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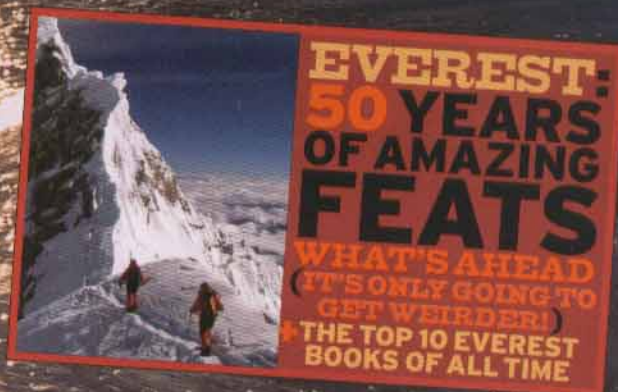
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REVIEW

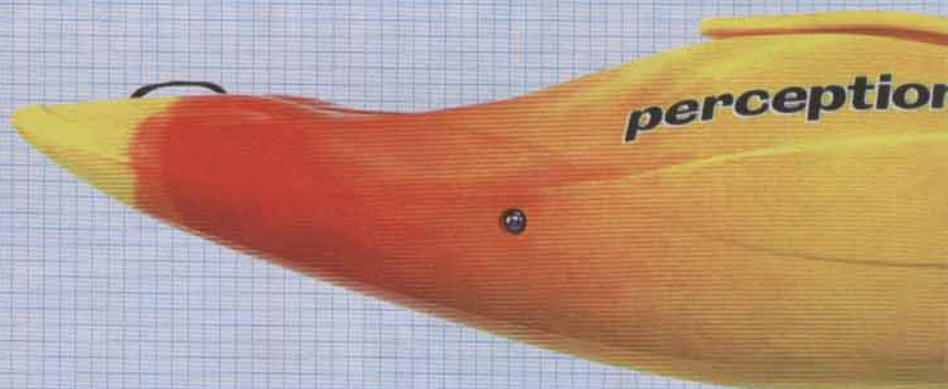
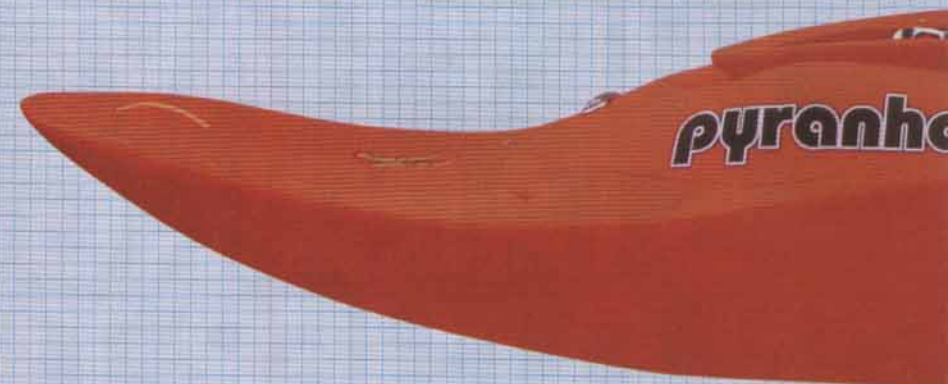
SPLASH COURSE

EVEN IF YOU CAN'T THROW DOWN A DONKEY FLIP—YET—A NEW FLOTILLA OF KAYAKS GUARANTEES YOU'LL HAVE MORE FUN IN RAGING WATER
BY MARK ANDERS

