

Tandem Sit-on-top Kayaking: How To Avoid A Mutiny

By Tom Holtey

Here are some basics taken from his book to help Tandem paddlers get started off on the right "seat."

The popularity of the solo kayak left a void in the assembly of small craft that had once been filled by the canoe; so it seems only natural that tandem sit-on-top kayaks are the fastest growing branch of this new evolution of the sport.

Oddly enough the tandem kayak has brought the technology of paddling full circle to the first human who carved a shallow cockpit in a log to carry a family and their possessions across the water.

Tandem kayakers can talk to each other with ease and work together as a team. Being close and sharing the experience is one of the best motives for using a two-person craft.

Most notably, families with children will be keen to take advantage of tandem kayaks which have multiple seats. This allows adults to keep the kids together and eliminates straying.

A two-seater also makes it possible for a novice kayaker to join an experienced paddler in the enjoyment of a water environment that may be beyond their ability as a solo kayaker.

Whatever your reasons for choosing a tandem sit-on-top kayak, if you do it right you will find tandem kayaking to be a fun and rewarding sport for you and your crew.

THE BIG QUESTION IN TANDEM KAYAKING IS "WHO SITS WHERE?"

There are many ways to address this question. Seating arrangements can be made based on experience, weight, preference, practicality, and maintaining harmony among the crew.

The primary reason for someone to sit in the rear is experience. The person in the back seat steers the kayak. A paddler with more experience will be better able to direct the kayak, making course decisions based on previous paddling situations.

How does one get this kind of knowledge? By sitting in the back seat and steering the kayak of course! On fair weather days it is advisable to let inexperienced paddlers take the steering seat and learn the skills that will enable them to guide the boat wisely.



Sometimes the weight of the paddlers will determine who sits in each seat.

A kayak is best loaded evenly, or if necessary, a bit more weight in the rear. Some tandem sit-on-tops cannot handle the weight of a large person in the front seat. A kayak will handle best if bow is loaded lighter than stern, unless paddling into very strong winds or currents where more weight in the bow is better.

So it is safe to say when in doubt put the larger person in the back and the smaller person in the front. Other reasons to choose front or rear seats are as follows: A person who is handling a fishing pole may want to sit in the bow so the stern paddler, who will have better control of

the kayak, can direct the boat. The same is true for bird watching with binoculars.

Some people just have to be the "captain" (sits in the rear), others just want to be the "crew" (sits in the bow). It may also be a matter of personal preference. If possible, sit where you like it best.

If you must paddle a two-person kayak, solo you will want to sit in the middle seat, if it has one, or the back seat. You will have the best control of your boat by sitting in the middle, good control if you sit in the rear, and poor control if you are in the front seat. You can put a load, such as a cooler or a dog, in the front seat to balance the boat.

When paddling with children you will want to seat them depending on certain circumstances. Very small children are best seated in the lap of an adult. Larger children ride best in their own seats or a suitable storage well on the deck.

In a three-seat kayak, with a party of two adults and one child, put the adults in the front and back seats and the child in the middle. This allows for either adult to attend to the child. If you are one adult and two children then you may put the kids in the front and back seats while you control the boat from the center seat. Putting the children in the bow and mid seats while you sit in the rear helps trim the weight in the kayak properly.

Some times you can put two small children in the same seat. Always bear in mind the weight capacity of the kayak. Also the more wiggling bodies you put on board the greater your chances of a capsize. The weight of kids is not just cargo but a "dynamic cargo" that moves around and leans over the side unpredictably.

You must be prepared to apply all these principles to your seating choices. There are no black and white rules of seating. You must experiment and be flexible with the possibilities depending on the conditions and the passengers involved.

WORKING TOGETHER AS A TEAM

Working together as a team is an important part of tandem kayaking. Following the procedures outlined in my book, being patient with your partner, and communicating are the keys to a successful and enjoyable paddling experience.

The ability to talk to one another is a reason that many choose a tandem kayak. However there is a problem with this notion that has a very simple solution. The front rider is facing away from the rear. The bow paddle's mouth and ears are pointing forward. This makes it difficult for the person in the stern to hear what the bow rider says and be heard when the rear rider is speaking. The solution is for the bow paddler to turn their head to the side when speaking and when they want to hear the back person. This points one ear directly to the stern paddler and directs at least half of their voice rearward.

You and your partner need to communicate about how you intend to handle the boat. The bow paddler is the eyes of the kayak and they need to direct the stern paddler on how to steer the kayak around obstacles that can not be seen by the stern paddler. The front person blocks the view of the rear person.

When it comes to making general decisions about where to go and what course to follow I suggest that you be democratic. This will eliminate "Captain Bligh syndrome" and the resulting mutiny and unhappiness that result. You are a team, make compromises as necessary. Until you and your partner can anticipate each other's moves and goals it will be wise to state your intentions to each other to avoid confusion. Don't be shy. Count out strokes or sing "row, row, your boat" to keep the paddling rhythm. Tell your partner what you wish to do as points of interest present themselves. Indicate to your partner what strokes you want to do to accomplish certain maneuvers. But don't forget to just have fun. That's what it is really all about.

This article is just a basic beginner lesson. There is a great deal more to be aware of to get the most out of your Tandem paddling adventures. You can find help on our forums as well as at your local outfitter who offers kayak lessons. We always recommend finding a good lesson program to participate in, even just to brush up, no matter what your skill level.