

Where to paddle like the pros

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If Bill Mason were alive today, he might not have exchanged his beloved canoe for a kayak. But he would have to admit that the sport he popularized may not be synonymous with Canada for long.

According to Paddle Canada, kayaking instruction is eclipsing canoe courses. While canoe sales in North American are down 20 per cent, kayak buys are up 144 per cent from last year. And when car companies want to convey the thrill of getting outside? They make sure kayaks are strapped to the roof racks in their ads.

Or as Vancouver Island kayak instructor Doug Alderson describes the surging interest in kayaking: "Big time, huge."

Of course, some of the sport's sex appeal comes care of Adam van Koeverden. Canada's Olympic flag-bearer broke his own world record this week with a one minute, 35.554 second paddle across 500 metres in Beijing.

But even if recreational paddlers can't go that fast, Michael Pardy, the Victoria-based head of the Trade Association of Paddle Sports, says kayaks have "come to represent independence, freedom, a certain sort of spontaneity."

Best of all, even when Canadian waters get nippy, you can still steer a kayak on lakes and oceans across the country.

Herewith, seven sublime places to practise your paddling.

DESOLATION SOUND, BRITISH COLUMBIA

When Captain George Vancouver named this sheltered waterway in 1792, he couldn't find much to recommend it. "An awful silence pervaded the gloomy forests," he wrote, "the steep rocky shores prevented the use of the seine, and not a fish at the bottom could be tempted to take the hook." But while there may not be great fishing, Alderson, an instructor as well as the author of *Sea Kayak Around Vancouver Island*, insists that area is spectacularly beautiful. "The green forest comes right down to the water," he says. Also on the rocky shorelines, purple and pink starfish.

For information on kayak rentals and guided tours, visit <http://www.bcseakayak.com>.

BROKEN GROUP ISLANDS, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Part of Pacific Rim National Park, the Broken Group is kayak heaven. Dozens of islands offer protection from the open ocean. Evidence of aboriginal habitation - culturally modified trees, stone fish traps and middens - is abundant. And so is marine life: As Alderson notes, there are small clams and periwinkles, and even the occasional killer whale. Many kayakers access the Broken Group Islands on the M.V. Lady Rose or M.V. Frances Barkley, working freighters that serve the west coast of Vancouver Island and will drop kayakers off close to the islands as well as rent them kayaks.

For information, visit <http://www.ladyrosemarine.com>.

LAKE ATHABASKA, ALBERTA AND SASKATCHEWAN

Sea kayaks aren't just for the ocean. They're equally suited to big lakes. And as the fourth largest in the country, Lake Athabaska is a good spot to test out this claim - along the south shore, you'll see spectacular sand dunes, some as high as 30 metres and stretching for 100 kilometres. "They're moving with the wind something like a metre a year and engulfing the forest," says Laurel Archer, paddling guide, instructor and author of two guidebooks. Organize your own floatplane and kayaks to and from the lake.

For information on kayaking trips, visit Saskatchewan Tourism at <http://www.sasktourism.com>.

PUKASKWA NATIONAL PARK, ONTARIO

One of the wilder parks in the province, Pukaskwa offers kilometres of paddling pleasure along the ancient shoreline of Lake Superior. "It's the remoteness of the location that makes it fantastic," says David Johnston, a sea kayak instructor in Toronto. "You won't find anybody out there." Crystal clear water and white sandy beaches add to the appeal. But be ready for swells of roller-coaster proportions and winds that can keep you ashore one day in three.

For information on fall kayaking in Pukaskwa, visit Naturally Superior Adventures at <http://www.naturallysuperior.com>.

THOUSAND ISLANDS, ONTARIO

There are close to 2,000 islands in the St. Lawrence River between Brockville and Kingston, but you'll be too distracted by the scenery - both above and below water - to keep track. The water is so clear in places that shipwrecks loom clearly. Anne Baxter, the publisher of paddling magazine KANAWA, grew up on the St. Lawrence and still enjoys the islands' "majestic pines set in the rugged beauty of the Canadian Shield."

For information on guided kayaking in the Thousand Islands, visit www.1000islandskayakingco.com.

SAGUENAY FJORD, QUEBEC

Carved by glaciers and stretching more than 100 kilometres into the Canadian Shield, this fjord in the St. Lawrence River is one of the world's longest. Where it meets the freshwater of the Saguenay River, the water is also biologically rich and turbulent. "Its dark, quick-changing water offers majestic scenery, high cliffs, charming campsites and herds of curious Beluga whales," says Serge Savard, a local kayak instructor and guide.

For more information on Saguenay kayak adventures, visit <http://www.caribou-expeditions.com>.

KANE BASIN, NUNAVUT

Since the Inuit invented the kayak, what better place to test it than the High Arctic? This finger of ocean between Ellesmere Island and Greenland harbours icebergs, hanging glaciers and soaring peaks. And there's lots of wildlife. "It's an area that's known for narwhal," says Michael Parady, head of the Trade Association of Paddle Sports. He also says you may spot seals, walrus, polar bears and migrating caribou herds. You will have to plan ahead, though, since many kayaking trips take place in early summer, last up to 16 days and can book up quickly.

For details on trips, visit legendaryex.com.

BURGEO, NEWFOUNDLAND

There are few roads to the southwest coast of Newfoundland. All the more reason to explore by kayak, which Tim Shuff, editor of Adventure Kayak magazine did last September - and when you arrive, he says, the remoteness is part of the pay-off. "You can hike up these big ramps of granite up to 1,000 feet above the ocean and look across the coastline and see nothing but trees and rock and water for as far as you can see."

For more information, visit www.explorenewfoundlandandlabrador.com.