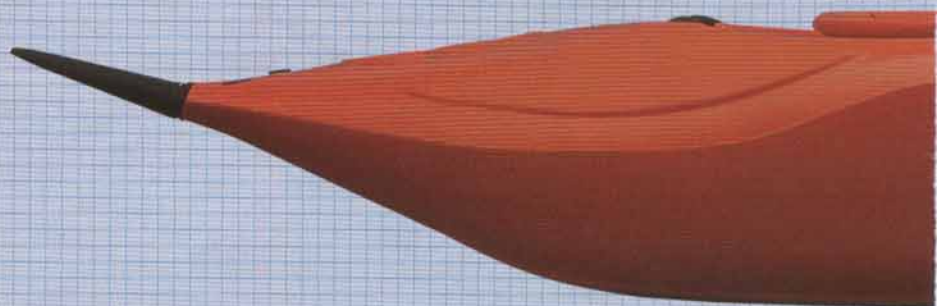
REMEMBER WHEN whitewater paddling was all about running rapids? Well, today's action centers around holes and standing waves, and in an effort to squeeze every last drop of fun out of your local hydraulic, the paddle-sports industry is cranking out boats that are impossibly stubby and dramatically more maneuverable—a few with surprise add-ons (surfboard fins, anyone?). And while the new designs are edgy, they're also a windfall for recreational kayakers: A once-steep learning curve has seriously flattened.

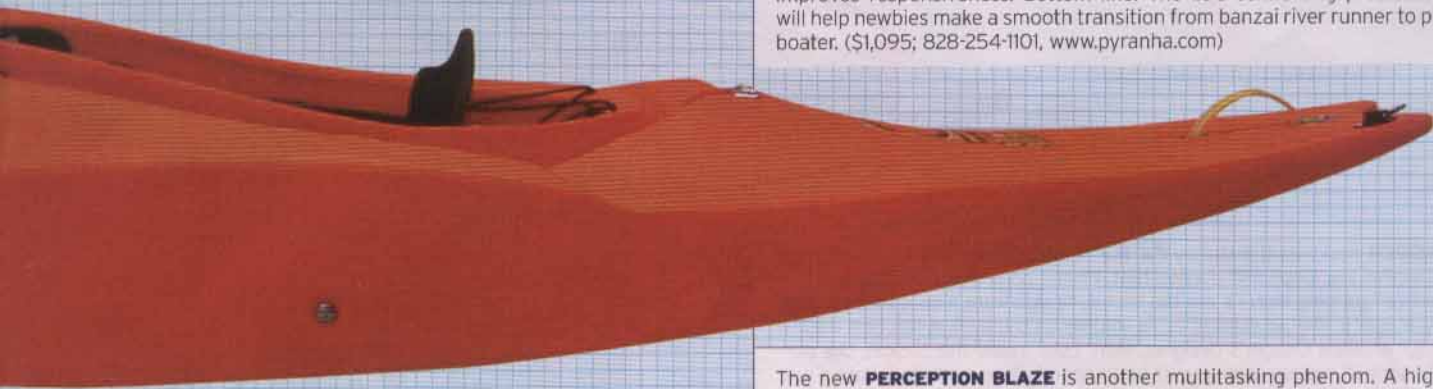
"People who get in a kayak now are able, in one year, to do playboating moves that took me ten years to learn," says Montreal-based Corran Addison, a designer for Riot. As engineering advances developed for the hole-and-wave crowd begin to show up in big-rapids runners (which still constitute the majority of whitewater rigs sold), gone are the auger-prone bows and sharp, easily flipped edges. These reinvented kayaks can survive Class V whitewater but also turn basic playboating tricks with ease.

Here, then, are three spanking-new river runners that love to surf, spin, and jump; a pair of state-of-the-art playboat designs for expert paddlers yearning to nail an aerial front-flip or an aerial corkscrew (a.k.a. a donkey flip); and a state-of-the-art expedition kayak for those dreaming of remote and epic Class V+. All follow the industry mind-shift toward "a more user-friendly package," says Dagger designer Marc Lyle. In other words, you'll spend more time floating on the river than swimming in it.

