



# canoes & kayaks



*Two-person open canoe.*

## what are they?

Canoeing is a generic term for human-powered paddle boating, including kayaking and stand-up paddle boarding. It's the earliest known method of travel on water, pre-dating sail. The kayak ('man-boat') was used in Greenland, North America and Siberia for hunting, fishing and transport, while canoes were used by Polynesians, Native Americans and Maori, for whom it was also a war vessel. Canoes were traditionally made from bark or hollowed-out logs, usually open-topped and built to carry varying numbers of people. Kayaks tended to be one-person and made from animal hide stretched over a wooden frame, leaving only the cockpit open to prevent water from entering.

Canoeing was introduced to the UK in the 1850s by Scottish explorer John MacGregor after a trip to North America. Today you can canoe anywhere there's an authorised access point, including lakes, rivers and the sea. There are clubs across Britain and Ireland, helping to make canoeing accessible for everyone.

There's a huge range of activities and craft to choose from - from white water rafting to canoe sailing, sea kayaking, and surfing, and if that sounds too energetic, you can try stand-up paddle boarding, canoe fishing, canoe trails and touring. Paddles are single-bladed for a canoe or paddle board, double-bladed for a kayak; a kayak is paddled from a seated position with legs out in front, while some racing canoes require you to kneel upright. Both canoes and kayaks can be one- or two-person, but larger Canadian-style canoes are paddled by two people. Commercially-available boats are made from synthetic materials that make them light and durable, but natural materials are still used by some of the dedicated few still using traditional boat-building skills.

## what are the benefits?

Canoeing is a great way to travel (and transport things) on water whilst getting some exercise at a pace that suits you. With such a wide range of activities available, you can choose whatever suits your level of fitness and interests. Paddling is very good for cardiovascular health and lung capacity, as well as building muscle tone and core body strength. Regular physical activity is also known to be beneficial for mental health, and gently floating down the river spotting the wildlife is a supremely therapeutic and relaxing activity in itself. With more extreme forms of canoeing, the adrenaline rush and the feeling of having faced the challenges set by nature and survived can also be extremely life-affirming. Canoeing can also be a good way of engaging young people in physical activity who aren't drawn to, or don't excel at team or track sports.

Provided you follow some basic rules and respect the wildlife and places you visit, canoeing has a very low impact on the environment. Unlike motor boats, paddle boats use no fuel and cause no pollution. There's no wash so they don't contribute to river bank erosion, and they're silent so there's no noise pollution. As with any outdoor activity, canoeing encourages people of all ages to learn about nature by experiencing it first-hand. This in turn fosters respect for the environment and a heightened sense of appreciation of the natural world; and people who love nature are more inclined to value and protect it.



*Hand-built wooden canoe.*



## what can I do?

**Getting a boat:** second-hand ones can be had from around £100, plus a buoyancy aid from £50. Buy quality kit from specialist shops or online, rather than a general sports store. If you want to build your own, there are kits/plans available online. This involves potentially dangerous tools, so you're probably best off starting out under the guidance of a professional.

**Paddling:** if you're new to canoeing, don't just jump into the water on your own. Like driving a car, you need to know the rules of the 'road' and there are skills to master to safely manage a boat. Canoe clubs run introductory days, and let you try a range of boats and activities, with safety kit provided. You need to learn some techniques on flat water first, and most clubs run courses. Clubs are generally voluntarily run and membership fees are reasonable. British Canoeing lists canoe clubs plus trails and activities. You need old shoes and light clothes you don't mind getting wet. Layers are good for your top half, including something wind-proof. Sunscreen and hat are recommended. Take water and food for the time you'll be out, and rented canoes often have a watertight container attached to store food or valuables.

**Access:** a licence is required to access many waterways and this is usually covered by club membership, or British Canoeing membership gives access to 4,500km of waterways in England and Wales. Access to inland water is limited, and almost all tidal waters, including tidal rivers, estuaries and the open sea carry a Public Right of Navigation (PRN), although this may be subject to restrictions and additional fees by the relevant port authority. Most other waterways managed by the Canal & River Trust, the Environment Agency and the Broads Authority can be accessed by licence holders. In Scotland rivers and canals carry a PRN and don't require a licence. See British Canoeing for more details or contact your regional Waterways & Coastal Advisors.

Waterways can only be accessed at approved launch points, often via a public right of way. Take care to stay within the law with regard to private land. There is a drive to register all historic public rights of way. British Canoeing is working with groups like the Ramblers and the Open Spaces Society to map and register all footpaths and access points. Volunteers are always welcome.



Sea-kayaking off the coast of Australia.

**Safety:** paddle on the right; be aware of large craft; check wind, currents and weather forecast, and tide tables when sea kayaking. Rivers in flood must not be paddled. Don't get in the water without first securing and adjusting your buoyancy aid. Most clubs insist you can swim (at least to the bank) while wearing a buoyancy aid.

**Impact:** be considerate to water users, avoid anglers and respect the privacy of those who live along the banks. Check, clean and dry canoes & kit after use to prevent the spread of invasive species or diseases. Launch from the water (rather than sliding down the bank), don't drag boats over gravel beds (there may be fish spawn) and stay away from spawning grounds or nesting sites at certain times of year. Don't crowd animals, block their retreat or cause them to change their course, and be aware that some animals can also pose a danger to you.

## resources

- [lowimpact.org/canoes-kayaks](http://lowimpact.org/canoes-kayaks) for info, courses, links, books, including:
- Bill Mattos, *the Kayaking Handbook*
- Andrew Westwood, *Canoeing: essential skills & safety*
- Mark Scriver, *Canoe Camping*
- Shelley Johnson, *the Complete Sea Kayaker's Handbook*
- Dennis Davis, *Build Your Own Canoe*
- [britishcanoeing.org.uk](http://britishcanoeing.org.uk) - info; list of clubs
- [riversaccess.org](http://riversaccess.org) - campaigning for river access
- [thepaddlermag.com](http://thepaddlermag.com) - for recreational paddlers

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