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KENT CANOES
UNIT 1,
NEW HOUSE FARM
KEMSING ROAD
WROTHAM
KENT TN15 7BU

01732 886688

E-mail: kcs@dircon.co.uk

www.thecanoeshop.co.uk

OPEN CANOEING FOR BEGINNERS

Introduction

Open canoeing, (often called 'Canadian canoeing'), has become much more popular in the UK over recent years. It is an ideal activity for anyone who wants to get on the water in a really manageable boat with friends or family. Open canoes offer some distinct advantages over kayaks. They are generally more stable than kayaks and have a much greater carrying capacity.

Many open canoes can take two or three adults or two adults and two young children with ease.



Many canoeists also use them for extended camping trips on rivers. Canoes have a completely open deck so there is no fear of entrapment should you accidentally capsize. They are very comfortable to paddle all day because you can change your sitting position, or even stand up and have a stretch if you wish! Like kayaks, they can also be transported on a normal car roof rack. If the weight of the boat is critical, choose a canoe made from Royalex which is extremely light, and will be much easier to load onto the car roof than canoes made of other materials.



Above: Open canoe terminology

Learning to canoe

We would always recommend that you book on to a course to learn the basic principles of open canoeing in a safe, structured and fun environment. This article covers the basics of open canoeing at BCU 1 Star level, and is designed as background information to the courses we run.

Terms used:

Stern : Back of canoe
Bow : Front of canoe
Hull : Underside of boat
Gunwale : Edge of canoe
Yoke : Used to carry boat if solo



Lifting, carrying and launching a canoe

Canoes are not necessarily heavy but they are bulky and awkward, so good lifting technique is vital when handling them.

Good lifting technique is simply about using a few basic principles. There are a couple of words we can use to jog our memory every time we are about to lift something:

SAFE:

- S** Stop – before lifting, stop!
- A** Assess the situation
- F** Formulate a plan of how to safely lift the equipment-discuss this with your paddling partner
- E** Execute that plan

Another word that is a useful check before we lift something is:

LITE:

- L** Load - Look at the load
- I** Individual Can the individual(s) safely lift the equipment?
- T** Task Is this a reasonable task?
- E** Environment Is the environment safe? (e.g. go round slippery banks rather than over them if necessary).

The following principles are also very helpful when thinking about lifting:

1. Wherever possible, always share the load.
2. Keep the spine in line
3. Slide and glide rather than lift if possible
4. Make sure the load is properly balanced.

Always work on the principle that we only have one back so protect it!!

Lifting the canoe from the ground on to a car roof rack with two people



- With a straight back, bend down at each end of the canoe, and lift the boat up to waist height.
- From this position, turn the boat upside-down
- Keeping a straight back, lift the boat to a height just above the roof rack
- Place one side of the canoe on to the roof rack and slide the boat on.

Lifting the boat off the roof of the car

- * Repeat the above in reverse order



Launching the canoe - two people



- Carry the boat to the waters edge.
- At the water's edge lift the boat up from the centre, one person on each side.
- Holding on to the 5 m line attached to the end of the boat, lower one end in to the water.
- Working together 'feed' your hands up the gunwales and then drop the other end of the boat into the water.
- Don't forget to hang on to the line before pushing the boat out on to the water.
- Bring the boat along side the bank, and with one person holding it steady, the stern paddler should get in and sit down. Remember to apply equal pressure on each side of the canoe whilst getting in.
- The stern paddler holds the canoe steady whilst the bow paddler gets in.

Tandem forward paddling

When two people paddle an open canoe there is often a tendency for the boat to veer off towards the bow paddler's side. To understand good forward paddling technique it is important to understand both good individual stroke work and the relationship between what each paddler does.

Principles of good individual forward paddling technique:

- * Swivel on the seat towards the side of the boat you paddle on.
- * Twist your body from the waist and push your "on side" shoulder (the one on your paddle side), forward
- * Hold your top hand on top of the paddle vertically above your lower hand.
- * Pull the paddle back through the water by untwisting your body.
- * Recover the paddle by slicing it out as it reaches your hips.



Things to note:

1. The paddle should be vertical throughout the power phase of the stroke
2. The paddle should follow the centre line of the boat (not the gunwale/side)

Principles of good tandem forward paddling technique:

- * Both paddlers should paddle in perfect time with each other so the bow paddler needs to set the paddling rate
- * The bow paddler must develop a feel for what is happening at the stern of the boat because the stern paddler often has to apply a combined power and steering stroke to keep the boat straight.
- * Good communication is important; if the stern paddler needs the bow paddler to slow down they need to say so!
- * The stern paddler cannot see right in front of the boat (unfortunately bow paddlers are not transparent) so the bow paddler needs to let the stern paddler know if anything is right in front of the boat.
- * The stern paddler needs to let the bow paddler know if they need help steering the boat
- * There is only one 'Captain' in the boat and that is the stern paddler!
- * Swapping positions helps each paddler to understand better what effect their paddling has on each other.



Steering the canoe on the move - two paddlers

Because the stern paddler has more leverage than the bow paddler when paddling forwards, there is a natural tendency for the boat to veer off towards the bow paddler's side. To correct this, the stern paddler must learn to combine a steering stroke with each power stroke. There are two ways of doing this, by using a 'stern rudder' or a 'J stroke'. Here we are going to concentrate on the stern rudder.

- * The stern paddler should do a normal power stroke followed by: -
- * Placing the paddle blade in the water just behind the hips.
- * The blade edge should be pointing vertically upwards and the paddle shaft should be parallel with the centre line of the canoe.
- * Either pull or push the paddle blade towards or away from the canoe to adjust the steering.



