

COMPACT PLEASURE FOR THE SPACE-CHALLENGED



SECRETS OF THE FOLDING KAYAK ARE OUT OF THE BAG

My small downtown condo has its limitations – no baby grand, no pool table and no kayak.

Okay, I lied. There's barely enough room to sneeze at my place, but I do keep a kayak at home in two compact canvas bags. They hold my 14.5 kg (39 lb), Folbot Aleut single folded kayak that extends to 3.7 m (12 ft), two inflatable flotation bags, a lightweight two-piece double paddle, a collapsible spare paddle, a collapsible bailer bucket and sponge, two mooring ropes and my personal flotation device.

Assembly of a folding kayak takes about 10 minutes to:

- roll out the Hypalon/polyester skin
- assemble the four-piece aluminum stern and bow sections
- click in the polycarbonate cross-frames
- inflate and insert flotation bags in each section
- slide the two assembled sections inside the skin and lock them together
- click in the middle cross-frame
- cap the cockpit with the three-piece aluminum gunwale washboards
- inflate the two internal side sponsons to tighten the skin and provide extra flotation,
- and
- tie the mooring ropes onto the bow and stern.

Presto, the kayak is fully assembled. Usually, I don't bother to install the rudder that comes with the kayak. Then I am on the water, ready to paddle. Okay, I'm lying again. That's how it should be, but there's a big hitch. Nine times out of 10, someone comes along during assembly and asks me a lot of questions. The queries are often the same and I'm pleased to respond, based upon my years of enjoyable experience.

When I was a pint-sized teenager, I owned a beat-up, old, double folding kayak. More recently, I've paddled a heavy-duty Nautiraider double in waters ranging from Ontario to New York, from Alabama to California, and from Vancouver Island across to Thunder Bay. I am currently the happy owner of a Folbot Aleut single, the one I refer to above.

Following are my responses to those typical questions.

Q. How long does it take to put one together (if you're lucky enough to have no interruptions)?

A. Initially, it might take a half hour or more. Practice makes perfect. You can whittle that down to about 10 or 20 twenty minutes on average. Most folding kayaks have colour-coded and/or numbered parts so there's not much to go wrong.

Q. Who makes folding kayaks, and which is best?

A. There are many manufacturers but only about half a dozen really good ones. The Folbot from the U.S. is my top choice. They give a lifetime warranty, no ifs, ands or buts. You'll notice rugged fittings, tight stitching, smooth welding, and effortless interlocking parts. They are solid quality at a very reasonable price, and they are extremely easy to assemble quickly. What's more, they have a Canadian agent located at Le Faivre, just east of Ottawa, so you can easily get to see the models and experience a demo.



In the higher-price bracket, the Canadian Feathercraft brand is superb — a Rolls Royce of kayaks. I've toured their Vancouver factory and marveled at their quality and precision. The German Klepper is "BMW" quality without a doubt. If you like the aesthetics of wood, look at the superb Nautiraid from France, with its beautiful birch frame. Longhaul in the U.S. makes a kayak similar to the Nautiraid, and some say it is even better quality. The nimble ultra-lightweight FirstLight from New Zealand is also worth considering.

Q. How long have folders been around?

A. Folders were inspired by the rigid Eskimo skin/bone/wood kayaks that have been around for thousands of years. Today's folders emerged in the early 1900s in Europe and have become increasingly popular worldwide as new space-age materials and sleek designs have developed.

Q. What kind of models are there?

A. There are singles and doubles, all ranging from about 3.6 meters (12 ft) to roughly 5 meters (16.5 ft)

Q. How much do they cost?

A. Expect to pay from about \$1,750 to \$7,000 Cdn., or more. "Yikes!" you say? Why pay that when you can get a new injection-molded plastic "Tupperware" kayak for only \$600 Canadian or a used fiberglass hardshell for \$1,500 or less? Because, many kayakers believe a folding kayak offers better handling, better stability, less weight, more convenient storage, longer life, and super portability anywhere by plane, auto, train or bus. For the money-wise, there are often end-of-season and winter sales. You can also shop around (especially online) for used folding kayaks for as low as half those prices. However, folders do keep their value very well over the years.

Q. How much does one weigh?

A. Weight ranges from 7.8 kg (21 lb) for a First Light single to 22.4 kg (60 lb) or more for a Nautiraid double.

Q. How much weight including passenger(s) and gear can they take?

A. My compact 3.6 m (12 ft) Folbot Aleut single has a recommended payload of 93 kg (250 lb). So deduct my weight of about 63.4 kg (170 lb), and there's plenty of room for 26 kg (70 lb) of gear. A double, such as the 6 m (20 ft) Feathercraft K2 Expedition, has a payload of 320 kg+ (700 lb+). Do the math, using your weight.

