

Visiting Scotland Learning by Doing Around Skye

by Catriona Miller

I was in Scotland in May for my cousin's wedding and took advantage of it to get out kayaking for a few days. The wedding was at Eilean Donan castle, 15 miles south of the Isle of Skye on northwest coast of Scotland. I have another cousin that lives in Kyle of Lochalsh, which is directly across the mainland from Skye, and I immediately started planning a kayak outing with him. He mentioned that Gordon Brown lived nearby, and he'd made Gordon's website for him:

<http://www.skyakadventures.com/>. He also said that there were kayaks for hire on the docks in Plockton.

About a week or two before heading over to Scotland, I decided I better actually book a kayak tour or figure out where I could rent a good one, and I began inundating the entire Scottish kayaking internet world with emails and forum posts. Apparently, you can't actually rent a kayak in Scotland without being BCU level 4 or 5 certified/or demonstrating skills. I can of course demonstrate skills, but demonstrating them in level 4 conditions seemed a bit extreme just to rent a kayak on an inland loch and toodle around. It also costs 200-250 GBP for a days private tour/lesson, which was a bit more than I wanted to spend to kayak in Scotland. You can join the Glasgow Kayak Club for about 30 GBP a year, which then gives you access to all of their club boats and equipment to use. I had a really nice member of the Glasgow Kayak Club offer to take me kayaking around Helensburgh when I first got there.... I was tempted by that offer, except there were 100 mph wind gusts that day and from what I could see the Clyde was churning in Glasgow. She sent pictures of the loch where she lived that day: For some reason we decided not to paddle that day.



I drove up to Kyle of Lochalsh after a few days in Glasgow to escape the wedding craziness. I had scheduled a day with Gordon Brown—I'd been told that it was going to be a mixed level group, but they'd make sure to challenge me. The sun was shining and everything looked lovely at 4 AM, but by the time I'd headed over to Skye it was cold, wet and there were 25 MPH winds. Gordon offered to let everyone come back another day when there wasn't as much wind, and said what he usually does when someone seemed to be fearful. "So what's the worst thing that can happen?" Typically someone says "Oh, I fall in" Then he says "No, you die. That's the worst thing that can happen. So falling in isn't really all that bad."

I was quite happy that I decided both my drysuit and the dress for the wedding had to go in my carryon. They fitted me out with an NDK Explorer LV and a Lendal Archipelago paddle (he had many Werners with crook shafts, but I wanted a straight shaft).



We put in at Armadale which Gordon figured would be most sheltered spot on Skye with a harbor to duck into if things got rough. When I got home that evening, my cousin told me how one of his clients had called and after discussing the horrible weather, mentioned there were a bunch of nutty kayakers actually out kayaking, so he'd known exactly where I was.

We started off tucked behind a stone dock, with Gordon sending us out to make turns in the wind... We'd do a few turns and come back behind to get more instruction. He had everyone else out in the relative open making turns, and told me to get as close to the crashing surf on the rocks and stone wall of the dock as possible, making as tight of turns as possible, and edging my boat as much as possible. Once I got used to it, I actually really liked the NDK Explorer LV—very easy to hold an edge and very responsive to edges on waves and rough stuff.

After watching us turn a few times, he gave us a few suggestions, and stressed letting the wind turn the boat for you—when we want to turn in the wind, paddle on the downwind side and let the wind turn your boat—so if you want to turn downwind, back stroke a couple of times on the downwind side. If you want to turn upwind, front stroke a couple of times on the upwind side.... If you do that, the wind will just blow your boat in the direction you want to turn.

After he was confident of our turning abilities, we followed the rocky coastline out of the harbor and then shot straight across to some islands—Gordon sent me to surf the waves, while he watched the others more closely. We did that, saw a few seals on the island, did some other drills, met up with Morag who was taking a newbie in a really sheltered harbor and had lunch. While we ate lunch, the winds were increasing and we were having force 8 gusts, he thought—seemed like about 45 MPH to me.



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Gordon had us shoot across straight towards a sheltered bay to see if we could make it, when he was convinced we could make it in the wind, he had us veer back out towards the rocks—and then Bill tipped over. Bill was an old guy that had taken up "canadian canoeing" as he called it, but was taking kayaking courses. I rushed back for him, as did Gordon, he got him in with a heel hook reentry and then had me stabilize and put Bill's skirt back on for him during an assisted tow. Bill was hyperventilating and really shaky, so I was glad to have practiced tows assists recently at CPA SK203's trip leader training in May.

