

liquid love

Australia is set for an open-boat revival, with countless rivers waiting to be explored. But before you hit the water, there are a few things to know about paddling with a single blade, including how to get a grip and master the essential J stroke.

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Trav and Pat paddling a Graphite Ultra-lite Minnesota II, Jeremy & Kent paddling a Barracuda Spirit II - on the Upper Shoalhaven River Gorge.

OUR tradition of open-boat paddling stretches back beyond recorded history — indigenous people began using dugout canoes in the 17th century, but they were getting around in bark boats for millennia prior to that. Yet modern Australia lacks the canoe culture of North America, where a love of open boats is woven into the fabric of outdoor communities.

This is partly because our population is concentrated along the coast, the natural habitat of sea kayaks and ocean skis. However, we also have numerous rivers, lakes, dams and estuaries that are ideal for canoeing and right now these are primarily the preserve of school groups and Duke of Edinburgh participants, noisily splashing around in big, plastic Wobbegongs.

These rivers are screaming out to be explored further, by paddlers in proper touring boats, on small independent missions to follow the flow

and camp on the banks as people have done for thousands of years.

From the small town of Robertson, in NSW's Southern Highlands, one bloke is spearheading a canoe revival. Travis Frenay is an upstate New Yorker, born and bred on the shores of Oneida Lake, who — when he's not teaching canoeing techniques to TAFE outdoor rec students — is championing the opportunities offered by open boats and single-bladed paddles.

First up, here's a disclosure: Travis brings Wenonah Canoes into Australia. However, his missionary zeal is not that of a self-interested salesman.

"I just couldn't believe how few people paddle canoes here," he says, when we hit the Shoalhaven River for a canoeing skills session cunningly disguised as a four-day, three-night downriver tour.

The Shoalhaven, which dissects Morton National Park, is a classic example of a waterway perfect for canoe touring. The upper reaches

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boast challenging rapids and this section is regarded as the best downriver trip in the region for experienced paddlers. On the middle section, just above the dam at the confluence of the Kangaroo River, the water sprawls out to form meandering Lake Yarrunga, with numerous calm nooks and crannies ripe for exploring and bush camps perched under the awnings of the ruddy escarpment.

We spend two of the next four days practising flat-water techniques here. Below the dam, the lower section offers yet more rapids, and this is where we put in for the moving-water portion



SIX OF THE BEST

- GLENELG RIVER**
FORMING PART of the border between South Australia and Victoria, this river offers an easy multi-day paddle with dedicated canoe campsites along the way.
- SNOWY RIVER**
(MCKILLOPS BRIDGE to Buchan River Confluence) — History, romance and rapids, an absolutely classic downriver run in East Gippsland, Victoria, with challenging rapids up to Class IV at times.
- BLACKWOOD RIVER**
PADDLE ALONG a beautiful river in the south-west of Western Australia.

- HUON RIVER**
VARIOUS SECTIONS provide a range of conditions on this historic Tasmanian waterway, with Scotts Peak Dam to Tahune Bridge offering experienced paddlers a two-day, 60km stretch with Class III rapids.
- KATHERINE GORGE**
KATHERINE GORGE, Northern Territory — Multiple sections offer flat-water paddling in Top-End terrain.
- NOOSA RIVER**
DAY TRIPS and overnight adventures are on offer in the hinterland behind Queensland's Sunshine Coast.

Note: These rivers are all potentially challenging and dangerous, and can change dramatically after rain. They should only be attempted by competent canoeists who have done their research. A brilliant resource for checking up-to-date levels and conditions on rivers around Australia is www.adventurepro.com.au/paddleaustralia

DIFFERENT STROKES

“Canoe strokes should be about finesse and efficiency, not panic and sudden movement,” Travis stresses. Practice is the key, and following are the basic skills and strokes you’ll need to master. For most of these strokes, you need to be travelling faster than the flow: the golden rule is keep paddling.

➤ BASIC FORWARD STROKE

Naturally, you want your big muscles to do the grunt work. With all forms of paddling this means getting your core muscles working. No matter how impressive your guns are, if you try and paddle solely with your arms you’ll tire quickly. To paddle efficiently your shoulders and whole torso should be rotating, with your arms keeping the paddle in the correct position and lifting the blade out of the water at the end of the stroke. Use your lower hand to keep the blade parallel to the gunwale as it passes through the water, and drive the power of the stroke from the top hand, rotating your shoulders as you do so and engaging those abs. Ideally you’ll be turning your torso to the extent that both arms will be outside the gunwale throughout the stroke and the shaft will remain vertical. You get the most bang for your buck at the start of the stroke, so putting the blade into the water as far forward as you can is a good way to maximise your return.

