

Greenland Paddler Paddling in Skinny Jeans

By Christopher Crowhurst

The qajaq was developed by the Inuit to allow them to move among the sea mammals and hunt for their family and village's survival. The qajaq is not a boat; it would be more accurate to describe it as a prosthesis, an extension of the hunter's body enabling them to swiftly and silently approach, harpoon and recover their prey. Qajaqs fit the hunter just like a prosthetic limb is custom-made for its owner. The width, length, height are all custom-made to envelope the hunter and allow them to move the qajaq as if it was a part of their body, literally swimming with their qajaq.

Rolling is one example of an activity where this connection between hunter (now paddler) and their 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.

Turning is the same. The methods by which many modern paddlers use their paddle and arms to move their qajariaq (kayak) are the antithesis of how the Inuit move their qajaq through the water. Graceful extended paddle turns, leveraging one's body in the water, moving the qajaq with the lower torso and pressure applied through the legs and feet all require a connection and fit that seems alien to many modern paddlers. This should not come as a surprise when the shapes and sizes of most modern-day kayaks are considered.

Many modern kayaks are built with cockpits large enough to allow a butt-first, legs-second approach to boarding. The cockpits are large enough and the decks are high enough to allow a large range of different-sized paddlers to sit in luxurious repose. Unfortunately, few if any paddlers will actually fit the kayak. 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.

If getting into your kayak feels like pulling on a pair of skinny jeans, then there is a good chance you are paddling a well-fitting qajaq.

If it is made to fit you, or simply happens to fit you then, it will be comfortable all day. A snug connection between paddler and qajaq does not necessitate discomfort. A great connection enhances efficiency both in forward stroke and turning, allowing a seamless transfer of force from the paddler to the qajaq.

It would be easy for traditional paddlers to become upset by uninformed water-cooler talk describing our beloved activities as boating or rowing. Rather than responding negatively, perhaps we need to reflect and use these opportunities positively to delicately educate people of the historical significance of the qajaq and the Inuit hunters who made them.

Learning the traditional methods of powering, turning, rolling and harpooning with a qajaq makes one appreciate how important this connection between paddler and qajaq truly is. It is only by sharing this experience that we are going to make people understand why a qajaq is so much more than a polyethylene shop-bought kayak or qajariaq. As a board adviser for Qajaq USA, it is my role to help ensure people continue to get the opportunity to experience the entire collective qajaq culture and be given the chance to appreciate the difference between a modern kayak and its predecessor the qajaq. You can find out more about the qajaq and the events where you can experience them by visiting the Qajaq USA website: <http://qajaqusa.org>

I hope to see you afloat this year in a qajaq. 🐻

About the author

Christopher Crowhurst, an ex-pat Brit now living in Minnesota, USA is slightly obsessed with Greenland rolling. In 2010 he founded Qajaq Rolls, a philanthropic business that promotes the passing on of the traditional art of Greenland style kayak (qajaq) rolling. Christopher has developed video, diagrams and written instruction to help paddlers learn the traditional Greenland rolls. During 2010 he self-published Rolling with Sticks, a waterproof guide book of 25 Greenland-style rolls, and followed this up with a companion DVD. In 2011 he used the business to establish and fund a program of free rolling clinics, providing hands-on training for paddlers looking to develop their Greenland-style kayak rolls. You can contact Christopher through his website: <http://qajaqrolls.com>

