



Greenland style Kayaking

WHERE IT ALL STARTED



Traditional kayak building is a resurgent art across the globe.

Several thousand years ago the inhabitants of Greenland knew more about kayaking than we can every dream of knowing. The origin of our paddle sport defined the life, and death, of generations of hunters who grew up along the shores of what is technically the world's largest island -- Greenland. With the Inuit survival no longer dependent on the combined art of paddling and hunting, the traditions of the Greenland paddling culture are being preserved through a passionate worldwide community dedicated to passing on the legacy of knowledge and skills.

Words: Jillian Macdonald Photography: Eric Moyst



Passionate kayak builders sharing the knowledge of the different regional construction methods at a traditional paddling event.

Greenland is a beautiful barren wilderness, yet everything that makes it beautiful made it challenging for the inhabitants to eke out an existence. For many months of the year, the only available source of sustenance was sea life. To ensure their survival, over many generations the Greenland Inuit developed techniques and equipment that allowed them to become efficient hunters of mammalian sea life. It was through this process of development that the traditional Greenland kayak emerged as the preferred means to hunt. More than just a source of food, every part of the sea life the Inuit hunted was used. Whether it was blubber used to waterproof the clothes and craft, bones used to make harpoon tips, or meat used to feed the village, nothing was wasted. Only the available resources defined the limits of the Inuit ingenuity. The original kayakers were built using driftwood that washed up on the shoreline. They were skinned using seal and sea lion hides, sewn together with sinew. The paddling hunter's clothes were also assembled from skins, kept waterproof and supple by rubbing melted blubber into them regularly. After the development of the steamer around the turn of the twentieth century, travel to Greenland became relatively easy. This ease of movement of people and goods has forever changed the character of the island and its people. It is no longer a subsistence community: the rifle replaced the harpoon, steamships brought imports, and the grocery store now has replaced the hunter. For decades it also looked like the advent of the motorboat would replace the ancient kayakers, and the craft of building and art of paddling these first kayakers nearly became extinct. Seeing the inevitable demise of the Greenland kayak culture rapidly approaching, a small dedicated band of Inuit established an organization, Qaannat Kattuffiat, to preserve the knowledge and skills of the ancient hunters and their craft. Over the past decades several affiliate groups have been established around the globe, specifically in the USA, Denmark and Japan to support the goals of Qaannat Kattuffiat by ensuring the skills of building, paddling, harpooning and rolling with Greenland style kayakers continue.



The culture and traditions are as important as learning the skills.



Everyone is welcome to learn with whatever equipment they have.

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The author practicing a hand roll in the ice laden waters of Minnesota (Image courtesy Monkey Brain Photography)



True to traditional mentoring culture, all participants are both teachers and learners freely sharing their experiences.



MENTORING IS THE VOLUNTARY TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS; THERE IS NO PAYMENT OR REWARD, ONLY THE SIMPLE JOY OF ENSURING THE TRADITIONS ARE KEPT ALIVE, AND YOU CAN STILL SEE THIS IN ACTION AT MANY OF THE TRADITIONAL PADDLING EVENTS.

The skinny stick – or Greenland paddle.

When the ancient Inuit first took to their craft along the shores of Greenland, their paddles were already influenced by generations of previous paddle carvers. The Inuit migrations from the east and west brought traditions and techniques developed along the shores of the northern Atlantic and Pacific nations. The evolution of the Inuit paddle, predominately double-bladed, was heavily influenced by the stealth and speed necessary for hunting. Modern paddlers' needs have changed, and there are few left who subsistence hunt, so it is not surprising that the shape of their paddles has continued to evolve.

Traditionally with Greenland paddles, length, width, Loom size, shoulder position etc. are all specified based upon the paddler's body size. One point that is frequently overlooked is that traditionally one's kayak was also constructed using a set of anthropometric rules (body size) so not only did the paddle match the paddler, but the paddle also matched the kayak. Modern paddles are different due to mass production and the fact that we are now primarily paddling for recreation rather than hunting for survival.



The ancient art of qajaq building creates beautiful hulls.

What make a Greenland kayak so special?

The Greenland qajaq, or kayak, as the English speaking world more commonly spells it, is not a boat; it would be more accurate to describe it as a prosthesis, an extension enabling the hunter to swiftly and silently approach, harpoon and recover the prey. Qaannat (the plural of qajaq) fit the hunter just like a prosthetic limb is custom made for its owner. The width, length, height are all individually designed to envelope the hunters and allow them to move the qajaq as if they were parts of their bodies. Rolling is one example of an activity where this connection between hunter (now paddler), and qajaq suddenly becomes obvious. The qajaq follows the movements of the paddler's body, it responds to the pressures applied and muscles moved. Any disconnect between the body and qajaq quickly inhibits the motion and ease of rolling. Many modern kayaks are built with cockpits large enough and decks high enough to allow a large range of different sized paddlers to sit in luxurious repose. Few if any paddlers will actually fit the kayak well. Even with the best custom foaming and adjustment of seat and foot pegs, the voluminous kayak cockpit inhibits that connection between body and kayak that is the essence of qajaq design. A well-fitted qajaq should feel like getting into and wearing the perfect pair of skinny jeans.

Teaching as a culture

In order for the Greenland communities to survive it was imperative that each generation passed on their knowledge to the next. This culture of teaching is continued now by the qajaq organizations around the world through a process of mentoring. Traditional paddlers are as passionate about passing on their knowledge as they are about their qajaq and paddles. Mentoring is the voluntary transfer of knowledge and skills; there is no payment or reward, only the simple joy of ensuring the traditions are kept alive, and you can still see this in action at many of the traditional paddling events.

Gatherings

Across the globe more and more kayak events are cropping up, presenting wonderful opportunities for people to learn or grow their skills afloat. Along with the growth in general kayaking events there has been a complementary increase in Greenland Kayaking events globally. Traditional events differ from other kayaking events in a couple of important ways. First, there is a passionate core community interested in preserving the qajaq culture of the Greenlanders, and these passionate people use the traditional mentoring approach to expand the knowledge of the Greenland qajaq skills. Secondly, at most events you will not just find groups focused on skills afloat, you will also find people ashore passing on their skills of skin-on-frame kayak building, Greenland paddle carving, Inuit rope gymnastics, strength games and even story-telling of the history and legends of the Inuit. Qajaq USA, the US-based group focused on the preservation of the Qajaq Culture, brings a fleet of traditional kayaks to each event along with a collection of Greenland paddles, and traditional paddling gear, enabling people to try kayaking using the equipment that closely mimics the way the Inuit hunted. If you are lucky you will even be able to experience a harpoon hunt (using Styrofoam seals). Traditional paddling events welcome all comers: modern kayak enthusiasts and complete paddling novices alike will be brought into the family and loaned the equipment necessary to have a traditional qajaq experience, deciding for themselves if they are interested in helping to preserve this wonderful culture.



Greenland rolling can be as much an art as a method of self-rescue.

If you wish to learn more about traditional Greenland kayaking, you can visit QajaqUSA.org or the Authors website QajaqRolls.com or attend any of these traditional paddling events:

- TIPS (Traditional Inuit Paddlers of the Southeast)
- SSTIKS (South Sound Traditional Inuit Kayak Symposium)
- HRGF (Hudson River Greenland Festival)
- Qajaq TC (Qajaq Training Camp)
- Traditional Paddlers Gathering
- DelMarVa Paddlers Retreat