

The Boston Globe

Surface attention

Guides show paddlers how to know another world

By Brian MacQuarrie

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EASTHAM - "Let's get ready to rock and roll!" **Dick Hilmer** exhorts his charges, who are gathered in a life-jacketed semicircle on the sun-blanketed shore of Nauset Marsh.

Rolling in a kayak is not high on the agenda of his afternoon customers, but Hilmer makes his kayaking tours akin to a rock concert. This is ecotourism with a rollicking edge, and Hilmer seeks to combine fun, education, and a body-friendly workout in the daily excursions of **Explore Cape Cod**, his kayaking company.

"I don't teach kayaking. I teach balance," Hilmer says, and he's not talking only about staying upright in the slender boats. He's also referring to an out-of-office appreciation of Cape Cod that comes from sitting in a slow-moving, low-riding, nature-compatible kayak.

"Just relax and enjoy the ride," Hilmer reminds his paddlers-in-waiting.

That stress-free goal has helped make kayaking popular with Cape visitors. From Buzzards Bay to Nauset Marsh to the inlets of Wellfleet and Truro, kayak outfitters are catering to customers who want a view of an osprey nest instead of the action on a high-definition television.

"I think kayaking offers our visitors a unique way to explore Cape Cod that they hadn't had before," said Kristen Mitchell Hughes, vice president of marketing for the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce. "There's such beautiful places to kayak around here."

Options for kayakers are plentiful on the Cape, including guided tours, solo rentals, corporate and family outings, eco-tours, and lessons. Kayaks can be rented for one or two passengers, and the venues can range from riding ocean surf, to navigating rivers, to exploring secluded creeks.

Of course, many kayakers bring their own boats, launch them at a public beach or landing, and set off on a tour limited only by their whims and their watch. The Cape - prodded by fingers of saltwater and pocked by freshwater kettle holes - offers a rich variety of scenarios.

"There are coves to explore, there are marshes. On the back side of West Dennis Beach, there's a beautiful area to go for a swim or a walk," says Abi Smith, who, with her husband, Cliff, operates Bass River Cruises and Kayaks in West Dennis.

"More people want to be involved in active sports, and they're just trying to get their exercise in a fun way. It's a very green sport," says Smith, whose company provides rentals but not guided tours. "A lot of families are involved. We've had people going out with very small children, even a 6-month-old. We've also had folks in their 70s and 80s."

On Hilmer's twice-daily tours, which last three or four hours, kayakers are guided around the maze of Nauset Marsh, located in the Cape Cod National Seashore, and Pleasant Bay, just above the elbow of the peninsula. The route can vary according to weather, wind, and currents, so Hilmer

chooses from 14 launching sites in Eastham, Orleans, and Chatham.

“We analyze the conditions, and we launch where we give the paddler the best opportunity to have a great time,” says Hilmer, who runs the company with his wife, Linda.

The meteorological vagaries mean that kayakers with reservations are wise to carry a cellphone as launch time approaches.

On a recent afternoon, after a peppy primer on paddling technique, Hilmer sets an easy pace in Nauset Marsh as he leads eight kayakers along a quiet channel called Cable Creek. The marsh grass, clear water, bird sounds, and gentle glide on an outgoing tide quickly consign the landbound Cape to an out-of-sight world.

“The first 10 minutes I call kayaking chaos,” Hilmer tells the group. Then, after wobbly paddlers become more comfortable with their mechanics, an entertaining classroom-on-the-marsh begins. Over three hours, Hilmer holds court on the history of horseshoe crabs, the feeding habits of seals, the changing topography of the barrier beach, and how to read the depth and flow of water.

“Always follow the lobster traps. That’s always a sign of deep water,” Hilmer says. With only a 3-inch draft, however, 15-foot kayaks can get just about anywhere.

Twice-a-day, seven-day-a-week tours for about 2,500 customers a year are not a grind. Just the opposite, Hilmer insists.

“It’s the dynamics. It’s the fun. It’s why we teach out here,” Hilmer says. “I’ll go until the water and the air temperature don’t equal 100.”

Kayaking took time to establish a foothold on Cape Cod, says Kim Fernandes-Huff, owner of Cape Cod Kayak, based in Cataumet. Interest was so low in the mid-1990s, she recalls, that some of her early business was given for free.

“I had gone to Hawaii in my early 20s, and when I got back to the Cape, there was no one who did it,” Fernandes-Huff says. “A lot of people had the misconception that you would get stuck in them.”

And then there was the matter of the Cape’s fickle, fleeting window for outdoor activity. “The season is so short in New England for warm water,” she says.

Now, kayaking has “really grown; it’s huge,” according to Fernandes-Huff. “We’re very, very busy. We’re pretty much going seven days a week. We even have pool classes in the off-season - Eskimo rolls and rescues and that kind of thing.”

The reason for the surge, she believes, is that “more people have learned what kayaking is,” and that it is not solely the province of white-water rafting.

Instead, now “you have all ages doing it,” Fernandes-Huff says. “You can go at your pace, drop anchor, and read a novel.”

Cataumet, which is part of Bourne, is sometimes overshot by kayakers who believe the farther reaches of the Cape offer better, more placid venues.

“For a kayaker who wants to go out for peace and quiet, a lot of people overlook us,” Fernandes-Huff notes. But being closer to metro Boston does not mean Bourne and adjoining areas in north and west Falmouth cannot compete for serenity, she argues.

“If you find us, there are a lot of nice nooks and crannies,” she says. In her view, the Pocasset and Back rivers in Bourne are appealing for their laid-back nature; the surf-minded might head toward Wild Harbor in North Falmouth.

For Hilmer, who is 57 and has been offering tours since 1998, one of the beauties of kayaking is the nuanced energy that is visible every day and all around him. The dramatic changes caused by erosion are one appeal; the fish and waterfowl are another; and the familiar contours of the Cape’s famous coastline are yet one more.

The effect is tangible on his clients, Hilmer says, whether they be affluent vacationers or inner-city youngsters who have seen plenty of concrete but never a salt marsh. That exposure speaks to one of his company’s founding principles: to teach coastal ecology to youths and environmental groups.

“It’s about getting people out here to understand where they are,” says Hilmer. “It keeps me young.”



Kayaking on Cape Cod

If You Go

Explore Cape Cod

508-240-1211

www.explorecapecod.com

Two eco-tours daily into October; launching locations vary; 9 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Solo \$49, tandem \$35 per person. Offerings also include seal tours, specialty outings, and field trips. Equipment and instruction provided. Reservations required.