Things to note:

Usually you will be pushing away from the boat to correct the steering when forward paddling.

If it helps, you can support the paddle shaft against the edge of the canoe.

The paddle blade should be completely under water.

Stopping the canoe – two people

To stop the boat moving forwards it's simply a matter of paddling backwards.

- * From a good forward paddling position, twist your body round and place the paddle blade in the water level with your hips.
- * Push the blade forward in the water by untwisting your body.
- * Keep the paddle vertical and your top hand immediately above your bottom hand.
- * To recover the blade slice it out at the end of the stroke.

Things to note:

Make sure the boat is travelling at normal speed before practising this.

It is often easier to only use most of the blade area.

Using shorter strokes in quick succession works well.

The boat should be travelling in the opposite direction within two boat lengths at BCU 1 Star level.

Turning the canoe on the spot – two people

We can do this by what is known as a "sweep stroke". It is called a sweep stroke because instead of following the centre line of the boat, it sweeps out in an arc.

The bow paddler places the paddle at the front of the canoe and "sweeps" the paddle through a 90 degree arc and recovers the paddle level with the hips

The stern paddler places the paddle at the back of the canoe and using the back of the paddle, (i.e. the non drive face), simultaneously "sweeps" the paddle through a 90 degree arc and recovers the paddle level with the hips

The boat can then be spun round on the spot by apply several strokes with the stern paddler following the timing of the bow paddler.



Things to note:

The paddle shaft can be as near horizontal as possible whilst still keeping the whole blade area in the water.

Twist and untwist the body whilst performing this stroke

Don't sweep the paddle round more than 90 degrees since this just ends up moving the boat backwards and forwards at the same time which is just a waste of energy!

The strokes can be reversed so the bow paddler sweeps from the hips to the front of the boat and the stern paddler sweeps from the hips to the stern of the boat.



Reversing the canoe – two people

- * Twist your body round and place the paddle blade in the water level with your hips
- * Push the blade forward in the water by untwisting your body.
- * Keep the paddle vertical and your top hand immediately above your bottom hand
- * To recover the blade slice it out at the end of the stroke.
- * Look over your shoulders to check where the boat is going.

Things to note:

When reversing, the stern and bow paddlers' roles are "reversed" and it is the bow paddler's responsibility to keep the boat straight. The bow paddler can then adjust the steering by using a "reverse J stroke".

Reverse J stroke



- * Do a normal reverse stroke and then follow through by:
- * Pushing the blade forward in the water and keeping the blade fully submerged
- * At the same time, roll your top hand over so your thumb is pointing downwards and your hand is touching or almost touching your shoulder
- * Steer the boat by levering off the gunwale, moving your top hand towards or away from the gunwale of the boat.
- * Lean forward if needed.

Trimming the canoe

This sounds complicated but in fact it's very simple. All it means is that the bow should be slightly raised above the water line when paddling forwards and the stern should be raised slightly above the water line when paddling backwards. So how do we achieve this? Well unlike a kayak we can move our weight forward on the seat or if necessary kneel in front of the seat to achieve this. We can also move any gear we have in the canoe forwards or backwards to achieve the right trim.

Things to note:

Because of their size, open canoes are effected by wind more than kayaks it is good idea to trim for wind conditions as well. We do this by moving weight forward if we are paddling into a head wind, and moving weight back if the wind is behind us.

Standing Exercises

Taking it in turns to stand up in the canoe and paddle it whilst standing up develops confidence and demonstrates just how stable these boats are.

Moving the boat sideways – two people

At this level the easiest way of moving the boat sideways is for both paddlers to do a "draw stroke" on the same side.

- Twist round on the seat to face the side of the canoe.
- Place the paddle in the water at right angles to the canoe.
- Make sure that the drive face of the blade is facing towards you.
- Your top arm should be almost straight and the blade submerged.
- Keeping the top hand in the same position, pull the blade in towards the boat.
- Recover the blade by rolling your top wrist away from you through 90 degrees, (letting the paddle shaft rotate through your bottom hand), and slicing the paddle back through the water to where you started the stroke.
- Rotate your wrist again and apply another stroke.



Things to note.

Don't rush this stroke, technique is much more important than speed or power here.

Keep in time with the other paddler.

The paddles should always be pulled in at right angles to the canoe.



Preventing a capsize



If we are falling over we naturally put our hand out to project ourselves. Well the same applies in a canoe, but instead of using our hands, we have the added advantage of being able to use a paddle blade which has a much greater surface area.



To practise this we need to:

- * Tilt the boat over until it is nearly off balance.
- Lower your body as low as you can.
-
- * Place the paddle blade at right angles to the canoe with the back of the blade (i.e. non drive face), flat on the surface of the water.
- * Push quickly on the blade using the surface tension of the water and then swing your body and paddle across to the other side of the boat bring it back on balance.



Things to note:

This is all about weight transfer and is a lot easier to practise if you are kneeling in the canoe.

As you swing your body across, aim to transfer your body weight from the lower knee to the higher knee.

If your blade sinks too far in to the water as you push on it, you can recover it by rolling your top wrist back and slicing the blade upwards.



And that's it for the BCU One Star Open Canoe Award apart from some theory work, which we discuss on the course. It may look a little daunting, but it is our aim to cover all the above and get you through the BCU Open Canoe 1 Star test at the end of the day if you wish. These notes are designed to give you a feel for what is covered and are a good reference for after the course.

**Don't forget - ENJOY your time learning to open canoe— as this is what open canoeing is all about!
HAPPY PADDLING**

Grant Scamell BCU Level 5 Coach.

