

The Rockpool GT

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The container doors opened revealing another shipment of Kayaks from the UK and amongst them were a handful of Rockpool GTs.

As I worked to unload them I started to wonder how any kayak could live up to the expectations that had started to build with early reports from the Northern hemisphere. Could this boat really go quicker than the usual sea boat, track straighter and yet retain the sporty feel and agile performance that has made British boats so highly regarded by paddlers around the world?

Appearance

Sitting on stands at the warehouse my immediate thought was that this was a serious gear carrier with a capacity that would rival some of the local big guns, but unlike other big boats the volume has been achieved by deck height and maintaining some of the beam closer to the ends.

The boat is a lean 52cm but looks and feels quite large in deck area around the cockpit.

In profile it has a long keel line with a distinctive deep stern that looks like it would make the boat track too hard if it were not combined with generous rocker and enough midsection volume to allow the ends to release when edged.



It has a clearly visible V through its entire length and a soft chine edge in the midsection that blends smoothly before reaching bow or stern.

The skeg slider works in the opposite direction to our other boats. You slide it forward to deploy the blade. The skeg box is low profile inside the hull and with only a narrow opening in the keel line. The mechanics of this skeg system are very smooth and easy to use and designed to be more kink proof than a standard cable system.

Cockpit

Close inspection of the cockpit area reveals six large easy to tighten thumbscrews which are at the heart of the GT high performance seating position. By unscrewing the two just forward of the hip pads you are able to completely remove the seat and after locating an alternative seat on the threaded studs it can be tightened by reversing the process with the thumbscrews. There are three different seat configurations that offer varying compromise between comfort and a more aggressive posture.

By removing the forward screws on each side, the aluminum tracks that support the seat can be relocated to provide a vast range of adjustment allowing the seat to be moved forward and backward independently of a similarly adjustable foot plate that supports the whole of the ball of the foot and the toes. These adjustments allow a vast range of paddler leg lengths and torso heights to be accommodated.

Deck

The foredeck is higher than the usual sea kayak with a flattened peak to house the mini day hatch. The foredeck shape is nicely beveled and narrow so that it is only high where your legs are and not where you want to place your paddle.

With my heels apart and my knees bent I am still able to really rotate my torso and use my legs and the whole time the thigh braces are in the right spot if I want to do something on edge or upside down. I can make any stroke without having to change foot position or splay my legs out to the side to get setup. The forward day hatch is unobtrusive but also very handy for storing those items that would otherwise have to go under a deck net. The boat is slightly Swede form and quite narrow across the foredeck and this combines with the steep beveled deck to allow a very close catch for increased efficiency. One of the trade offs is that the spare paddle is best stored on the rear deck and not the foredeck position we have grown accustomed to with other British boats. There is a nice bungee configuration with tensioner on the aft deck to hold the spare securely even in rough water. There is also a nice flat spot next to the day hatch that will accommodate a Valley tow system.

Hull

Although there is no hard chine, the boat has a distinct slab side through the mid section and on the water feels like a chined boat but without the tendency for the edge to catch when the boat is tilted or broached. The designer promises a smooth transition from solid straight line tracking to smooth tight turns on edge and the boat delivers this by using what he describes as a 'blended hull form'. The boat has small overhangs relative to many others and this keeps waterline length high as a proportion of total length. The bow is slightly convex and seems to have plenty of lift to resist pearling even when the boat is driven hard in following seas.

Test Paddles

Test paddles are such a tricky business. For a start, the boats we import are always so shiny and perfect looking as they sit gleaming on the sand ready for action. It is hard not to be impressed and there is a real danger that wishful thinking will triumph over giving a balanced account of the craft. With this in mind I always try to avoid making statements until there are a few scratches on the demo boat and I have tested its performance in as many different conditions as possible.

I also try testing the boat by putting a range of other paddlers in the cockpit seeing how it trims with different sizes, weights and skill levels. The following are my impressions based on ten days on the water in a wide range of conditions and although they are not exhaustive I have come to the conclusion that the GT has a unique blend of performance characteristics that seem to suit a remarkably broad range of conditions and paddlers.



