

Choosing a Touring Kayak Paddle Traditional Euro-Style

By [Michael Gray](#)

Most people spend a lot of time, energy and money choosing a kayak. They don't often focus as much energy on their choice of paddle and frankly, that choice can make an even bigger difference at the end of a few miles than your boat.

Fit is one of the biggest factors affecting how well you're going to enjoy your paddle. Length: You want a paddle that is literally just long enough for you to reach the water for proper stroke position (see forward stroke article). The blade should be immersed all the way with your hands in optimal stroke position for touring. Any longer and you're simply carrying around more paddle weight than you need to. Remember that if you have long arms, you can even get away with a shorter paddle because of your natural reach. You might be surprised to find some very skilled paddlers using paddles less than 215 cm long. Shaft size: People with smaller hands may find a smaller shaft diameter to be a bit more comfortable too, especially when combined with a relaxed hand grip technique.

Blade size: If you are playing in waves a lot or sprinting for exercise, you may want a large paddle blade, whereas for all day touring you may want a more moderate blade size. You may find that smaller paddlers perform much better with a smaller blade that allows them a wide range of cadences throughout a paddling day. Smaller, lighter paddles can often bring a straggler to the front of a pack.

Weight has the largest effect on your perception of a paddle's comfort to use. Let's face it, you carry that thing at arm's length for as long as you're on the water. The heavier it is, the more it will wear you and your joints out. I think that once you find a paddle that weighs in less than 28 oz, you'll be a lot happier camper. Cost of light paddles increases exponentially as you shed ounces to as little as 19! Unless you really have lots of extra money, you don't necessarily reap lots more benefit from the very lightest paddles unless you are competing, whether it be on the water or with other paddle clubbers. Most entry level touring paddles with asymmetrical blades tip the scales at close to 40 oz, so that high 20 area starts to look pretty good! Most of the better composite paddle makers offer paddles that weigh in at less than 30 oz these days and the extra investment is well worth it.

Materials used in paddle construction include plastic/aluminum combinations, wood and composites.

- Low End: most common entry level touring paddles have injection molded plastic blades and an aluminum shaft covered with plastic or fiberglass. They're durable, inexpensive and heavy.
- Wood: there are a number of laminated wood touring paddles on the market that are relatively inexpensive and have a nice warm organic feel. They're usually a bit on the heavy side, but in use, their perceived weight is less than you think. The natural buoyancy of wood means that the water supports a fair bit of the paddle's weight during a stroke. Wood can mean a little seasonal maintenance maintaining its finish, but it can be a very nice choice.
- Composites: a variety of types of glass, kevlar and carbon fiber are all used to create paddles that are strong, lightweight and have efficient blade shapes. This is where you will find the ultra light, esoteric and ultra-expensive. It is also an area where you can order custom lengths, colors and shaft sizes to really get a good fit. Would I advocate using a \$400 paddle to move a \$1200 boat? Sure. I often do. A light, efficient paddle that fits you well will be the single biggest joy in your paddling day!

So, spending a bit more on a lightweight paddle that fits you well can really increase your paddling comfort, give your joints a break and maybe, just maybe, even make you a better paddler. It's fairly easy to test-drive a variety of paddles. Anytime you get a chance to go to a club paddle or any group trip, you'll find people with big grins on their faces with paddles they really like, ask 'em if you can

take their paddle for a brief spin. They'll usually be a happy to share a paddle that they really like and it'll give you a chance to sample until you find the right direction for you.

Michael Gray writes from the island of Roatan and never goes anywhere without his Epic paddle. You can view his company's website at www.uncommonadv.com) for information about instruction and tours in the Caribbean and the Great Lakes. .