

Surfing Tales & Tricks



Rob Mercer about to effect a perfect bottom turn on a good play-sized wave, Bateman's Bay, NSW

At a recent instruction day at Wanda Beach I was re-acquainted with joys & dangers of surfing for fun, in a sea kayak. This of course, is in direct contrast to what we should all practice in sea kayaking, which is actually avoiding the surf, as our boats are simply not designed to deal with it. Unfortunately, even if you manage to avoid surf for months at a time, there will inevitably come a time when you'll have to negotiate this exhilarating & at times terrifying zone, so you should make sure you have the skills & practice to deal with the basics.

Conditions on Australia Day were perfect, with a light offshore breeze, 1-2m swell from the east on an 8 second period, & a rising tide. The group was John Friedman, Terry Walsh, Bruce McNaughton, Roger Boardman & Peter Levy.

We paddled out through the lineup at about 9am after a briefing on safety, in particular a refresher on the importance of shoulder safety & correct high bracing technique. Landing through a good spilling 6 foot surf the guys all tasted a bit of salt water, with Bruce & Terry managing to roll after being upended. Roger Boardman took on everything thrown at him, & braced into some terrific waves, often riding 100m into the beach. Everyone fell victim to the '5 yard rule' - relaxing when on the landing & being dumped upside down by the shore break. That said with everyone mindful of the need to tuck up, there were no more serious injuries than a few bruised egos. John & Peter hadn't previously been in moving water to this degree & both grew more confident as the day progressed.

The incoming tide started to make our spot a bit dumpy, so we relocated to a nice little break that formed about 100m offshore on the rising tide & all caught some really good waves, before calling it a day after a solid 3 hours.

When it really mattered, paddling back in to a crowded beach at Wanda, everyone landed without incident, bracing beautifully into the shore break. I also made sure I landed first & cleared a 50m gap on the beach of swimmers, with the promise to them that they were very likely to see a bunch of old fella's smash themselves up.....There were plenty of expectant cheers as a big shore dumper reared up behind Bruce, followed by admiring applause as he held a perfect brace & skidded up onto the sand. Just goes to show what a crowd can do for your concentration.

After the session, Roger & I took out a couple of surf kayaks for a blast, but the high tide & crowded line-up made it a pretty futile exercise. At least Roger got a small taste of this awesome evolving sport!

All up, a good day out & enough adrenaline expended to ensure nobody needed any rocking on Saturday night.

A few old lessons were reinforced while reflecting on this great day out. Surf is pretty uncomplicated, besides the fact that it is so difficult to control (if that makes sense). You need to master your boat control using proper edges to turn (rudders are next to useless, & will break in surf if left deployed), pick a good take-off spot, & either get off the wave while it's still green or engage the white-water with absolute commitment & good technique. This means a solid high or low brace, no over-extension of your shoulder joint. Then, if you do manage to get capsized, you have to have the grace under fire to be able to hold your tuck position, then roll up once the fury on the surface of the water has subsided. Rolling isn't about being able to pull off a textbook manouever 10 yards off the beach at Clontarf, it's about developing a reflex action, which is your first instinct when you're capsized without warning. When is this most likely? Of course, in a moving water environment like the surf zone. Once you can roll in a controlled environment, get out into some small moving water & play for an hour or so – I guarantee you'll get capsized at least half a dozen times, giving you a perfect opportunity to test your new roll. Once you can roll in the surf, you can roll.

As for riding the waves, a good progression to remember is to move from your forward paddle stroke to catch the wave, evolving into a good, fully rotated stern rudder with edges to hold your position & direct the boat left or right, a gradual low brace evolving from your stern rudder, with the high brace to finish when the wave impacts on your now-broached deck. I'm right handed & much stronger on my brace on that side, so I'll generally look for a right-handed break, edge my boat as I gain momentum to direct the boat on a slight angle to the right with the break, then either ride the green water to it's end, or be ready on my stronger side with a high brace. That said, it's also a good idea to constantly work on your off-side support strokes so they're merely less of a strength, as opposed to a weakness.

So, what to look for if you are heading to an ocean beach, as opposed to a bar break like Bundeena or Box Head? First & foremost, space. Boardriders & swimmers need to be given a wide berth, ideally a good hundred metres either side of your take off spot. Ideally, you want to be riding the outermost break, so if you do get clobbered you'll be upside down in deep water, & the wave will release you from it's power, rather than drag you 200m in to shore upside down. Given that a wave will break in water around 1.3x it's height (so, a 10 foot wave will break in 13ft of water), this means you've got to go looking for a sandbank formed past the beach break. If it's bigger than 4 feet, with the odd bigger set, you should probably forget about a 'fun' session, it will more likely be an 'experiential session'. Look on the forecasts for wavelength, more than swell size. A long wavelength (10-14 seconds) will bring enough power to a 1m swell to make it a very interesting surf, whereas a 1 ½ -2m swell with a 7 or 8 second wavelength will have a lot less power. It goes without saying, that any steepness in the formation of the waves is to be avoided. We can really only surf our clumsy sea kayaks in a spilling wave, dumpers are best left to the short boarders.

Don't fool around in shore break, it will eventually hurt you. As Dr Trevor cheerfully told me a few years ago, every time you surf a sea kayak, you're one wave closer to the one that will bust your shoulder. Playing with surf that is likely to upend you onto hard sand with almighty force is only going to shorten that inevitability. Remember, the beach-side of your boat is a no-go zone, once you're moving. A brace on the beach side will pop your shoulder like a cork, while exiting your kayak on the beach side will get you a nice set of bruised shins, at best.

A helmet is a must. I don't buy the argument that they make you brave beyond your ability & thus likely to take on something you can't handle. The simple fact is, if you don't need a head, you don't need a helmet. I have had numerous encounters with paddle/kayak/rocks/sea bed which would have left me dazed or bleeding without a helmet. Instead, I stagger out of the water with a 'what the.....' look on my face & a few scratches on my shiny Gath. When in doubt – that awful feeling when you realise that you're in the wrong spot on a big wave – put your foot down. Sometimes it's safer to power down the face & have the whitewater engulf you, than being taken over the falls after you stop paddling or try vainly to back off.

Surf kayaking is an evolving sport & a different kettle of fish altogether. In a country like Australia where great surf is abundant, I can see a time in the not too distant future where surf kayaking

takes over from whitewater paddling, & sea kayakers have a surf kayak as their fun boat. Surfing in a surf kayak is pure joy, with a much broader wave type available to you, & much less dire consequences when you wipe out, as the wave has much less boat to 'hang on to' & smash around. You do, however need a good skill set & a roll that works under pressure. Happy paddling.

(Disclaimer – please don't hold me responsible if you follow my advice & get cleaned up! Surf is unpredictable & even the most experienced paddlers are humbled more often than they care to acknowledge. Before you do anything, get good instruction on proper support strokes, etiquette & technique, surf in a group & watch out for each other & other beachgoers, wear helmets, & use your common sense. You only need a 2ft wave to have fun & get your skills base started in the surf.)