

CANADA'S PADDLING MAGAZINE

KANAWA



Winter/Spring 2008

\$4.95

The grand masters of barrenland canoeing

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Newton in
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inspiration

Paddling and
parenthood

Atlantic to the
Arctic revisited



Plus
Gear review:

Aqua-Bound Odyssey canoe paddle,
Malone HandiRack inflatable roof rack,
SPOT personal tracker and satellite messenger



Published by
Paddle Canada
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The outfitter



Aqua-Bound Odyssey canoe paddle

A familiar name in paddle sports throughout Canada, Aqua-Bound makes well-made and well-priced paddles. They were among the first paddle manufacturers to use gas-assisted moulding, a system that fills the thicker parts of a paddle with gas, which can significantly lighten its weight without significantly decreasing its strength.

For 2008 Aqua-Bound has developed the Odyssey, a new canoe paddle so unique in appearance I had to try it out. While the stiffening spine of a paddle is always right down the middle of the blade, the spine on the Odyssey wraps around the outside edge of the blade. Aqua-Bound calls it “Perimeter Technology.”

As odd as it looks, the Odyssey’s edge spine adds several positive attributes to its performance. Having the thickest part of the blade on the edges significantly increases durability when the blade strikes hard objects (rocks, partner’s head, gunnels, etc). It also substantially reduces potential warping of the blade because the thin part of the blade is supported on three sides.

Since the total area of spine is greater, and thus filled with more gas, the Odyssey is more buoyant than a normal centre-spine paddle. But, since all that spine volume is spread around the blade’s perimeter, it has a lower side profile and

slips through the water more easily for an underwater recovery during a stroke.

All the other benefits of Perimeter Technology are dwarfed by the blade’s increased bite. You notice it with every stroke! A centre-spine paddle tends to dump water during the stroke, whereas the Odyssey catches water between the edge spines, which results in noticeably more power.

The Odyssey comes in three blade widths and each has its use. The 6 inch blade catches less water than the other blade sizes and best suits smaller paddlers or those who have a very high cadence. The 8 inch blade is great for whitewater canoeing or other situations where a great deal of power is needed. Because it catches so much water, however, most of us would not want to paddle all day on flatwater with the 8 inch blade – it would wipe you out. The 7 inch blade works best for Average Joe. It feels similar to a centre-spine 8 inch blade, which is fine for all-day stroking, and generates enough power during an “oh, crap” moment. All the blades are 19 inches long.

Like the other Aqua-Bound paddles, the Odyssey is available with a proprietary fibreglass/plastic blade paired with a fibreglass shaft, or a carbon/plastic blade with a carbon shaft.

www.aquabound.com

MSRP: \$95-135

Malone HandiRack inflatable roof rack

One thing all paddlers seem to share is the need for a roof rack of some sort. Many of us have steel structures permanently affixed to our vehicle’s roof, others make do with the factory racks that come with some SUVs, while some use foam blocks and straps rigged right through their vehicle.

Malone, a manufacturer of rack accessories, has introduced the HandiRack, an inflatable roof rack system. It consists of two racks, each with two tubes made of three layers of reinforced nylon. Five D-rings that act as anchor points for your ropes or tie-down straps rest between the tubes, and are close enough together to accommodate most loads.



The HandiRack comes with two 10 foot tie-down straps, which are good for a kayak, but too short for a tandem canoe. The system is rated for 80kg (176 lbs) – much more than needed for any boat I’d care to use. Check your car owner’s manual though, as many vehicles have load limits lower than 80kg and you need to respect those limits.

I found the HandiRack easy to install, even the first time. Roll it out on your roof, run the webbing through the

car and into the 2 inch cam buckle and inflate the tubes. It only takes a couple of minutes!

I didn't test the HandiRack in the rain, but I suspect water could get into your vehicle during a storm because the 2 inch straps running through the doors break the door seal.

On the plus side, the HandiRack is durable and lightweight. The whole system, including racks, pump and 10 foot

tie-down straps, fits into the included sack and measures only 8" x 8" x 16".

The HandiRack may not replace semi-permanent rack systems like Yakima and Thule, but it sure comes in handy if you don't have a rack, don't want a permanent rack or are using a rental vehicle, and it's far more dependable than foam blocks.

www.maloneautoracks.com

MSRP: \$130



SPOT personal tracker and satellite messenger

A new device to take with you when playing outside, SPOT acts like a personal locator beacon in an emergency and provides other useful functions, most notably peace of mind to friends and family.

SPOT performs four different tasks.

Pressing the "911" button notifies the appropriate search and rescue (SAR) authorities that you're in a life-threatening situation and advises them of your position within a few metres. If you move in an effort to self-rescue, SPOT keeps the SAR personnel updated on your position.

