

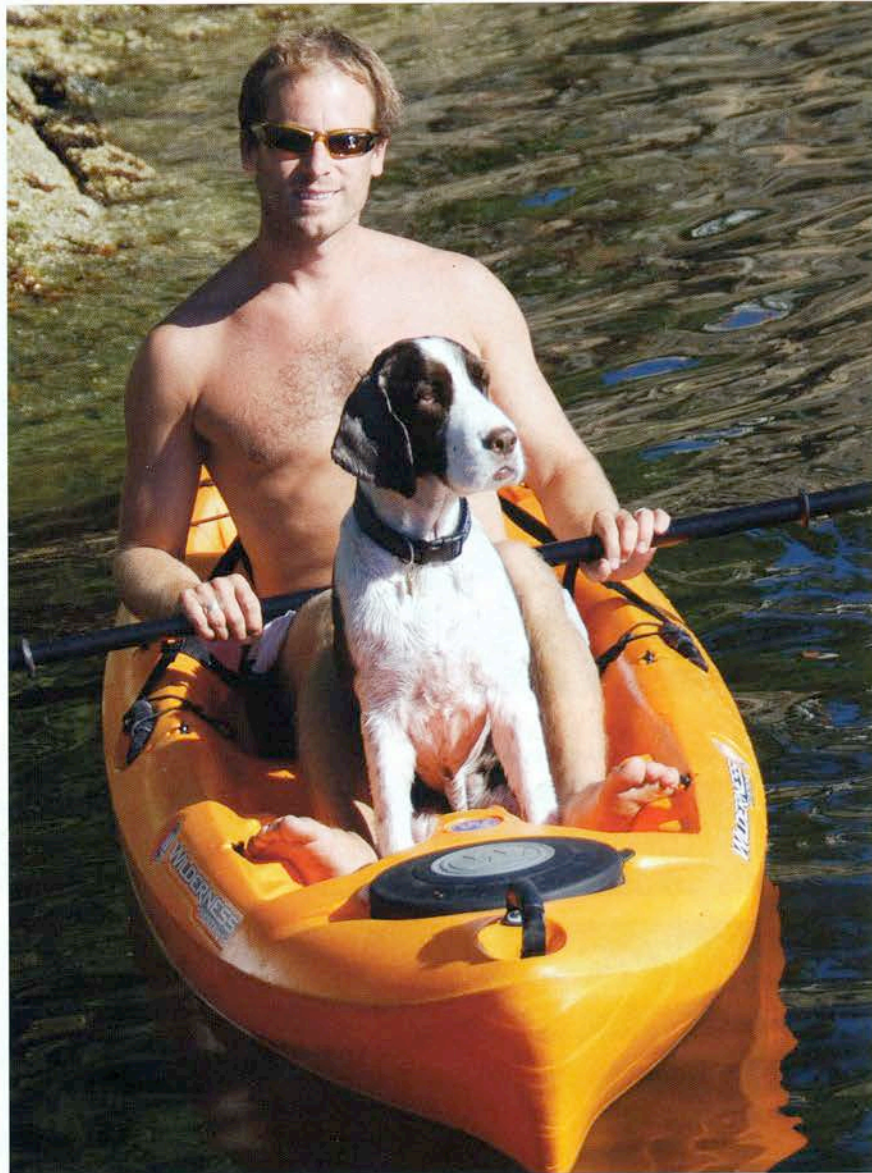
by Shelley Wood

Kayaking is one of those activities I assume I ought to enjoy, but don't. My husband Tyler, by contrast, loves it. He was an avid paddler when we met and at the time I earnestly believed I'd come to like it. Instead, I managed for years to cajole him into doing every other sport I wanted to try without ever having to hunker down in the hull of a kayak.

Then came the summer when I learned, while playing a sport I genuinely adored, that knees are only supposed to bend in certain directions. Diagnosed with a torn ACL and no hope of surgery until autumn, I sulked constantly over my neglected sneakers and rusting bikes until Tyler, seized the opportunity, casually suggested we invest in kayaks as a way to get outdoors and stay in shape.

Within days, two sleek, sit-on-top kayaks were stacked in our garage: sit-on-top because, Tyler argued, they would be much breezier in the heat of summer and our dog would be able to accompany us, nestled between the legs of the more experienced paddler.

Sit-on-top kayaks, which don't >>>



RELUCTANT KAYAKER HAS TO GRIN AND BEAR IT

Kayaking to a secluded beach on Okanagan Lake and camping the night sounds like the ideal romantic getaway. But to me, that's the problem with kayaking — it always sounds better in principle than in practice

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have the skirt to fasten you into the boat, let you feel the wind on your toes while sunburning your shy and tender inner thighs. They are also stouter and more stable than their sit-in cousins — less likely to dunk you.

