roofline adaptor**) in order to carry a canoe or kayak. In general you will be able to load two kayaks, or one canoe. A hatchback car is a good candidate for **rollers**, but an **extension bar** can be used.

cannot reach, but for the most part kayakers hardly ever need to travel off road. A SUV can typically handle two sea kayaks or rec kayaks (one canoe) when out fitted with a sport rack. Wide and tall SUVs may be able to handle 3-4 kayaks. The height of a SUV is a mixed blessing. It is hard to lift a kayak that high, but you can use extra long bars, above head height, to make more space for kayaks. If you have trouble reaching that high, consider bringing along a small stepladder, or you can stand on the wheel. Many SUVs are well suited to **rollers**, as long as the rear crossbar can be placed very far aft. Alternatively you can select an **extension bar** for help with lifting heavy kayaks. Some SUVs have plenty cargo space, others are a bit small inside, but assuming two paddlers, there should be enough room for two people's gear. Never try to transport a kayak inside your SUV. Chances are you will break the windshield, just slipping the kayak in (I have seen this happen more than once), or in a worse case scenario the load can shift while driving and injure you.



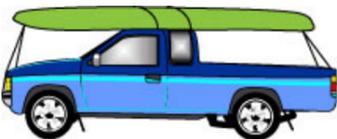
Minivans - In my mind the minivan is the best for the serious kayaker. The one big plus is the internal cargo space. In fact a van is like a small room on wheels, enough space inside to change into and out of a wet suit! (*Tip: take out a row of seats.*) The down side to a van is the height. Fortunately vans are well suited to **rollers**, as long as the rear crossbar can be placed very far aft. Alternatively you can use an **extension bar** for help with lifting heavy kayaks.

Vans are generally wide and that means you can use extra long bars, possibly above head height, to make more space for kayaks. Most vans can carry two sea kayaks or rec kayaks when outfitted with a **sport rack**, possibly 3-4 kayaks if folding **J-Cradles** are used (1-2 canoes on bars). Vans are tall - a small stepladder on board could be wise, or you can stand on the wheel. Never try to transport a kayak inside a van. You might break the windshield, just slipping the kayak inside, or worse yet the load may shift while driving and cause trouble. A panel van is much like a mini van when it comes to car topping boats.

Station Wagon - Whatever happened to the station wagon? A good car for paddlers if you ask me. Low to the ground, wide enough for two canoes side by side, or 2-4 kayaks and lots of cargo space in the back. A station wagon is a good candidate for **rollers**, but **extension bar** can be used too.



Trucks - Some folks think a pick-up truck can carry a kayak well in the bed. Maybe this is true for some, but most truck beds are 6-8 feet, while most kayaks are 10 to 16 feet. A long kayak will not fit in the bed of a pick-up truck. It will stick out so much that the kayak will want to tip and drag on the ground behind.



Plan B is to lash the kayak, or canoe, on the cab and the tailgate. This angles the kayak high up in the wind stream, extra stress on the tie downs, and makes it vulnerable to low overhangs, not good. Your best bet is a pipe rack or plumber's rack, the kind that contractors have. Yes, there are sport version truck bed racks too, and they can be better for kayaks. A contractor's rack often has side rails or posts that interfere with car topping boats. With a pipe rack you can load a bunch kayaks, as weight would not be much of an issue, maybe even some short 9-foot rec kayaks in the bed too.

A truck with a good rack can carry two canoes side by side. **Rollers** are a good option over the tailgate. No need for an extension bar. A single rack bar, or two on an extended cab, coupled with an arch over the bed make for an excellent kayak rack too. An El Camino type mini truck would have similar capabilities, on a much smaller scale.

Jeeps - An open ragtop Jeep with roll bars can pose a problem for the car topper. At first glance you think that the roll bar will work great. Two roll bars can be utilized much like two rack bars. The problem that comes up is many Jeeps have only one roll bar; the windshield is the second support. The plan here is to secure the kayak well to the roll bar, placing most of the weight on it. The windshield frame should be padded with a crossbar pad, or heavy-duty large diameter tube wind insulation (pool noodle). The kayak **MUST** be tied bow and stern to the bumpers as well as in the middle, to the roll bar. Fortunately Jeeps have lots of tie down access. In this configuration I expect you will only be able to load one kayak, or canoe, possibly two white water or surf kayaks. Sport racks and their accessories have no roll to play on a ragtop Jeep with roll bars.



Convertibles - A convertible is much like a Jeep. If you are lucky your convertible is outfitted with a roll bar, but probably not. A convertible cannot take a sport rack, nor any related accessories. The key to loading a ragtop is **soft rack foam blocks**, with the top up. A convertible top can support the weight of one kayak, probably not two, certainly not a canoe. Two surf skis or wave skis might fit on the convertible roof. With the top up and locked down, place a foam roof rack block over the windshield, and the second just before where the roof slopes back and down. There are usually a supported, or a single stronger rib, at the back of the roofline, look for this as the strong points. Do not place rack blocks on unsupported fabric. Bow and stern **MUST** be tied to the front and back bumpers, as well as a center strap inside the open doors of the car. Do not try to stand up a kayak in a convertible. Yes, you may be tempted to slip in a surf kayak, or wave ski, like you see in the surf movies, but this can not be considered 100% safe.

Sport Cars - Sports cars and very tiny cars can make car-topping boats a challenge. The problem is the length of the roof, and lack of cargo space. Sure, you might be able to use a SRA, but you might not. It is imperative that you place the supports for the load, sport rack or foam rack, as far apart as possible. Foam block racks may actually get you better spacing than a sport rack, SRA or not. Ironically is a quite common to see a 20-foot long surf ski racing kayak on a small sports car. Bow and stern tie downs **MUST** be used on a short roof vehicle. I doubt you will want to load a canoe, but you may be able to stack two wave skis.