Pressing the "Help" button sends an e-mail to whoever you choose (up to five e-mail addresses) telling them you need

help, but are not in a life-threatening situation. The e-mail message includes a link to Google Maps indicating your position, and is re-sent every few minutes with an updated map in case you're on the move.

SPOT comes pre-loaded with a standard help message, but I found it wanting, so I rewrote mine. Due to a character limit, however, I had to keep it short. I think it would be best to forewarn your chosen e-mail recipients about what the help message means and what you expect them to do if they receive it. Mine basically means, "I'm in a bit of a mess, but stable, and you should send a float plane to get me." I imagine a situation where my canoe has floated away in the night

and I'm camped on an island. (I used to think it could never happen to me, but I was wrong.)

Pressing the "OK" button also sends an e-mail with a Google Map link to your list of friends (it can be a different list), but it only sends once for each time you press the button. Again, I rewrote the message to indicate, "I'm okay and just checking in." But I'm thinking of changing it to something like, "The weather is great, wish you were here. Exact coordinates provided."

I like the idea of sending the okay message every night when I reach camp to put my family at ease and to provide an updated last known whereabouts. After all, what would happen if my SPOT was in the canoe that floated away? I also might make arrangements with those on my list to send that plane if they don't get an okay message after a specified number of days. I include myself on the list so when I return home I get a series of map links indicating all of my campsites. A Web-geek friend of mine says I can put all of my campsite locations onto one Google map, add comments and post it onto my website.

If you want even more detail with none of the hassle, use SPOT's fourth function, called SPOTcasting. This optional feature allows any friends to whom you give the password to monitor your progress in real time via Google Maps. It stores all your waypoints, so you can review your route at any time. Or, post it to your website for the world to see.

How does SPOT work?

A GPS receiver within the unit determines your position like any other GPS – it triangulates your position in three dimensions using US military satellites in geosynchronous orbit and a little math. If you press any of the signal buttons a separate set of 40 commercial geosynchronous satellites send your position, as determined by the GPS receiver,

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to the emergency dispatch centre. If you activated a 911 signal, a team of humans takes it from there, contacting the most appropriate local SAR resources as well as your emergency contacts. If you send any of the other three signals, computers and the miracle of the Internet get the word out.

SPOT has few weaknesses.

Since it depends on GPS to determine its location, it's susceptible to the same weaknesses as GPS. If SPOT cannot "see" enough of the satellites, it can't get a fix on your position. Typical conditions that thwart GPS include deep canyons and heavy forest, so you need to get it into an area of unobstructed sky. To balance this weakness, SPOT continually sends 911 and help messages so that at least some will get through.

The belt clip, which is not moulded to the unit, creates another weakness. The belt clip attaches with a hand-tightened

screw because it needs to be moved to access the battery compartment. As tight as I can tighten that screw, I can easily move the belt clip, which causes me to worry that my SPOT might become dislodged without my knowledge, and at an inconvenient time.

On the plus side, SPOT combines several functions into a small and light-weight unit (it weighs just over 7 ounces and measures about 4.5" x 2.5" x 1.5") that go mostly unnoticed in your PFD pocket until it's needed. (Don't leave it in your canoe, which could float away.) The unit floats and the satellite system works nearly anywhere in the world. As insurance against accidentally sending a signal or turning one off, all buttons need to be held for several seconds, and the two AA lithium batteries have a very long life. It will stay powered in standby mode for one year, or send 1,900 okay messages on one set of batteries, or broadcast the

911 signal for seven consecutive days, or SPOTcast for 14 days.

In addition to the unit's purchase price, there are a number of additional costs to consider. An annual subscription fee of US\$100 maintains your account and provides the services. If you choose to use SPOTcasting it'll cost you an additional US\$50 per year, and an optional GEOS Search & Rescue benefit, which covers the costs of your rescue and other benefits, costs US\$8 per year. Like any insurance policy, read over the terms carefully to see what's important to you. I think it's all well worth it!

While not cheap, SPOT is still a great value, especially considering the features and peace of mind it provides, and compared to the other products out there.

Very soon SPOT will be the standard of care for camps and commercial outfitters, mark my words. It's just too easy to buy a SPOT unit, subscribe and carry it in a PFD for any such group to resist. Individual backcountry users should consider getting one also. I'm glad I have a SPOT, and I'm sure my family is too.

www.findmespot.com

MSRP: \$170



Tony Palmer (kanawa.outfitter@gmail.com) has been paddling and playing with gear since the sixties. He teaches canoeing and kayaking in the ecotourism program at Mount Royal College and owns Calgary's paddling store, Undercurrents (www.undercurrents.ca).