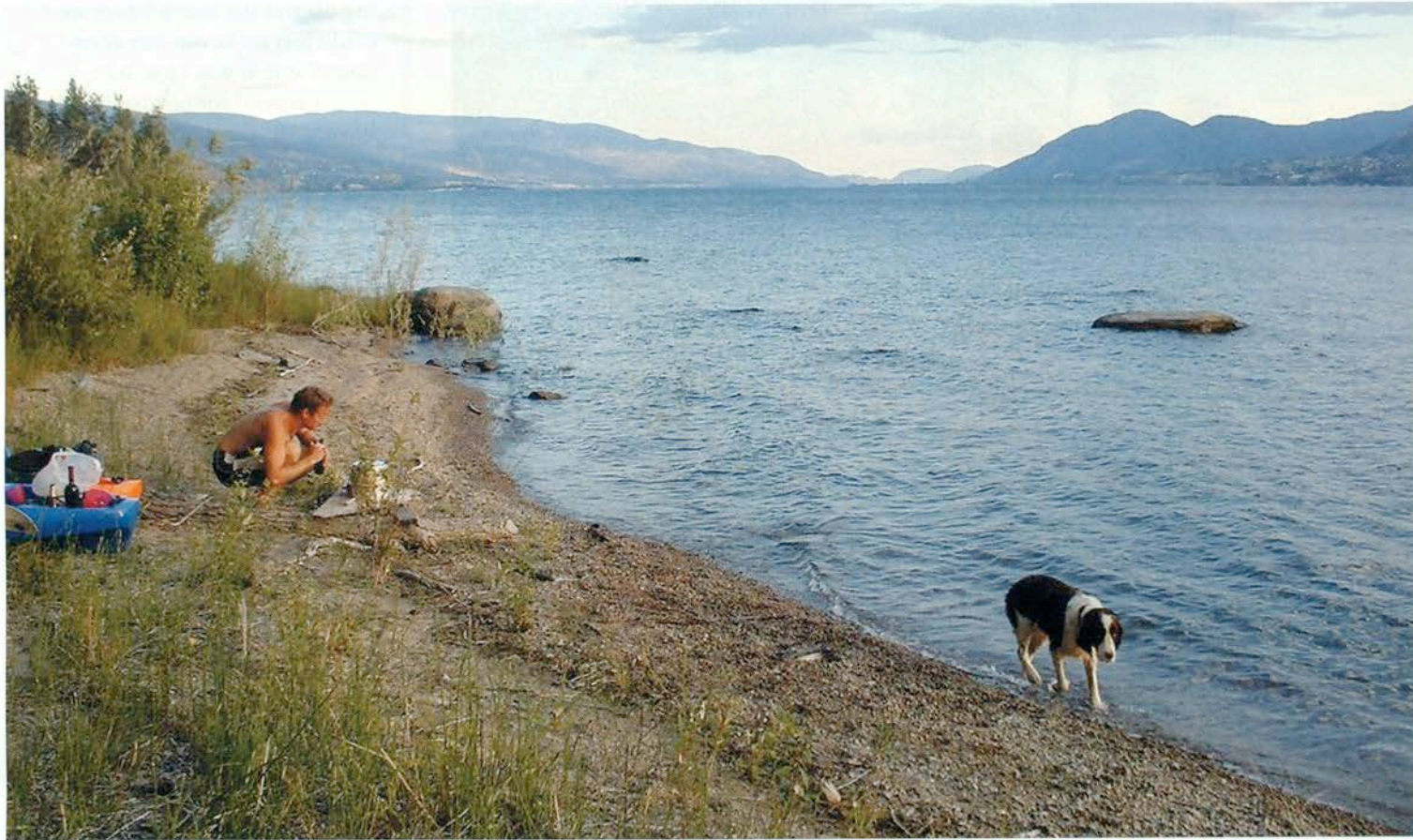
On the downside, they are considerably heavier and slower-moving. If I had initially envisioned us paddling out to dinner in Peachland and back to Kelowna in time for *Grey's Anatomy* reruns, my plans were swiftly squashed on our first outing when I scarcely made it to the other side of the lake before seriously considering asking a powerboat to haul me home.

One midsummer weekend Tyler suggested we paddle to a campsite in Okanagan Mountain Park for the night. A romantic notion. All of our camping equipment, food, and a bottle of wine would fit easily in the waterproof storage holds in the kayaks, and if we put-in at the south end of the park, we could paddle as far or as little as we liked.

By the time we'd pushed off from just north of Naramata, the wind had whipped up and with it, the lake. I was cranky before the water had even soaked my shorts. Tyler may have been envisioning a leisurely two-hour paddle into the sunset, but I made a beeline for the first sliver of beach that looked like it could serve as a campsite.

Things improved considerably on shore. The evening was one of those gilded summer nights that tints everything a coppery red and leaves it fresh-baked warm long after the sun is gone. We swam, pitched our tent, cooked a delicious, if not hard-earned pasta dinner, then washed our pots and stowed them in the sealed hulls of our kayaks. We were snug in our tent, the dog curled at our feet, before the first stars blinked in the sky.

When I woke a few hours later, I blamed my bladder, which demonstrates wide fluctuations in capacity proportional to the amount of effort required to relieve it. I'd wriggled



THE LAST HOUR BEFORE DAWN WAS PUNCTUATED BY SIGHS FROM AN INCREASINGLY EXASPERATED DOG



A NEOPRENE OR RUBBERIZED SKIRT IS USED TO CINCH YOU INTO A SIT-INSIDE KAYAK, TO KEEP THE WATER OUT

out of the tent, crawled back in and was drifting back to sleep when Tyler said: "Did you hear that?"