After getting Bill settled, I stuck with him for a while until he looked like he'd calmed down, and then went to play on the rocks. Looking at the crossing we originally did, Gordon decided it was probably better that we not try it with the wind gusting as strong as it was, and headed back towards the sheltered bay where we put in for lunch. I continued to play in the rocks, and when we got back to the sheltered bay, Gordon gave me things to work on. I'd go out into the wind/waves/rocks and try them, and then head back for more advice. His teaching style was basically to ask you questions about what you were doing when and why... and then get you to try different variations on it to see what would work, until of course you realized that the way he wanted you to do it was the easiest way.

The next day when I woke up it was bright and sunny—probably the prettiest morning I had there. The wedding was at 6 that evening, and I decided to run over to Skyak to get another paddle in while there was good weather. The only other day I could kayak was Sunday, which was predicted to have high winds and rain, and I'd have to do a six hour drive back to Glasgow afterwards. When I popped in and said I could paddle till 3, they said, "Oh, come with us to Kyleactin—it's just opposite the bridge and it's beautiful".

There was a mixed group again that day, a guy who was a high level paddler, but whose wife had never paddled before, Bill from the previous day, and another guy. Gordon began going over how to calculate the local tides using almanacs from the closest tide stations. It should be admitted that he'd never been able to predict the tides around Skye where the bridge is, because of how the area is silting in, the bridge supports, etc. But we would get there just as the tide was running in the opposite direction from the wind.



He suggested I try the Avocet LV that day just to feel it, and we got the new girl situated (first time in a kayak). We paddle over to the bridge pillar (waiting there while he's getting the girl going) and it's just a swirly mess of currents underneath the bridge because the wind was going opposite the tide and funneling through the pillars. The wind was probably about 10 knots by then and we paddled across the shipping channel to an area by the lighthouse and the other bridge pillar, where it's very narrow, but there was a little protected inlet to the side to duck into when we needed to talk. Then, he had us paddle in circles around the pillar, loose or tight circles, using different strokes. The girl who has never been in a kayak was paddling in this disturbed zone with the wind intensifying going through the pillar gap between the pillar and the lighthouse. She got stuck by getting blown against the rocks once, and I told Gordon and he said "Oh, she'll be fine, she'll figure it out." Her boy friend said, "Yeah, I thought I'd let Gordon introduce her to kayaking, because if I was trying to teach her, she'd've been screaming at me about an hour ago".

Then Gordon pairs us up: "One of you guys is going to close your eyes, and the other is going to tell you what strokes to make as you paddle around the pillar". It's more than a bit bizarre to be out in choppy soup and wind without seeing what you're doing. We take turns doing that, each guiding the "blind" paddler around the pillar. Gordon said "That teaches you two things: One, you need to use your body more when you're kayaking, women instinctively use their lower body for balance, men don't; Two, those of you that were guiding, were telling other people how to paddle their boat, while paddling your own boat through waves without any problem. Even Sue, who had never been in a boat before, did a complete 360 turn in chop without thinking about it while guiding someone else. If you stop overanalyzing what you're doing, your body will just do what it needs to do"

After lunch, the winds are stronger and Gordon had us shoot across to a rocky island, and then on to the next one which has various rocks across the tip and wind and waves hitting them. We dart through the gaps in the rocks, and Sue was rock gardening in 15-20 mph winds. He gives Sue, Bill and Tim fairly big gaps to go through, and he starts pointing out little holes to me, saying, "There's just enough water for you to get through that on a wave, and then I want you to go sharp right and get through that next tight little crack, then go through this one... and when you've done that a few times, I want you to go back through them in the opposite direction." I do that, and then eventually see Tim get broadsided by a wave and capsize. Gordon and I sprint over to him, I collect the paddle and Tim's hat, and we get Tim to do a heel hook, and Gordon has me support while he tows us out of the wind.

By then, I had to leave for the wedding. I'd love to go back sometime and do a more strenuous paddle with Skyak and some kayak touring in Scotland, but my time was limited with family obligations this trip. I did learn a lot and did some great drills. I was thrilled being able to paddle in Scotland. The contrast between how kayaking is taught in Scotland and the U.S. was striking.

See more pics at <http://www.cpakayaker.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=25&t=5819>