Q. Can you take a long trip?

A. You bet. Folding kayaks have circumnavigated Australia, England and Ireland and crossed the Atlantic. I've enjoyed numerous 100 km or more trips on waters such as the Rideau Canal and Ottawa River.

Q. Can you take one on a bus, train or airline?

A. No problem. Driving, throw it in the trunk or back seat of your car. Or, car top it fully assembled. They like to fly, too. I recently took my Folbot Aleut on Air Canada from Ottawa to Thunder Bay via Toronto and back — all without a hitch and with no extra baggage charges. Just pad the bags well. But remember, airline regulations about baggage allowances vary, and may or may not be applied rigorously or consistently.

Q. Are they safe?



A. They are very stable and very seaworthy. When compared to hardshell plastic-type kayaks they are reputed to have a significantly better safety margin. How? When encountering a beam wave or choppy seas, the flexible skin and pliable frame of a folder will flex against the water instead of resisting it like a hardshell. Also, most folders, such as the Folbots and Nautiraids, have inflatable sponsons on the interior walls which enhance stability, increase flotation, and minimize bailing if you get swamped. I have never capsized in a folder, even in two-metre swells. However, better safe than sorry. You should learn the "cowboy" and paddle-float self-rescue techniques, as well as how to rescue others. Best of all, take a course with a qualified trainer.

Q. Are they durable?

A. Folding kayaks are typically made of very tough synthetic rubberized materials combined with synthetic deck fabric, plus brutish industrial-strength zippers and Velcro closures. In the product descriptions you'll see such high tech terms as "ballistic denier high tenacity" and polyurethane solution coating, heat sealing, and abrasion resistance. Assemblies are often of anodized aluminum and/or ultra hard, waterproofed birch with brass and/or stainless steel fittings. Some have polycarbonate frame plates. Maintenance? Zero, apart from wiping off sand or mud. In salt water, barnacles are your worst enemy. Corrosion in salt water can be a problem, too. Just hose the frame down after a trip.



Q. What kind of warranty comes with folders?

A. They vary from five years, to a lifetime "no ifs-and-or-buts" of warranty.

Q. Is there room for your camping gear?

A. Yes, absolutely. Just be sure to pack tight and lean, storing the heaviest gear towards the middle and the light stuff towards the bow and stern of your kayak. Use dry bags which also serve as flotation bags. And install low-profile deck bags to hold more gear.

Q. Is handling and performance different than with a hardshell?

A. Folders track very well, saving you a lot of energy by maintaining your course in a cross wind or through choppy seas. Maybe folders are a bit slower than hardshells, but not by much. The beam on a folder is usually wider than on a hardshell. In general, longer folders are faster than short ones — but less manoeuvrable than short ones. In the opinion of some, new folder designs such as the 5 m (16.5 ft) Folbot Cooper with its 0.6 m (2 ft) beam, give performance as fast, even faster than the slickest hardshells. But the trade-off is the narrower the beam, the less the stability.

Q. Can I put a sail on one of them?

A. Yes, there are outrigger float and leeboard kits, small upside-down triangular sail shapes and regular downwind and upwind configurations available for all sizes of folding kayaks. Or make your own. I've even enjoyed umbrella sailing with a kayak. Wow! What a rush!

Q. How does one decide which one to buy?

A. What is your budget? Do you want a double for you and your partner or do you prefer going solo? Do you intend to mostly go on long trips or on short paddles, or both? Do you want to fly places with one? Do you want high performance and speed? Ask yourself these kinds of questions. Then talk to paddlers of folding kayaks that you meet on rivers and lakes, or online in forums. And try different brands and models by visiting dealers. They are very willing to give demos.



Q. What storage space do I need at home?

A. Chuck your disassembled kayak in the back of a closet or in a basement locker. For example, the two bags for my Folbot Aleut are only 25 cm x 25 cm x 135 cm (10" x 10" x 53"), and 53 cm x 66 cm x 23 cm (21" x 27" x 9"). Neat, eh?

Mike Lomas, is a regular contributor to Ottawa Outdoors Magazine, and is Secretary of the Touring Kayakers Ottawa-Outaouais. He can typically be found flying someplace with his Folbot Aleut folding kayak in hand, or paddling on local waters.

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