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Volume 14 No. 24
May 21, 2009

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SUMMER GUIDE

From mild to wild in a folding kayak

Calgary's Trak Kayaks takes average urbanites out on the water

Published May 14, 2009 by [Trevor Howell](#) in [Summer Guide](#)

Accommodating one's love of outdoor adventuring in the cramped quarters of a condo or apartment often requires stretching the rules of home décor. Mountain bikes cling to living room walls like art pieces. Camping equipment acts as home cookware and bedding for unexpected guests.



Calgary-based Trak Kayaks' origami-style kayak can go from the closet to the trunk to the water with ease

The urban kayaker, however, can now neatly stow their boat without compromising the Feng Shui of their abode. Calgary-based Trak Kayaks, producers of a 16-foot vessel that folds away into a piece of luggage no larger than a golf bag, is finally giving origami a practical purpose.

"They can stand anything from mild to wild," says Nolin Veillard, Trak's CEO. "If you've got the skills, you can go into the wild waters with these things."

On the surface, the idea of riding a foldable boat down any stretch of water, much less a rapid, sounds far-fetched if not downright ludicrous. To prove its product could withstand extreme conditions, the company enlisted the services of five-time national whitewater kayaking champion Ken Whiting.

Despite years of experience, including successfully navigating some of the world's most challenging rapids, Whiting says he was initially suspect of taking a foldable kayak down the Ottawa River. But his standing order from Trak was blunt: "Break it."

It was an odd request, but the kayak's makers wanted to prove the product, which out of the bag looks more like a tent than any water faring vessel, could hold its own against a traditional hard-shell kayak.

Whiting says he tested the rig in tamer waters before he worked his way "up to stupid," which involved launching himself and the kayak down a Class 5 rapid and headlong into a large rock, breaking the boat's hydraulic system. Mission accomplished. It was, notes a swayed Whiting, a manoeuvre that would have damaged "any normal kayak."

"The whole idea behind it was to build a high-performance kayak that would go in a golf bag," says Veillard, who became involved with the project after meeting with Trak founder Gord Espeseth five years ago in the basement of a house in Saskatchewan.


As a bush pilot and avid kayaker, Espeseth was keenly aware of how inconvenient, and expensive, a kayak's size could be when travelling. Dozens of experiments and untold sums of money later, the pair found the right balance between high quality and portability.

The kayak's frame consists of aero-grade aluminum shock-cords (similar to modern tents but a hell of a lot stronger) and urethane ribs. Stretched around its skeleton is a puncture resistant polyurethane skin — the same material used by the U.S. military for bulk fuel storage — which can withstand more than 110,000 kilograms of weight.

They also developed a unique hydraulic system to stretch the skin and create the tautness and rigidity needed to glide along the water. This system can also change the shape of the boat's keel to make it flatter and faster or conversely curved and more agile.

In 2004, the two entrepreneurs moved the company to Calgary to seek out investors (it now has more than 300). Last year Espeseth handed over the reins to Veillard, but remains a board member.

While the kayak can handle rougher waters, the idea of shooting Class 5 rapids may not appeal to everyone, says Veillard. Instead, he and his business partner, Robert Schmidt, are bypassing the traditional kayaker, who is more likely to buy a hardshell kayak, and targeting the average urbanite. Trak is using the Blue Ocean Strategy, which creates and thus owns an uncontested market space. It's a similar tactic used by Nintendo for its Wii gaming console. Schmidt says the strategy involves finding an underserved customer group — in this case, the

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average urbanite — and offering them a unique, high-end, low-cost product. And it's one that has jumpstarted their sales 120 per cent over the past seven months, he adds. "Most of the people, surprisingly, are 40 years old and beyond and are urbanites."

Anne Braun, who owns two Trak Kayaks with her husband Keith, is one of those urbanites. "We've always been the backpacking, hiking kind of people and we just decided it would be fun to switch it up and try something new," Braun says. "If we decide at the last minute to take the afternoon off, we can have the kayaks in the back of our Murano and be on the road in less than 15 minutes."

The ability to pick up and go just about anywhere is the key selling point, says Schmidt, although he admits the kayak often confuses airport security when the bag is shoved through an X-ray machine. "I don't even argue with them anymore."

However, that doesn't mean you have to go far, as there are plenty of opportunities for kayaking in and around the city.

"You're literally seeing the city from the water, which is a new vantage point. Get out and enjoy it here," says Veillard. "You don't need to go on an exotic vacation somewhere to get on the water — get out on the water in your own backyard."

KAYAKING IN THE CITY

There are a number of places to kayak in and around Calgary that will suit everyone from the first-timer to the Class 5 rider.

- The Glenmore Reservoir can be easily accessed from Crowchild Trail S. and is a great place within the city to get out on the water and sail away from the stressors of urban life. The reservoir also acts as the city's main water supply, so swimming and capsizing are prohibited.
- The Elbow River, from the Glenmore Reservoir down to Fourth Street, is popular with rafters, but the stretch between Fourth Street and Fort Calgary (at the Bow River) gets pretty flat and slow to be much fun.
- The Bow River can be accessed from several launch points, such as below the Bears paw Dam, and you can ride to Prince's Island or further along to Inglewood. Whatever you do, avoid the weir at all costs — getting caught in its hydraulic waves spells certain disaster.

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