➤ RUDDERING

A trailing stroke, where solo paddlers or the person in the stern of a tandem boat use their paddle as a rudder. Pivot the blade into a vertical position by pointing the thumb of the top hand toward the sky. Initiate the stroke by either pushing the blade away or by pulling it towards the boat. The boat will pivot around the trailing paddle and turn right or left depending on which way you position the blade. This produces good, fast results if the boat is moving quickly, such as going through a section of rapids, but it also creates drag so isn’t an ideal method of steering during flat-water paddling.

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of my education — straight into a feisty stretch of challenging whitewater.

CANOE V KAYAK

Accompanying us are several of Trav’s current and former TAFE students and two fellow outdoor instructors, both called Matt and both from the UK, where canoeing is widely taught and enjoyed.

Matt 1 is an all-round paddler and a devout open-boat enthusiast, cut from the same cloth as Trav, but Matt 2 is more of a climber and a kayaker, and as we gear up he poses a common question: “So tell me again, why are we taking canoes, not kayaks?”

The reasons are many. Canoes can carry far more equipment than kayaks, making them ideal boats for touring and multi-day river expeditions. Most of your gear should be stored in barrels or dry bags, but there’s always room for luxuries like

camp chairs and, in our case, the world’s biggest coffee pot. Canoes are also great for families with kids (and/or dogs), as you can easily take them along.

Once fundamental skills have been mastered, you can take a canoe into more places than most kayaks. They can be portaged by individuals across or around sizeable sections of water that can’t be paddled, and you can even sleep in them at the end of a long day, and be lulled off to slumberland by the rocking of the water under a tapestry of stars. Yep. I tried it. It’s awesome.

DESIGN BRIEF

Canoes come in a variety of designs, reflecting the range of intended purposes, from racing to fishing, touring to running rapids. River-touring boats are longer and shallower, with a flatter underside and lower gunwales to reduce wind resistance. They’re faster across flat water, but

less responsive and manoeuvrable. Typically, they have better initial stability but poorer secondary stability.

River-running whitewater canoes (as opposed to the tiny C1 boats used in slalom racing and high-volume whitewater) are shorter, have steeper sides and a more pronounced “rocker” (meaning the bottom is curved), which makes them much more manoeuvrable when you’re executing sudden, fast turns to follow a chosen line through a rapid. They tip quite easily, but their secondary stability is good — you just have to trust it.

Different paddles are used for each style of paddling. Whitewater paddles are generally heavier and more solid. They have straight shafts and squarer, wider blades for fast strokes and cranking turns. Touring paddles are longer and lighter, with thinner blades often offset at an angle. Classic variations include ottertail and

➤ THE J STROKE

With a single-bladed paddle, unless you alternate sides every stroke, you’re going to be pulling multiple strokes on one side of the canoe. In a double it’s no big deal, just make sure you paddle on opposite sides. In a single, you’ll to end up going in circles.

The technique employed to avoid going in circles, or snaking along in a big S-shape if you do regularly swap sides, is called the J stroke. To compensate for the one-sided propulsion, rotate the paddle at the end of the stroke, turning your top thumb downwards until the open face of the blade is parallel with the canoe, then flick it outwards to subtly kick the front of the boat back straight. Looking at the stroke from above, it draws the letter ‘J’ (or a backwards J) on the water’s surface. You may have to relax your top hand’s grip on the paddle during this action, allowing the T to swivel slightly in the palm of your hand to avoid discomfort in your wrist. Some paddlers perform small correcting J actions with each stroke, while others use a more pronounced J kick every third or fourth stroke.

The concept is simple and when watching experienced paddlers perform this stroke it’s barely perceptible, but this technique takes time to perfect. Once you understand the principle, you have to practise it and eventually it becomes second nature. Remember to work on perfecting your technique on both sides — although you’ll probably favour one side, you’ll need to alternate occasionally to avoid fatigue and to compensate for wind and waves.

➤ THE TRAILING J STROKE

Lying somewhere between a rudder stroke and a J stroke, the trailing J employs the same principle and technique as the standard J, but it’s performed further back and has a more pronounced and immediate effect. It’s a very effective stroke if you want to make a turn on your paddling side, but does create significant drag and slows the boat down.



Travis, Kent, Jeremy, Matt, and Lewis make their way down the calmer waters of the Lower Shoalhaven River

DIFFERENT STROKES (CONT'D)

➤ **THE C STROKE**
Starting with a similar action to the bow draw (below), this stroke then moves through a standard forward paddle and ends with a J stroke, completing the shape of a C in the water. It enables solo canoeists to turn on the same side they're paddling on, and is also useful for getting going from a standing start when you want go forward by paddling on one side without veering off course.

➤ **SWEEP STROKE**
Extend your paddle out wide into a sweeping arc, keeping the blade close to the surface. It's used to turn the boat to the left or right (away from the side you're paddling on) while canoeing on reasonably flat water.

➤ **REVERSE SWEEP STROKE**
As with the standard sweep, but going from back to front, this stroke turns the canoe towards the side you're paddling on. In tandem, the sweep strokes should be completed by both paddlers at the same time, on opposite sides in opposing directions, and should be focussed at the ends of the boat (between the tip of the boat and their hip – but not in the middle).