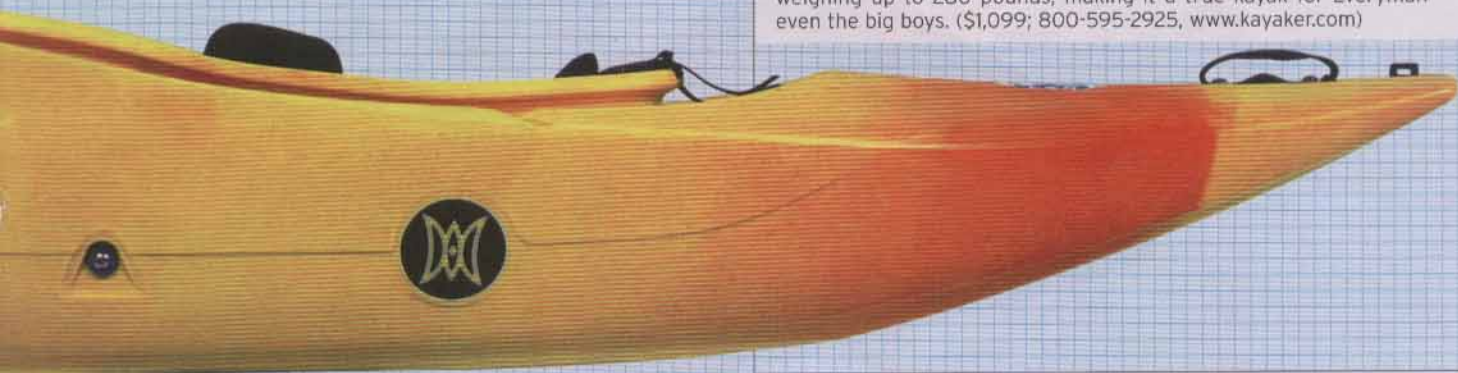


(RIVER BOATS)





Think of the **PYRANHA i:3** as a playboat for the people. Our six-foot-one tester was plenty comfortable in the seven-foot-four-inch model; a simple ratcheting thigh-brace system kept the fit snug. The wide planing hull lends stability for easy shots down tough rapids, and the boat's upturned bow makes punching through big holes a cinch. Meanwhile, its swallowtail stern improves responsiveness. Bottom line: The i:3's comforting predictability will help newbies make a smooth transition from banzai river runner to playboater. (\$1,095; 828-254-1101, www.pyranha.com)



The new **PERCEPTION BLAZE** is another multitasking phenom. A high-rockered bow and stern stabilize the Blaze for blasting through technical rapids, and an easy-to-roll hull means less time upside down when the water gets too wicked. Want cartwheels and stern squirts? Find a powerful hole, get vertical, and the boat will go acrobatic. But perhaps the best news is that the largest version of the Blaze accommodates boaters weighing up to 280 pounds, making it a true kayak for Everyman—even the big boys. (\$1,099; 800-595-2925, www.kayaker.com)



Named for and, apparently, modeled after those supercool 1980s-vintage action figures, the **WAVE SPORT TRANSFORMER** boasts removable tips for the bow and stern that customize the boat to the temperament of the river. Shallow holes call for the slim, inch-long bumpers, while the eight-inch tips are designed for cartwheeling in deeper water. Thanks to its flat bottom, the Transformer spins like a top with the slightest of strokes and surfs standing waves as nimbly as a true kahuna. Some paddlers may find it a bit too boxy and tough to roll, but for intermediate kayakers who want to quickly add tricks to their repertoire, the Transformer's hard to beat. (\$999; 800-311-7245, www.wavesport.com)



We know at least one sponsored paddler who was so smitten with the new **RIOT AIR 45** that he defected to the company. And why not? The six-foot Air uses its surfboard-like bow and two removable inch-long fins along its hull to generate more speed on waves and, therefore, more air. Paddlers looking for maximum acceleration can plug in up to four fins, including optional two-inch skegs that make the Air shred-ready for ocean surf. No surf? Just unbolt and remove the fins for runs down rocky river sections. Less-skilled paddlers may find the Air's ride demanding at first, but advanced paddlers who love waves and mondo altitude will sing hallelujah. (\$1,125; 514-931-0366, www.riotkayaks.com)

