

A kayaking we go! It's the ultimate in Cape waterway traveling

By Stephanie Foster

Tue Oct 03, 2006, 08:00 PM EDT

Harwich - Which goes on first, sun block or bug repellent? Both are sticky and white. If they don't sink into my skin, I'll look like a member of a primitive tribe in New Guinea on my first kayak trip. I've always wanted to try it, haven't you? Next: hat, sunglasses, towel, pen, paper, camera, snack, and water. Do you wish you were going right now instead of reading this newspaper? Well, since you aren't, I'll let you know what it's like.

Naturalist Dick Hilmer offered to take me along on one of his Explore Cape Cod Tours on a perfect day. Actually, he is more than a kayaker; he is an educator, with boundless curiosity, enthusiasm and energy.

Will I be able to learn to paddle, take notes, eat apricots, take photographs and keep the kayak upright? I want to pick some cat-o-nine tails too. My husband gives me the gimlet eye and tells me the boats are tipsy. I could end up kayaking upside down. I ignore his gloomy forecast. After all, I have a decent sense of balance and a positive outlook. I'm not sure if I am athletically inclined, however.

Kayak -- a neat word that can be spelled backwards without looking any different. How hard can it be to do? It's definitely a hot sport. I've seen hundreds of kayaks on the tops of cars this year. Will the waterways be as busy as Route 6? I'm about to find out.

A group of seven ladies, most of them experienced kayakers, has signed up for a trip down the Herring River in West Harwich. Hilmer matches us to paddles and kayaks by size and ability. A couple of the women have taken this tour many times and tell me they prefer to go with a guide rather than by themselves in their own kayak. Egad, the kayaks are tiny. I feel a little dread creep in my stomach. After a 20-minute lesson on shore, I nervously climb into mine. I feel as if I've added a mermaid tail to my body. I practice a few paddle strokes. "How're you doing?" asks Hilmer.

"Great," I lie. I try to relax but my whole body is gritting its teeth. At least I'm alert. Hilmer tells us the tide will be with us on the way back. He describes the area and its history and I get to see my neighbor's backyards. If worse came to worst, I could walk home since I live in the area. Lisa Hartel from New Jersey and Mary Kamalski from Los Angeles who are in the "divorce boat," a tandem kayak, accompany us. Meanwhile the other guide Richard Rodman has gone ahead with the more advanced kayakers.

"How do you know which way to turn when you come to a fork in the marsh?" I ask. Hilmer tells me he follows the flow of the water. He can tell by its movement which direction to go. By now I'm beginning to relax and concentrate on my strokes. We come upon a lone Canada goose who ignores us. Little sandpipers dart amongst the reeds. Dragon flies flit through the marsh. A green heron flies alongside us. All is good in the world. There are no other boats around, no fishermen motoring past. It is totally quiet except for the chirping of birds. We hear a marsh wren. Then it is silent again. Suddenly we become aware that we are alone. The five kayakers and Rodman have totally vanished from sight.

Hilmer whistles a special code whistle but Rodman doesn't whistle back. He tries again but Rodman is not within hearing distance. So much for the Boy Scout routine. He resorts to a cell phone. They confer but can't determine where the other is. We are lost.

But we are not in danger. We all laugh. It is quite the ice breaker being lost. The problem is we could get more lost so we turn around and head back. Eventually, Hilmer's whistles are returned by Rodman and we cheerfully reunite. We paddle under a footbridge, the Bell's Neck Bridge where kids are crabbing and make it to the Herring Run, where we disembark to stretch our legs.

We are the kings and queens of the river. The only other beings afloat are a pair of mute swans and five cygnets. The male is protective so we give them wide berth. Swans can be dangerous when threatened.

We pass patches of brilliant red cardinal flowers with hummingbirds collecting nectar, huge pink marsh mallow blossoms, purple sea lavender, blue spires of pickering flower and the prize I seek, cat-o-nine tails. By now I have acquired a bit of dexterity and sidle up to a stand and pick a half-dozen. Ha! I haven't tipped over yet! And to not keep you in suspense. I don't.

Hilmer stops us briefly and asks us to listen. To the quiet. The wonderful and rare, absolute silence of nature. It was as if we were sharing a prayer.

We finally arrived safe and sound back to the town landing. The last 10 minutes were the toughest for me. Rodman offered to tow me. But I refused. I came in on my own steam. The 2-1/2 hour trip had taken us four hours. And I can proudly say I enjoyed every minute of it.

Learn to kayak with: Explore Cape Cod Tours, Inc. 508-240-1211