Lewis showcases his solo canoeing skills in a Recon on the second rapid of the Lower Shoalhaven River

beavertail-style paddles, which are elongated and can be used with a much smoother cadence. Wood, carbon, plastics and metals are all used, but wooden paddles are favoured for their warmth, flexibility and durability.

BODY POSITIONING & BOAT LOADING
Where and how you sit in the boat will affect how your canoe performs, how responsive it is, and how it tracks through the water. “Body. Boat. Blade. That’s my order of priority when I’m teaching students,” says Matt 1.
Get a grip: Grasp the T-grip at the top of the paddle in one hand and the shaft of the paddle in the other, with your elbows slightly bent. Swap hands when you change sides. You can do every stroke needed without ever turning the paddle around and you can make your canoe do almost every manoeuvre without swapping sides. It’s important to keep hold of the grip at all times, especially in rough water, to avoid braining yourself or a fellow paddler.

Keep trim: In a double canoe it’s ideal to have the heavier paddler in the back, otherwise steering can be challenging. When touring with significant amounts of gear and water, distribute the weight appropriately in the boat. Adjusting the “trim” of the boat involves moving the gear in the canoe forward or back to help deal with prevailing natural conditions, such as high winds.
Bum or knees: You can either sit or kneel in the canoe. Kneeling gives you a slightly lower centre of gravity, which helps with stability in rough water, but on longer trips it can be more comfortable to sit. Experienced solo paddlers kneel with their legs together and pointing towards the side of the boat they are paddling on, which helps keep the boat straight and lifts one side of the canoe out of the water (heeling it over) to decrease drag and improve efficiency and speed. Many downriver canoes feature thigh-brace straps that secure kneeling paddlers to the boat to a certain degree, enabling them to use their full-body strength to turn the boat.

Accomplished canoeists can even roll their boats.
Go against the flow: When eddying in or dealing with any fast-flowing water, no matter how counter-intuitive it feels, it’s imperative to lean away from the flow of the water so the side of the canoe rises high against the flow – if you lean the other way the water will breach the side of the canoe, swamping and potentially sinking it.

SAFETY AND SELF RESCUE
Always wear a helmet and a personal flotation device (PFD) when paddling in fast-flowing water.
Never enter a rapid blind – always scout it first. Even if you are familiar with a rapid, new and dangerous obstacles may have entered the water since you last paddled it.
Learn defensive and aggressive swimming. Defensive: floating on back, legs downstream, feet up, looking downstream, using arms to direct body angle.
Aggressive: floating on stomach, legs downstream, body on surface and angled around 45

degrees to the river current, freestyle swimming technique, looking downstream for any obstacles. Ready to retreat to defensive position if needed.
If you’re in your canoe and come up hard against an obstacle, such as a rock, lean onto it – don’t push away from it or you’re likely to end up in the drink.
If you do end up outside your canoe in moving water then stay upstream of the boat so it can’t pin you to any objects. Grab the end of the canoe that is upstream (hopefully equipped with a swim-line or “painter”) and swim for the bank.
Once on the bank, get a firm footing and hold the rope tightly (do not wrap it around your hands). The canoe should swing downstream into the bank with a pendulum action.

📍 Myriad rivers and waterways are ideal for canoeing. An excellent resource is the Global Paddler, which has guidebooks for NSW and Queensland. www.globalpaddler.com.au.

➤ **BOW DRAW**
Used by the front paddler (in a double) and by solo paddlers to achieve a sharp turn towards their paddle. Dig the paddle into the water on the side you are already paddling on, with the paddle entering the water at about a 45-degree angle to the boat and with the business side of the blade facing forward. Bring your top hand across your chest, then push the paddle towards the front of the canoe with your lower hand. Lean into the stroke slightly and use your upper body weight to push through the stroke, but do not overextend your reach or you may pop a shoulder. Remember, during this stroke the thumb on your top hand needs to be facing downwards. In a tandem boat the stern paddler will complement this stroke with a forward sweep.

➤ **CROSS BOW DRAW**
Used for the same purpose as the bow draw, but to turn the canoe in the other direction, this involves performing a stroke on the opposite side of the boat without changing the position of your hands on the paddle (ie, whatever hand you have on the T stays on the T). Place the paddle in the water on the opposite side to the one you’ve been paddling on, at a similar angle to the boat and with the blade facing forward, and use your lower hand to pull it towards the front of the canoe while pushing into it with your shoulder (again, don’t overextend your reach). In a tandem boat the stern paddler will complement this with a reverse sweep.

➤ **BOW CUT AND CROSS BOW CUT**
These strokes are performed in the same way as draw strokes, but instead of moving the paddle you allow the current and the water to do the grunt work, leaving your paddle in position as the canoe pivots around it.