



Keith and I attempt some rock-hopping

Three star kayak training course

The more **Andy Benham**, who's training to be a British Canoe Union kayak coach, learns, the less he seems to know. Once he reckoned ignorance was bliss...not any more

Over the last few months I've been training to be a kayak coach. This involves many courses, plenty of contact with other paddlers, and a lot of paddling in versions other than my beloved sit-on-top craft.

This all came to head when I decided that it was time to find out how much I knew about paddling, and try for the most advanced training scheme open to sit-on-top paddlers - namely the BCU 3* Sea Kayak Award.

This scheme has only been open to sit-on-top paddlers for the last

year or so, and to be honest, it's still so new that some coaches are having a problem making the transition to assessing paddlers in craft such as these.

So, the choice of coach is a crucial one. I was lucky enough to be able to chuck my kayak on the roof and head off down to Weymouth,

where I boarded a Condor ferry over to Jersey in the Channel Islands, a fishing paradise with which I am quite well acquainted, having filmed a Sea Angler video over there last century (so not that long ago!)

The reason I went over to Jersey was to meet up with Derek Hairon, a BCU coach and, more importantly for me as an angler, an evangelist for sit-on-top kayaking. Derek actually wrote the book about this branch of the sport, and it was this book that I constantly referred to when I was writing my own guide to fishing from a sit-on-top kayak.

Derek runs a company called Jersey Kayak Adventures, and has a huge fleet of sit-on-tops, which he hires out to visitors to the islands, as well as the locals, both for accompanied exploratory trips and for more serious training, such as my 3* course.

I wasn't really sure what to expect of the course - I've already done a fair bit of training, including becoming a Level 1 coach - so I thought I would be okay, but I was still interested to measure my paddling against the standards required for 3*.

For the three days Keith White, of Jerseybassguides.com and someone who will be familiar to Sea Angler readers as he's regularly featured in the magazine, joined me. I couldn't have picked a better companion for the trip. When we weren't pushing ourselves on the paddling front, I was picking his brains on light-line lure fishing, which has boomed over on Jersey in recent years, and looks ideally suited to use off a kayak.

Admit your failings

The coaching was set up over two days, the first being general training to make sure there were no gaps in our knowledge, and the second day being the actual assessment for the award.

One of the problems I have found with paddling with a coach is that you need to tell them the bits you don't like, and then go and do them, as this is the only way you will get to really learn.

For me, coming in through surf has always been a problem, and in decent surf I often flip the kayak, breaking rods and bruising my ego in the process. So, both Keith and I, rather reluctantly, confessed that surf was our Achilles' heel. The first session just had to be surf landings and launches.

Derek had picked a great little surf beach, and both Keith and I were quickly encased in close-fitting helmets, a really good idea when angler and kayak are both likely

to be tumbling around if it all goes pear-shaped.

I was actually a bit worried that we'd be able to get out at all. The day before I'd come through the Channel in a Force 7, the tail end of a hurricane that had previously battered America, so I was rather expecting the day to be blown off.

However, one of the great joys of Jersey is that because it is roughly rectangular, with some great sweeping bays, there is almost always somewhere sheltered to paddle. The spot we started out from was like something from the Caribbean, completely tucked away beneath cliffs, and a long sweeping beach, with an almost flat sea at

one end grading to decent surf at

the other, so you could choose the size of waves you wanted to play with simply by heading along the beach.

Derek started off by teaching us how to control the boat in surf, using the brakes to ensure that you come in under control, in a straight line, and landing at your pace rather than that of the water.

As we got more used to the skills required to control a boat in these circumstances we both started to let the brakes off a little bit. Soon we were surfing like pros, albeit ones that occasionally ended up buried in the seaweed under an upturned boat.

Surf is a great place to learn how to put various strokes together,

and having a play out there with a good instructor and no gear on the boats enabled us both to learn a vast amount in a fairly short time.

Running the surge

The afternoon was spent playing in what sea kayakers call a 'rock garden', running the tidal surge in a Force 5 wind and dodging in and out of rocks, using paddling skills to avoid close encounters with massive boulders.

Day one finished with us taking the kayaks to the other side of the island, where Derek explained that we would be running the gullies, a vast area of seabed on Jersey's south-east corner that dries out at low tide. Then you can walk for literally miles, and earlier on, from this very spot, I'd seen Derek's partner in the far distance, guiding a group of walkers.

As the tide comes in, the gullies fill up and you can have a superb ride around the coast, hopping from pool to pool, waiting for there to be enough water to get through a gully, and then flying

through on the rising tide. It is actually more like river paddling, with fast flowing water and eddies, and you can hop from rock to rock. Amazingly there were fish jumping everywhere, as the bass followed us into each newly connected pool.

Keith fishes the area regularly, and when he wades out, he will often have a bass holding up in the eddy created by the legs of his waders. Indeed, clients have even fallen over as a result of stepping backwards on to fish.

Training day over, both Keith and I were exhausted, but really looking forward to the next day, and our actual assessment.

I usually have to watch what I eat, but with a huge amount of calories burnt during the day, I did justice to the amazing evening meals laid on at my hotel, The Moorings in Gorey, collapsed into bed and was sound asleep by around 9.30pm.

Judgement day

This started the same way as the training day, with a surf session where we proved we'd at least learnt a little bit. Then it was kayaks on cars again, and off to the north coast. Here we ended up at a place called White Mark, which I last fished with the editor of this magazine more years ago than I care to mention.

From the land it is a cauldron of surf that you really would not want to put a kayak into. But this was where Derek wanted us to show off our skills, so for an hour or so we went in and out of the rocks, using the tide race as a plaything, and finishing off with a whole



Riding the waves - coming in...



...and going out again

series of rescues, right in the middle of the tide race.

As Derek explained, it is really no good just being able to get back on in flat water because it is in rough water where you are most likely to come off.

Both Keith and I had regularly practised our rescue, so we were both able to get back on our boats in well under a minute, even right in the middle of the race. Amazingly, the water temperature was over 17 degrees, so falling in wasn't too much of a chore.

As the race increased in strength it was time to go - we had one last obstacle, a very narrow channel on the way home, with the tide ripping through it so fast it had produced a standing wave. We actually had to paddle up this, going as fast as we could to inch through, and after about five minutes of frantic paddling we'd pushed through into the relatively sheltered water on the other side.

By the time we were safely back

on the beach and sitting outside the pub, with a grinning Derek telling us that we had both passed, both Keith and I were well and truly exhausted, but with a huge sense of achievement.

Talking that night we both felt that doing the 3* had been very worthwhile. We'd learnt loads, and with our increased skills base would be able to go fishing on days that previously would have resulted in us watching from the beach.

Our new-found skills would also enable us to stay out for longer and get to some interesting places that previously we might have avoided.

If you're giving kayak fishing a go, then I would wholeheartedly recommend finding a good coach who embraces sit-on-top kayaking and get them to hone your skills. Not only will you catch more fish in the long run, but you'll also be a whole hell of a lot safer doing it. **SA**

Factfile

For kayak training contact Derek Harion, jerseykayadventures.co.uk, or tel: 01534 853138

■ Andy travelled with Condor Ferries, which operates a regular service to the island all year round. Kayaks on car roofs are welcome on board their fast catamarans. Web: www.condorferries.com

■ We stayed at The Moorings, a seafront hotel in Gorey harbour. Web: themooringshotel.com

■ Thanks to Jersey Tourism for all its help. For more information on the island, visit jersey.com

Maximum effort to paddle through a standing wave

"New-found skills would enable us to get to places that previously we might have avoided"