DAGGER designed the stubby **FX 5.7** to help advanced playboaters pull off moves like loops and donkey flips. Plastic pods bolted to the decks of the five-foot-nine-inch FX are the secret. "If you want a boat that will jack you bigger in the air, putting extra volume on the deck is the best way to do it," explains Dagger's designer, Marc Lyle. Inside the cockpit, the performance-fit system uses a small hand-operated air pump to inflate a pair of bladders at your hips, which translates into better control on the water and in the air. Intermediate boaters shorter than five foot ten (sorry, tall guys) will find the FX a handy tool for spending all day perfecting aerial stunts on the rapids. (\$1,099; 800-433-1969, www.dagger.com)

Before attempting the first descent of Tibet's Tsangpo River, filmmaker Scott Lindgren turned to **LIQUIDLOGIC** for a boat that could survive almost anything. Behold the **GUS**. At eight feet six inches, it's designed to hold a line even when immersed in man-eating turbulence and store enough cargo for multi-day explorations. Larger folks will appreciate the ample legroom on long journeys, but those weighing less than 165 pounds might find it a bit too much. Although designed to perform in the far corners of the earth, those navigating their local rivers will find the Gus a snap to handle. (\$1,125; 828-698-5778, www.liquidlogic kayaks.com)



(RODEO



liquidlogic



Skills Into Thrills

Whitewater kayaking is difficult—and dangerous. Good training is essential, and these are two of the best schools in the world.

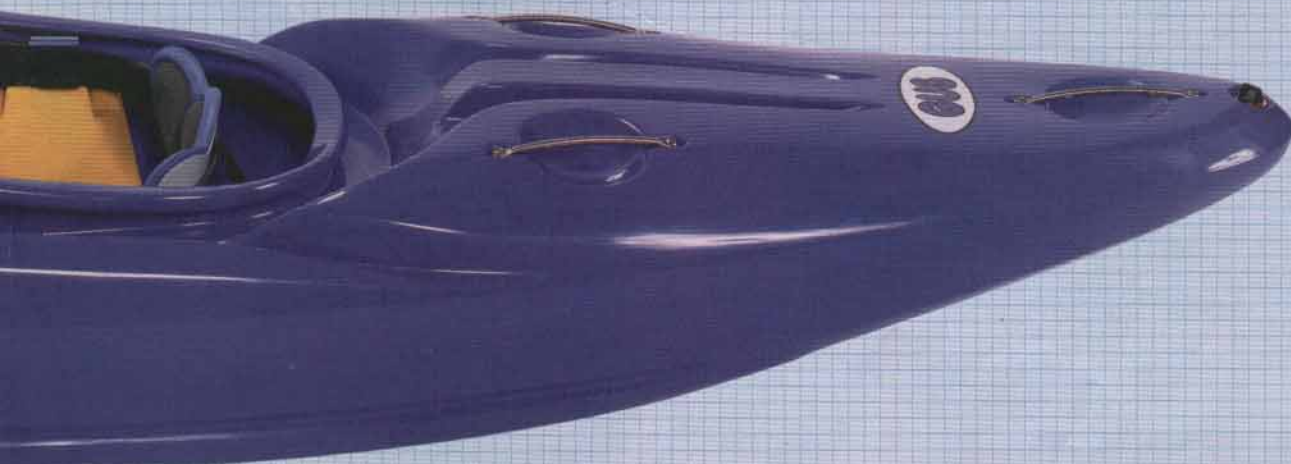
Deep inside Northern California's Klamath National Forest you'll find **OTTER BAR LODGE KAYAK SCHOOL**, which boasts back-door access to the Salmon River and its Class II-V rapids. Seven-day classes run from intro to kayaking (\$1,890) to advanced playboating (\$1,605), gourmet meals and lodging included. Mid-April to late September. (530-462-4772, www.otterbar.com)

BOATS)