I did. A rustling of bushes, followed by some clumsy thumping and grunting. Tyler, demonstrating a degree of bravery unmatched by my own, slowly unzipped the door of our tent, switched on his headlamp and squinted towards our kayaks, 20 metres away. He could just make out a bear-shaped shadow snuffling and batting inquisitively at our plastic boats.

Our strategy was to sing — at top volume. Neither of us is particularly tuneful, which we thought might in itself convince the bear to move along. But we were also terrified that the dog, now sprawled like a sultan across our freshly vacated sleeping bags, might wake, bark and draw the bear toward us. Loud singing, curiously, doesn't rouse him. Tyler also managed to scoot out, grab our paddles, return to the false-security of the tent and bang them together as an accompaniment to our bear-scare ditty.

After an eternity, the snorting stopped, although there still seemed to be some ominous tramping and snapping in the bushes now directly behind the tent. In hushed voices we discussed whether to try to go back to sleep — a possibility I saw as roughly on par with me cutting off my own arm to use as a pillow. Instead, in an adrenaline-charged burst, we grabbed paddles, lifejackets and dog, raced for the kayaks, hopped on and pushed off from shore.

Lapped by the lake, the world seemed instantly safer. >>>

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We bobbed in the dark, looking back at the beach where we could just make out our abandoned tent. It was 12:30 a.m.

I was all for just paddling back to the car and retrieving our tent in the morning, but Tyler had other plans. The moon was just rising over the cliff and the lake was an inky mirror: why not paddle? Truth be told, I was wide-awake; there was little chance I'd manage to sleep in the car.

So we continued northward under a full moon, spotting the tents and boats of other campers along the way. For more than two hours, we rippled along the shoreline—a magical midnight glide that I'd never, in ordinary circumstances, have stayed awake for. We hardly spoke, but listened instead to the water lilted rhythmically from our paddles.

At 3 a.m. we permitted ourselves a ration of chocolate, then started back. This might be the proof I needed that everything, even kayaking, improves with practice. Despite the hour, a growing chill and mounting fatigue, we made it to our beach much faster than we'd left it, with at least 45 minutes until dawn. Nothing could persuade me, however, to return to shore before first light—I pictured our bear astonished by his good fortune, curled up in our cozy tent.

After the last few squares of chocolate and an interminable game of 20 questions, punctuated by sighs from an increasingly exasperated dog, we decided it was light enough to beach the boats. Our tent was untouched and try as we might we could find no bear tracks. With my newfound paddling skills, it took a scant 20 minutes to kayak back to the car. We were in our own bed by 8:30 a.m.

Did our midnight adventure transform me into kayak-keener? Hardly. But we now dine out on the story and Tyler says that he'd never have convinced me to do a midnight paddle had a bear not sweetened the deal. **OL**

TIPS

- **Roll baby, roll:** For a sit-in kayak, you have to learn how to do a “wet exit,” to extricate yourself from your boat in the shallows, with a friend supervising, before heading into deeper water. More experienced paddlers can roll their kayaks if they capsize, basically maneuvering their paddles and torsos to right themselves in one fluid swoop.
- **Hope floats:** A life jacket is essential, even on a glass calm lake. Life jacket designs have improved dramatically — getting the right size and shape will vastly improve your time on the water.
- **Stroke school:** To fall in love with paddling, learn how to do it properly. Kayak shops often offer courses and there is a wealth of tips available in books or on the Internet.

Okanagan Trail

ROSE VALLEY REGIONAL PARK

Challenging trails and lake views highlight this West Kelowna hike. Rose Valley is a glacial melt water channel between two steep ridges that was dammed (1949-51) to form Rose Valley Lake, a reservoir for Lakeview Irrigation District. The trailhead is near Goldie's Pond, a great bird watching area also protected within the park. The cool story here is that concerned residents saved this wetland from development by raising funds to buy the property. The park eventually grew from this small nucleus. Be prepared for a steep climb up the eastern ridge. Descend to trails at lake level or stick with the high ground. The cliffs on the west

ridge are punctuated by caves thought to be the result of large air bubbles in the volcanic rock. From Kelowna, follow Westside Road, Bear Creek Road and Parkinson to Goldie Pond, just beyond Rose Valley Elementary School. From West Kelowna, follow Westlake Road to the small parking area. —L.C.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

When buying a kayak, try out a variety before making your choice. Sit-inside kayaks, with neoprene skirts to cinch you into the hull and keep water out, are faster and lighter, letting you feel much more at-one with the water. Sit-on-top kayaks are great for fishing and fun for kids. River and surf kayaks are a whole different breed and require a different set of skills altogether.



IF YOU GO...

Avid paddlers abound in the Okanagan. You can find out about kayak clubs at one of the local kayak and canoe stores, many of which also offer “demo days” to let you try out different boats. Pools and rec centre programs may also offer introductory courses and you can check out the Kelowna Canoe and Kayak Club. <http://business.silk.net/kckc/index.htm>

