

Aquanaut Bliss – first impressions of the Valley Aquanaut

By Mark Sundin

I managed to get out in my new Valley Aquanaut yesterday, tagging along on one of the famous Tuesday Night paddles out of Sydney Harbour. First impressions on unwrapping the boat on Monday were of a superbly finished craft, without a blemish or flaw. Valley Kayaks are truly the best looking, best made boats around. Conditions on Tuesday were great, at the back end of some very big swells there was still a metre & half to two metres of swell running, but virtually no wind.



The sections of cliff on the 5km stretch from North Head to Fairy Bower were producing terrific rebound & presented some fairly challenging paddling, just what I wanted to get a feel for my new boat. The fit was really snug, lower in the foredeck than the Currituck & Force 5 I've been paddling lately, but very comfortable. The distance my knees had to travel from free & easy in a forward stroke to tight & bracing in rebound was miniscule, but I still didn't feel boxed in like I do in something like the Outer Island. I'm 6 feet tall & weight about 98kg, as a kayaker I make a good ops side flanker.

The bow of the Aquanaut has pronounced flare emanating from a defined V keel, which means the boat doesn't pearl in to oncoming or following seas, without having the extra windage of an upswept bow. It's a subtle design feature, but one of the keys to the performance of the kayak. Cruising on the flat water from Watsons Bay to South Head the boat felt quite quick, & didn't throw out the distinctive bow wave that a lot of rockered kayaks can, & I was comfortably hitting 10km/h + without busting a gasket. However, once we hit the lump off South Head the boat really came into it's own. It is just so playful & responsive. A lot of boats in that sort of confused water can feel bogged down & difficult to move forward, whereas the Aquanaut seemed to leap on any push from astern & surf even the smallest bit of bump. The predictability of the secondary stability made it enormous fun to pick up little wind waves & zig-zag around in the chop. Cruising out to North Head I was running down the back of the oncoming swells, & generally having a ball playing in the choppy seas. With a decent old swell running, we looked forward to the kayak-friendly Fairy Bower reef break on the south end of Manly, & it was producing the odd head high & over set which were rolling off beautifully into the deep water off the reef. Rob (trailing the Nigel Dennis Explorer for the first time), Chris James (also in his Aquanaut RM) & I cracked a few waves, & but for fading light & a cold breeze, we might have still been there!



On a fast running wave, the Aquanaut was steady as a rock, predictable & very manoeuvrable. I caught one ripper of a wave towards the end of our little session only to look down & see a surf skier plodding out of the break zone in front of me, but all it took was a drop of my hip to steer clear & peel off with a gentle high brace. In a few other stiff tracking boats, I reckon in the same situation I might have speared myself a clubby.....

In summary, the performance of this kayak was staggering. I have personally searched for a boat that is capable of playing in rough water, with great manoeuvrability, yet still being capable of footing it with the straight-line speed freaks on a long day's paddle from A to B. I've tried plenty of kayaks over the last 18 months – as you would expect when we have imported 18 different sea kayak designs – and I think I've found the combination in one boat that I've been craving. It's not the absolute fastest, nor the absolute most manoeuvrable, but the combination of design features coming together make the Aquanaut just about as close to perfection in a kayak that I have paddled.