On the East Coast, it's tough to beat the **NANTAHALA OUTDOOR CENTER**, in North Carolina. In its 31st year, the NOC's classes range from weekend novice clinics to thorough two-week schools with a graduation trip to Costa Rica. Sessions are held on the Class II-III Nantahala and the playboat mecca of Tennessee's Class III-IV Ocoee River. Best of all, the NOC guarantees that rank beginners will learn to kayak and can keep coming back for free instruction until that roll's dialed. (\$380-\$1,400, includes all meals and lodging; 800-232-7238, www.noc.com)

(EXPEDITION)







TOOLS OF THE TRADE

SCOTT LINDGREN,
FILMMAKER/KAYAKER

He may be a first-rate expedition kayaker, but it's Scott Lindgren's camera work that's enabled him to rise above the mainstream whitewater fray. After he became the first to successfully run Tibet's Upper Tsangpo Gorge last year and filmed the event for Outside Television, he set out for Africa to nab and document descents on the White Nile, Zambezi, and Kafue rivers. To get through all that remote whitewater without washing out, Lindgren needs bombproof equipment able to withstand the world's toughest conditions. Here's the gear that makes the cut. —M.A.

Although he usually doesn't wear sunglasses while kayaking, when it's time to cut the glare, Lindgren relies on **SMITH'S CHOPPER**, which provides total, wraparound UV protection. (\$60; 208-726-4477, www.smithsport.com) » With seat and knee patches of Cordura, Gore-Tex socks, and a handy pee zipper, the extra-durable and -breathable **KOKATAT DURA GORE-TEX DRY SUIT** is Lindgren's go-to river attire. "It's the most comfortable survival suit there is, period," says Lindgren. "I'll get out of my boat, jump out of my suit, and change into my camp gear, bone-dry." (\$825; 800-225-9749, www.kokatat.com) » Lindgren straps the **SALAMANDER GOLDEN RETRIEVER** throw bag to his waist in case he needs to pull a buddy out of trouble. The slightly larger bag makes the 55 feet of quick-to-deploy safety rope easier to stuff. (\$90; 800-641-0500, www.salamanderpaddlegear.com) » As a filmmaker, Lindgren is constantly in and out of his kayak, scrambling up and over slick riverbanks to find the perfect shot. To bound like a billy goat on wet rocks, he turns to his **TEVA AVATORS**, neoprene booties built atop sturdy, sticky rubber soles. (\$85; 800-367-8382, www.teva.com) » To seal his boat, Lindgren depends on the **MOUNTAIN SURF BOMBPROOF DUR-O-RING** spray skirt. "It never wears out," he says of the Kevlar-like material. (\$150; 301-746-5389, www.mountainsurf.com) » Fellow Tsangpo team member Allan Ellard designed Lindgren's **SERPENT LIFE JACKET**; the five-point cinching system keeps it from riding up, and a mesh inner pocket secures waterproof maps and other necessities. (\$175; 866-405-4293, www.paddle-people.com) » The brimmed **SWEETSTRUTTER** (not shown) helmet, made of a carbon-reinforced plastic, helps keep sun out of your eyes and protects the sensitive area at the base of the skull, a.k.a. the knockout button. "Nobody else has really figured out that it's an important thing to cover," says Lindgren. (\$179; www.sweet.no) » To keep his camera safe and dry, he found the tough plastic **PELICAN CASE 1400**. "I'm always hauling around a 22-pound Bolex 16mm, and it fits that camera perfectly," he says. (\$94; 800-473-5422, www.pelican.com) » The lightweight **WERNER DOUBLE DIAMOND** is Lindgren's paddle of choice. "I'm using their carbon-Kevlar foam-core blades with a carbon-fiber shaft," he says. "So far, it's been indestructible." (\$320; 800-275-3311, www.wernerpaddles.com) » **LIQUIDLOGIC GUS** kayak (see review, previous page).

LINDGREN ON THE AMERICAN RIVER NEAR HIS HOME BASE IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG VON DOERSTEN.