
Words & Photos Travis Frenay

Paddle Prep

As the saying goes, Prior Preparation and Planning Prevents Poor Performance. Here are the six essentials to ensure your next canoe touring adventure is a successful and fun one.



Canoes 'rafted up' (holding on to each craft) means enhanced stability for this touring group.

Testing stability levels of canoes can be awesome fun, plus it enables paddlers to learn their particular canoe's tipping point and handling characteristics.



The Vessel



Top and bottom Canoes are made from different materials, such as Royalex (red canoe) and Kevlar (yellow).

NOT ALL canoes are created equal and these days there's more variety than ever. Here's a breakdown on performance attributes of different craft:

WEIGHT: Canoe construction varies from heavy and durable materials such as polyethylene and aluminium to space age ultralight materials such as Kevlar, carbon-fibre and Innegra. Essentially, the lighter the canoe, the lighter your wallet. The lighter a canoe, the easier it is to paddle — as well as to handle off the water, so you'll probably use it more often.

STABILITY: The width (or beam) of a canoe typically affects its stability. Wider means more stable, but slower through the water. Another factor that influences stability is the hull shape; a flat-bottomed boat may feel stable but it may be susceptible to capsizing when confronted by waves or boat wash.

SPEED: The length of boat usually contributes to straight-line speed. In theory, a longer boat should be faster.

CAPACITY: A boat's capacity is dictated by its overall internal volume. A short, narrow boat will have limited capacity whereas a long, wide boat obviously has more. The height of a canoe's sides (its freeboard) also contributes to capacity.

SUITABILITY: Some canoes are designed to do certain things well which can make them unsuitable for other pursuits. If you're heading into moving water (rapids) then a short boat with high sides that is very manoeuvrable will be most suitable. An 18-foot fibreglass canoe with a flat hull can be disastrous in such conditions. If you're taking the whole family on a weeklong flat-water journey, then a long, wide boat with massive capacity will be the best choice.

PADDLE CHOICE is important. Paddles, like canoes, vary greatly in weight, cost, durability and function. Using a quality paddle in a basic canoe can really improve the experience. The opposite is also true. These days, it's common to look at canoe paddles in a shop and see a variety of shapes, materials and lengths. Here's why:

MATERIAL: Traditional aluminium paddles with a plastic or fibreglass blade still work as well as they always did, but they're heavy and the aluminium can be cold to the touch. Timber feels warmer and has a nicer feel to it thanks to flex. Timber is also lighter than aluminium and cheaper than carbon-fibre but it requires care and maintenance. Carbon-fibre, Kevlar and other composite materials are incredibly stiff and light but are also very expensive.

SHAPE: A standard paddle will usually have a straight shaft, a T-style grip, and a blade that is either flat or slightly scooped which gives one of its sides more pulling power. Some paddles are bent, which means that the blade leaves the shaft at a bit of an angle. These paddles are ideal for forward paddling as the bend in the blade helps ensure you're pushing water straight back when you're in the strongest phase of the stroke. It can be used in the stern for steering but is not ideal. Traditional paddles with a long, thin blade are typically made of wood and are ideal for linking strokes under the water where the blade is sliced, or feathered, rather than lifted out for recovery. ➤

Using a quality paddle with your canoe can vastly improve the experience.



Paddles



Paddlers learning to solo paddle Canadian style.



Two paddlers demonstrating how to gracefully move a canoe sideways.

Local canoe/kayak clubs are a great source of paddling knowledge

Skills

MOST PEOPLE are able to hop in a canoe and make it go, but canoes are more complicated to paddle than a typical kayak, so you'll need to learn the right technique to make them go straight. There are plenty of books and videos on the subject, and there are instructional courses that teach canoe-specific skills. Local canoe/kayak clubs are another great source of knowledge and are a great way to connect with other paddlers. Accredited courses through Australian Canoeing are ideal for those who want to become guides or instructors. Whatever path you choose, essential skills include:

PADDLING TECHNIQUES: Forward stroke, J-stroke, Sweeps Stroke(s), Emergency Stop and Low Brace. It certainly wouldn't hurt to learn some draw and pry strokes as well.

