

# Surfing Essentials

*A great start.*

By Estelle Leyshon



**New Zealand is blessed with some of the best surf beaches in the world. With so many to choose from it seems strange that so few paddlers enjoy them. Apart from the enormous fun they greatly improve boat handling, rough water confidence, rescues, rolling and beach landing skills.**

Kayak surfing can be enjoyed by anyone with a sea kayak, sit on-top kayak, white water kayak or playboat. The principles of surf kayaking are the same no matter your choice of craft. Beginners, intermediate or advanced paddlers who follow these principles have a great time.

## **The Basics of Kayak Hull Shapes**

A kayak's hull shape determines how it performs and handles in the surf. A sea kayak, for example, generally has a shallow arched or v-shaped hull. Designed for tracking and speed they are difficult to manoeuvre in the surf. Once the kayak chooses the direction of travel on the wave you can find it almost impossible to correct its line and straighten the boat. However, going out over the waves can be quite easy. They punch or ride over them when you get your timing right. However, sea kayaks can be just as much fun in the surf once you've learnt a few techniques, mainly how to stay upright!

Sit-on-top kayaks (including fishing kayaks) tend to be broader with some keel underneath but nothing too harsh. They are an ideal kayak



to use if you are a novice in the surf. They build confidence since there is no fear of entrapment. If you do fall out they do not fill up with water like sit-in kayaks. Therefore, they can be easier to recover in the surf than other craft but still tricky to climb back on when the swells are coming through. Because of their hull design they tend to be much more stable than sea kayaks and white water kayaks. They allow a little bit of manoeuvrability so you can still have fun catching the waves.

Those with flatter, planing hulls (like playboats and white water kayaks) lend themselves better to kayak surfing as they have fast hulls and are manoeuvrable. The paddler can carve and turn and even do tricks on the wave. The downside to these is that they can't

always punch through the waves and unless you perfect a 'dip and roll' technique, you can find yourself picked up and dumped by the waves. However, once you have the confidence, these kayaks are the choice of many on the surf. They can be marvellous fun.

If you truly want to master kayak surfing then a full 'surf kayak' is the ultimate weapon of choice. Designed with hulls like surf boards, including tri-fins, these kayaks can gather incredible speed down a wave with edges (or rails as they're known) that simply carve up the wave. These kayaks are not for the novice and can be unstable and difficult to roll but if mastered correctly they become a thing of beauty on the water.

### The Basic Principals of Kayak Surfing

Now that you understand a little about hull shapes, consider which category your kayak fits in to?

With any kayak, **the better the fit, the more control you will have** on the waves. For those with sit-on kayaks invest in a pair of thigh braces that simply clip on to your boat. These just sit over your knees and will give you better hip control, which you'll learn is important in surf. If you capsize they fall off when you drop your knees. So there is little risk of being connected to your boat when capsizing. I meet so many kayak fishermen who have never used them and when shown what they do it's always the next thing they purchase. Besides it helps to keep belongings and dignity intact!

With your kayak set up correctly, approach the water, **watch and wait**. A common reason people tip out of their kayaks is nervous haste to get out through the surf. They fail to watch the patterns and frequency of the waves. Waves tend to come in sets, a succession of larger waves followed by a succession of smaller waves. Watch several sets come through so you get a better idea of the frequency. Timing is everything, and when a large set of waves has just finished you need to be heading out for an easier ride through breaking waves and surf. Ideally head directly into the oncoming waves at 90 degrees. **Keep paddling:** don't stop every time a wave comes towards you. You need to keep forward momentum to get over the waves. This is much safer than being picked up and carried backwards by a wave. Don't stop paddling until you are beyond the break zone in swells with no breaking waves. Here you can rest and position yourself safely until you are ready to catch a wave.

Beginners are advised to start off in the white wash of the broken waves to get a feel for it.

Catching your first wave, be it big or small, can be one of the most exhilarating experiences. However, for too many the experience is short lived. They get tipped over just as they were gaining speed, clueless why it happened.

Firstly, when they do pick a wave they often leave it too late to pick up the same pace as the wave. This means they will either be dumped on the wave, or catch the wave and then gain sudden speed which they can't control and 'pearl' or nose dive the kayak. Or they miss the wave altogether as it travels past them. You will be more successful and

safer if you **ensure that you get up to the same speed as the wave before catching it**. This means paddling hard in advance of the wave. By doing so, the kayak will glide down the wave and stay ahead of it. If whilst on the wave you feel the kayak slow, lean forwards and put in some more paddle strokes to speed up.

Secondly, people tip over when they feel the kayak start to turn. The human instinct is to try to correct this turn by straightening the kayak and in doing so they lean in the opposite direction (away from the wave). By leaning away from the wave, the water that is rising up the wave will catch the bottom edge of the kayak and flip you over. So **when catching any wave, big or small, it is always important to lean into the wave, edging your kayak as much as possible**. This will

give you stability and control on the wave. When you are learning and your kayak starts to turn, go with it and concentrate on leaning and edging your kayak into the wave. By adding a support stroke with your paddle and literally bracing yourself on the wave you will get even more stability.

Just remember that as the power of the wave dissipates you need to relax your edging and transfer your weight to the centre of the kayak otherwise you can find yourself tipping over the other way.

Commonly, I see people leaning backwards

in the kayak as they come down a wave, either thinking it will keep the bow of the kayak up or as a human instinct that tries to get them away from the possible danger of the water in front of them. In leaning backwards you are in fact slowing the kayak down. By leaning forwards



*Above: As a beginner, it's often fun to let the kayak run down the wave with no paddle control. To get control, put your paddle blade as a rudder at the rear of the kayak. This will control your decent on the wave.*



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you will gain more speed, which puts the kayak in a better position on the wave. A **top tip** is that **if you think your kayaks' bow is going to dip down in to the wave, simply edge and turn your kayak more into the wave. This will prevent a kayak from 'pearling'.**

For those just wanting to make the beach landing as simple and dry as possible, without the thrill of catching a wave or too many of them, then it is very important to sit out at the back of the waves and watch the pattern of the waves. When the last big wave of the big set comes through, paddle right behind it on the back of the wave. Keep paddling until you reach the beach and remove yourself from the kayak as quickly as possible. Be ready to edge and apply a support stroke if necessary. Some find coming in on a wave backwards easier as they can see what's coming and slow themselves down by paddling against the waves. This can take a little practice!

Essentially, 'practice' is the key. Be prepared to get wet and lose your dignity a little. Start on small broken waves and then build up your confidence and technique before moving to more challenging green waves. Try a sit-on first if you're really nervous and then progress to a sit-in. Whichever way you do it you will discover how much fun you were missing and that it wasn't as scary as you thought. You'll be a much better paddler for it!

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# kayaka



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