

Preparation key before getting on water

By Joseph Dowdy

Kayaking is a versatile activity. It can be as peaceful as floating on calm water as you soak in nature or as adrenaline pumping as navigating class five rapids.

For me, I try to keep my kayaking experiences simple and more on the peaceful side of things. One of my favorite things to do on summer weekends is to throw my kayak in the lake and spend the entire day on the water. What I learned over time is that sometimes I tried to keep things too simple and ignored common sense preparation and paid the price with sunburns, loss of gear and other mishaps that could have been avoided. No matter how you intend your kayak experience to play out, every kayaker should adhere to a checklist.

I'm talking about 10 items that every kayaker needs before getting on the water to ensure they'll be prepared for anything and have a positive experience. You may modify this list depending on what you plan on doing but let's start here.



Common safety tips can ensure a kayak goes smoothly. Photo/LTN

Life vest (AKA personal flotation device or PFD) – It goes without saying that every kayaker needs to wear a PFD when they go paddling. It's a safety precaution usually required by law and it's always better to be safe than sorry. They'll help you stay afloat should a capsizing occur and provide an access point for those on a boat or dock to pull you up by the shoulder strap. Many will be brightly colored or have integrated reflective materials so that you can be seen from afar or at night. Every PFD should include a place to clip in a whistle or noise-making device, which can also be required by law.

Paddle – Of course you know you need a paddle to go kayaking. You won't get very far without one. Like PFDs, kayak paddles have been designed for every type of paddler and you should take time to find the one that fits you best. Higher end models will be more expensive but are made of lightweight, durable materials that'll leave you feeling like you can paddle forever.

Paddle keeper – Having a place to secure your paddle is important, especially when partaking in any activity that involves you getting in and out of your kayak, rapids, fishing or photography. Why is it important? Because you don't want to lose your paddle! You can also substitute the paddle keeper with a leash.

Leashes, hooks and clips – A piece of gear escaping overboard is the easiest way to dampen an otherwise great day on the water. Save yourself some worry and lake bottom searching by securing all of your gear onto your kayak. Use a combination of leashes, hooks and clips or carabineers to attach items around your kayak.

Water bottle – It's smart to bring along a bottle of water or Camelbak to drink from even if you're just going out for a light paddle on a cool overcast day. Camelbaks are a great investment for kayakers because they are hands free and allow

you to drink while you paddle. Otherwise, any water bottle will do.

Sandals or water shoes – I can't remember the last time I went kayaking without my sandals and that's because I don't like coming home at the end of a day with a pair of ruined tennis shoes. Unless you capsize or just decide to jump in, you won't get soaked when you go kayaking but it is almost guaranteed that your feet will.

Dry bags and boxes – Whether you're planning on bringing a pair of keys and wallet or a complete change of clothes, you'll need to make sure this stuff stays dry. Kayak and kayaking accessory manufacturers make a wide variety of options and sizes from bags and boxes to small pouches designed to fit the shape of your phone. It's always a good idea to keep the items you use more often in a separate location.

Emergency kit – I started off with a red dry bag (red signifying emergency) and stuffed it with a small first aid kit, flashlight, matches, knife, rope, sunscreen, bug repellent and a rain jacket. Hopefully you'll never have to open this bag, but when you do, you'll know you've got what you need.

Phone – Yes, your phone. While I realize for some the idea of getting outdoors means leaving your electronics behind, bringing your phone with you is a good idea should you get into an emergency situation and need to make a call. It can also serve as your camera too. Protect your phone with dry bag, pouch or box. Trying to avoid emails, texts and phone calls? Simply turn it off and stow it inside your kayak.

Paddling apparel – A pair of cotton shorts and a T-shirt may be just fine, but using apparel designed to get wet and dry quickly will make your paddling experience a more comfortable and safer one. Shop for apparel that is made of synthetic

materials that are capable of wicking sweat off your body and dry quickly. If paddling during the colder part of the year, also stick to synthetic materials but don't forget to layer up.

It shouldn't be hard to find these basic kayaking accessories. Specialty retailers will have all of these items and most will be fairly inexpensive too.

So, next time you go kayaking, be prepared with the right gear and don't learn the hard way like I did.

Joseph Dowdy is an avid kayaker based out of the central Texas area. He has paddled many of central Texas' waterways and has attended and/or participated in many kayak fishing tournaments, races and paddling festivals. He's currently employed at Austin Canoe and Kayak and loves that he gets to spend time working with his favorite toys.