Speed

I have not measured the speed of the boat using a GPS but I know from paddling on flat water alongside some of the local fast 18 and 19 footers that I don't have to work hard to keep up in this boat. Whilst it is no Rapier it is definitely in the quick end of the genuine touring sea kayak market. I had a short (about 10km) out and back paddle in force 5-6 winds with seas to 2 metres and a metre of swell rebounding off the Sydney cliffs. In steep head seas on the outbound leg I found the empty boat pounded quite heavily, it seemed that the buoyancy that helped lift the kayak over the steeper waves also caused it to drop off the crests with a thud. After I got used to this pitching motion and changed my cadence and weight transfer to suit the conditions this settled down and I realized that riding higher over the waves was actually giving me more speed than slicing through the crests like some of the other boats. Another benefit of this volume distribution is that you can run downwind with easy acceleration onto the wave and extract plenty of lift from the bow. There is no need to back off when things get steep. This makes for long fast downwind runs and surfing rides.



Tracking/Turning

On a two day paddle along the Beecroft Peninsula I discovered that the GT tracks remarkably well in crosswinds and the steady Force 4 westerly across Jarvis Bay was easily tuned out with about half skeg deployed. There was no need for blended strokes, instead I just held my heading and applied myself to making an effective forward stroke with barely an edge required. With an overnight load on board the boat tracked better than any skeg boat I have ever paddled and yet when I pulled the skeg up to take a photograph, a moderate edge released the stern and the boat slewed smoothly through 180degrees. The second day of our Beecroft trip had us exploring some rather tight ravines and slots in the cliff line just inside Point Perpendicular and the boat proved very capable in close quarters. Although I didn't feel that sudden 'slide' that I get with the Aquanaut or Nordkapp LV, I did enjoy the smooth predictable turn that I could achieve with less edge and about the same effort. When I wanted to turn quickly I discovered the GT had a 'sweet spot' on edge where I still felt very stable and yet seemed to get maximum benefit from the tilt. I felt like the long stern keel was releasing easily and at a comfortable level of heel. I suspect this will make edged turns and corrections easy for paddlers not used to skeg boat paddling and make it a favorite among those aiming to clock up the miles on a long trip and do a little surfing, playing or instructing along the way.



Capacity

The boat is truly cavernous and has the buoyancy to match. My camping and safety gear disappeared and left me offering to carry other paddler's excess baggage to try to fill it up yet the boat trimmed nicely and the overall performance changed very little. If you like the feel of the boat as an empty day tripper then you will find there are no negative changes to performance when you load it up. At our recent Umina training weekend paddlers of all shapes and sizes decided to try it and the general feedback was very positive with stability and responsiveness getting the thumbs up. There were even a few tiny surfing waves to showcase the kayak's wave riding potential. Among those who have tried it out the only limitations seem to be weight with a couple of smaller paddlers in the 60-65kg range clearly unable to get enough boat in the water regardless of seat position.

Rolling and Stability

The boat rolls easily although it would not be quite as easy for layback enthusiasts because the rear deck is only moderately low. In surf sessions at Cronulla I have rolled the boat a few times when backward surfing and attempting endos and found it a very easy boat to roll in a real situation. Several of my students have really enjoyed rolling this boat and feel that the seating position helps them setup without strain. Stability in rebound and pitching waves was good with the heeling motion of the boat being very predictable. It is a good boat for photography even taking shots of sea eagles above my head was possible.



The One Boat Test

With the EK fleet at my disposal I often speculate about which design I would have if I could only have one boat to do everything. Not really the perfect boat (there is no such vessel) but rather the perfect compromise. Based on first impressions, I would be hard pressed to put any of my long standing favorites ahead of the GT when it comes to “the one boat test”

Summary

- Suits medium to large paddlers.
- Rewards good skills and provides feedback, great first skeg boat.
- Skilled paddlers who want a multitool type boat that will do “everything”
- Versatile enough for guides and instructors.
- Quick enough for a workout boat.
- Stable enough to build confidence for a new paddler.
- Superb tracking for long distances in wind and waves.
- Nimble enough to surf and explore rock gardens
- Big gear carrier. Perfect for a month or more on Cape York, The Kimberley etc.

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