

Paddling in a Quiet World

a course in kayaking with Quiet World Sports



Field Trips

by Alex Rossman

The spring thaw and its liberation of frozen waterways has always been an important time for northern cultures. From Inuit and Eskimo tribes to island residents here in Michigan, the return from ice to water reconnects them with the world. And every spring, slipping their kayaks into streams just as the Native Americans did before them, Bruce Clevenger and his staff at Quiet World Sports reunite with a world all *their* own.

For ten years, Bruce and his staff have been sharing their passion for the sport of kayaking. Located in Jackson, Quiet World Sports is a premier paddling school designed to instruct and empower students to enjoy kayaking on their own. April through August, visitors from Lansing to Louisville make the journey to become better kayakers. Experience levels vary from novice to veteran, and Quiet World Sports has a lesson to suit every need.

Quiet World's staff are knowledgeable in every facet of their sport. Several instructors work in the outdoor products industry and are experts on equipment, while others are well-versed in local lore and Native American history. The guides have explored the world's waterways from Alaska to New Zealand, but are best acquainted with the Michigan lakes and streams closest to their hearts and homes. Bruce and his staff also carry that dedication off the water, serving on a number of local environmental committees and boards.

After a short on-site debriefing, the kayaks and paddles are loaded, and the caravan of megavans rolls

toward a nearby lake. A far cry from the wood and hide kayaks of old, the brightly colored boats look like candy laid out on the green grass. Each boat is specifically geared toward a student based on height and weight, and Bruce and his staff announce the pairings. For first-timers, it holds the same anxiousness of a blind date.

The first lesson begins on shore, with the proper technique for getting into a kayak. The paddle is used as a brace between the shore and the boat, stabilizing the kayak to enter the cock-

pit. Entering and exiting kayaks and canoes is usually the greatest cause of frustration—and an unwanted baptism—so conquering the task immediately bolsters confidence.

Once everyone's on the water, the large fleet is divided into groups of five to ten students based on skill level and class type. The beginner classes are the most popular and are designed to accommodate people who have never been in a kayak before, or that have had limited experience with them. Longer tours encompass both beginner and intermediate lessons and experience both lakes and rivers, while advanced workshops provide polish for more seasoned paddlers.

Each instructor shepherds his or her group to an area of the lake to “raft up,” where introductions are



made and an outline of the day is divulged. The kayaks seem awfully wobbly at first, but the guides are quick to point out the boats' true balance. Kayaks actually sit *in* the water rather than *above* it like canoes, making them more stable.

In the safety of the reeds, the guide explains and illustrates the basic strokes to make a kayak turn, track and glide. Each student then heads onto open water to try his or her hand at it while the guides paddle from boat to boat to observing.

The stability and maneuverability of a kayak is amazing. Paddling amongst the lily pads beneath a clear blue sky, the freedom is exhilarating, and it's hard to imagine a greater way to experience the water. There's no greater feeling than the first smooth, successful glide across the water, skimming across the surface like a skipped stone. The proximity to the water is reminiscent of snorkeling, with every paddled whirlpool leaving seaweed dancing and sunfish darting before your eyes.

After learning and practicing the basic strokes, all the beginner groups band together to observe rescue techniques and capsize recovery. The willingness of the guides varies with the water temperature, but they still dutifully capsize themselves to illustrate the proper ways to recover when alone or with a partner. This is where all the typical concerns regarding kayaking (i.e., being stuck underwater) are laid to rest, and the importance of boater safety and preparation is reiterated.

The final part of the session is perhaps the most exciting. All the groups return to shore, and are provided an opportunity to try any of the other styles of kayak. This allows comparisons between lengths and widths, speeds and stabilities to be conducted firsthand, and lends some free time out on the water. This is one of the activities that sets Quiet World apart. They not only teach kayaking techniques, but also offer their well-seasoned advice on equipment purchases. The

impulse to buy is amazingly strong even after one lesson.

The kayaking bug is quite contagious and quick to take hold. The students most apprehensive to start are usually the last to paddle in, under protest. Many visitors take a beginner class in the spring and are back for an intermediate lesson before the summer's out, while others return year after year. Quiet World's beginner classes are the most comprehensive in the industry, and they also offer private lessons and special family outings for the enjoyment of adults and kids alike.

For more information on Quiet World Sports, visit www.quietworldsports.com or call (517) 750-3498. They're anxious to share their quiet world with you! 🙌

Alex Rossman combines his passion for writing and the outdoors working as a freelance writer in Lansing.

Photo by Lazlo Hunt