

About eight years ago I started searching for the ultimate paddle. I had a wing that certainly had a powerful catch but didn't deliver the versatility for blended strokes and bracing. Then there were all the asymmetrical blades I had owned that had a relatively soft catch but offered more versatility with strokes.

After much deliberation and the generous loan of a number of different blade styles I decided to try a Slalom paddle for touring and I felt an instant affinity with the way it worked. So against all the conventional wisdom of taking untested kit on an extended trip I ordered a Slalom Kinetic paddle just 24 hours before leaving on a 450 kilometer paddle in far North Queensland. I still have that paddle and it has done over 20,000kms of hard work for me in all manner of water using all styles of kayak. It has become my almost constant paddling companion. I have been as faithful to my paddle as I have been fickle in my selection of boats. When it comes to kayaks I have many favorites but when it comes to paddles, apart from the occasional tryst with a wing when paddling my Rapier, it has always been my trusty Slalom blade. It is not that there aren't some very fine asymmetrical blades out there. The Mitchell Blades Voyager and Bracsa Hurricane 100 both feel great in the water and there are a number of other worthy candidates. It's just that there is nothing like the rock solid catch and easy exit that you can get from this type of whitewater paddle. It is so easy to move from one stroke to another; the blade encourages you to blend strokes, and as you would expect from a Slalom blade, it is very predictable in the water and great for rapid acceleration and rolling.

Most of those who have remained unconvinced by my paddle selection have pointed to the blade area and how fatiguing the catch is after a while. Fortunately over the years, I have chipped away at the edges of "old faithful" leaving resin on rocks up and down the east coast of Australia. Occasionally I have carefully ground out the damage making sure to balance the removal of material on both blades to keep them matched. As the blade area has slowly reduced and I have got a little older, it has started to feel even more nimble and it has become easier to increase my cadence. The shape continues to perform but I suspect that as the blade area diminishes it is becoming an even better, albeit more fragile, sea blade. To prepare myself for that fateful day when I will need a replacement I have started looking around and found myself drawn to the Mitchell Blades surf paddle range. My first attempt was selected for its relatively "small" blade area, but at close to 700 sq cm it's still a brute, and too big from a sea kayaker's perspective.

Nevertheless, apart from being overpowering, it had that same dynamic feel as my existing blade, so I decided to see whether I could grind enough off the sides and end of the blade to get it back to the blade area of a medium sea tourer: somewhere around the 640sq cm mark. Fortunately before I had a chance to rev up the angle grinder and operate on my new blades, they were granted a stay of execution when Lance Mitchell sent us a prototype that had been professionally scaled down. It has all the manners of the surf blade but without the heft or oversize area.

For me and those on the testing panel so far, this blade strikes a fine balance between strong control and light acceleration. The major criticism has focused on the length. The prototype is only adjustable down to 215cm and some of the smaller testers would have liked to try it at 208-210. With this in mind, production sizes will start at 205cm.

We have decided to call this new model 'The Bombora' after an evocative Aboriginal word for reef break. I think this is a fitting name for a paddle that will take you to that distant offshore play spot and give you the range of strokes to ride the waves when you get there.

Technical Description.

The Mitchell Blades Bombora is a high angle, high performance blade designed for touring. It is a distinctive shape inspired by kinetic slalom paddles and designed to engage the blade earlier and faster than a traditional asymmetric blade, but in this case it has been downscaled and redesigned to make it smaller and more forgiving for the longer distances and heavier boats used for touring. The inboard edge of the blade is cutaway to allow a very close catch without the paddle striking the deck, and the concentration of blade area towards the tip seems to facilitate an easy and early exit for maximum acceleration. The blades have a wide foam core that gives them a cross section and buoyancy somewhere between a conventional dihedral and a foil. The tips are reinforced with glass flake to make them tougher and more resistant to chipping. The production model is now available in Carbon Zenith with a Kevlar reinforced power face. It weighs approximately 850gms. Shaft options: 1piece carbon made to length and feather or 'Vario.S.Lock' joiner. Both shaft options feature an integrated index.

Approximate blade area: 640 cm²

Price: \$575

Rob Mercer.