RESCUE TECHNIQUES: Deep Water Rescue (assisted), Deep Water Rescue (unassisted, or Self-Rescue) and Shoreline Rescue are all very helpful.



YOU CAN CARRY a lot of gear in a canoe but it's not going to do much good if it gets wet or you lose it. The rule-of-thumb in paddling is that you should always be prepared for a capsize, so make sure all of your gear is packed in such a way that it will remain dry if you tip over or cop some heavy rain.

PLASTIC BAGS: Your local vet can be a good source of waterproofing equipment; 'dead dog bags' are large, heavy-duty, plastic bags. It sounds a bit morbid, but with two of these you can double-line the inside of nearly any duffel or backpack, twist the tops closed tightly, and keep your gear dry for less than \$10. Items such as sleeping bags should also be packed into their stuff-sacks with a plastic bag liner to be absolutely certain that they'll stay dry. This method of packing also traps pockets of air inside the bag, making them buoyant.

DRYBAGS: With a roll-top enclosure, drybags are ideal for waterproofing. They vary greatly in terms of durability and performance, and they only work well when they are closed properly. Some drybags are available with a backpack harness, so lugging them around is easy.

BARRELS: Another option is an old plastic barrel. A 60L barrel is a good size for canoeing; they have the added benefit of protecting food items from scavenging animals in the campsite. ➔

Waterproofing

Comfort

CANOES ARE the packhorses of the water so there's no need to go ultra-light and skimp on comfort. If the weather's bad or if the campsite isn't great then sometimes a few creature comforts can really help to raise your spirits. Here are just a few ideas:

ESKY: An esky is a perfectly good choice for canoeing. It allows you to enjoy cold food and drinks that otherwise wouldn't be possible. As a bonus, it also makes a good makeshift table or seat.

SITTING: Folding chairs fit nicely into canoes and there are small roll-up or folding tables that allow you to create a very comfortable dining setting out bush. A

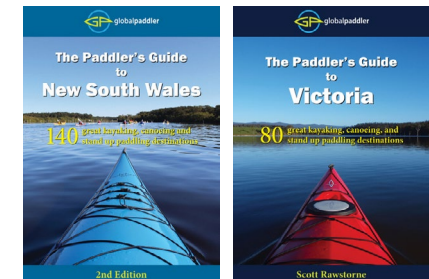
hammock is a lovely place to relax and doesn't take up too much space.

COOKING: A camp oven offers a unique method for cooking or baking and is a welcome addition to a canoe journey.

ENTERTAINMENT: Books, balls, frisbees or other toys all fit well and add to the fun. I own a small-sized guitar that I put in a drybag and bring along on some canoe trips. The possibilities, thanks to the capacity of the canoe, are almost endless. Just make sure that whatever you bring, you're not negatively impacting on the experience of the other users around you, or causing damage to the environment. Just because a chainsaw will fit in your canoe doesn't mean you should bring it along.

Canoes are the packhorse of the water, so that means you can afford not to skimp on comfort and make the most of that pristine campsite.

Paddle destination guidebooks, such as the Global Paddler series, are ideal for canoe journey planning.



Essential info

SO YOU'VE GOT all the gear and are raring to go, but how do you find out important details about specific paddling destinations? And what are those important details?

QUESTIONS: Where are the launch points? Where are other access points or evacuation points? What are the best routes and how long are they? Is it a round-trip or an out-and-back venue? Where are the campsites located and what are they like? What's interesting to see? What amenities (if any) are available? Where can I source fresh water? Where is the nearest town? When is the best time of year to go? Who manages the waterway and the land around it? Are there areas to avoid? What hazards can I expect to encounter? Where can I find about water levels/river heights/or tide movements?

Some of these questions won't be applicable every time, but seeking this kind of information, through online paddling communities and guidebooks, can certainly help to set you up for a successful trip. [📍](#)