

Canoeing 101 from Shenandoah River Adventures

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How to Dress for Canoeing

When you head out for a canoe trip, remember that wearing the proper clothing is critical if you want to be safe, somewhat dry and comfortable. The following steps provide guidance for planning and selecting appropriate attire for your canoeing activity.

- Plan what you'll wear around your location and the weather conditions. In warm weather, as long as the water is relatively warm, you can wear shorts or quick-dry pants with a T-shirt. It's wise to bring a long-sleeved shirt, even in warm weather, in case you need protection from bugs.
- Dress for comfort when you're planning to canoe in a raging river or in colder weather. Dress to protect you from cold water, because there is a lot of splashing and spray on a canoe trip and hypothermia can plague paddlers who aren't careful.
- Put on a base layer of clothing, the layer closest to your skin, using fabrics that will retain very little water if you get wet. Good fabrics for this layer can include polyester or silk. Cotton clothes should be avoided at all costs.
- Follow the base layer with a layer that adds warmth. Wool or fleece will insulate you from the cold. You will need warmth and wind proofing.
- Wear jackets and pants as your outside layer, In particularly cold weather or if you're going to meet up with whitewater, you might want to purchase or rent a completely sealed dry suit, which will seal out the water. Dry suits are waterproof, coated outfits that have gaskets at the cuffs and neck to keep out the water.
- Choose shoes that will keep the rocks and sand out. In warm weather and water, you can wear sandals, water slippers or even old sneakers. But in cold conditions, it's wise to wear calf-high rubber boots.
- Purchase a helmet if you will be tackling whitewater to protect you against hard knocks that may come your way.
- Bring your own insect repellent and sunscreen.
- Wear a hat that protects you from the sun and other elements. A baseball cap is fine during warm weather, and a wool ski cap is good protection in cold weather. Any hat you wear should include a strap so it stays on your head when the going gets rough.
- State laws vary regarding the use of pfd's, but in the absence of a state law, federal law requires that children under age 13 wear them while in moving watercraft.

How to Get In and Out of a Canoe Safely

The journey of 1,000 miles starts with one step; well the journey of a thousand rivers starts with getting in and out of a canoe safely. Nothing is worse than trying to row a canoe-sopping wet except having to stop a canoe trip early because of injury.

How to get into the Canoe

1. Have a partner hold the canoe steady or make sure it is safely secured to a dock or riverbank at both ends.
2. Bend your knees and crouch low. Use both hands to hold one side of the canoe.
3. Facing the front of the canoe, put one leg in toward the center of the canoe.
4. If you put your right leg in first, quickly bring your right hand over to grasp the other side of the canoe.

5. Use your left hand if your left leg went in first.
6. Slowly, but with a fluid motion bring the rest of your body into the canoe. Stay centered while doing this.

How to get out of a Canoe

1. Secure your canoe to the shore or dock. Make sure that it isn't able to float away.
2. Grab the side of the boat that is closest to the shore.
3. Stand up in a low crouch and face the shore.
4. Swing your right leg over the side and quickly bring your right arm over as well to grasp onto the dock.
5. Pull the rest of your body out of the canoe.

How to Forward Paddle a Canoe

Seemingly the simplest maneuver in canoeing, the forward paddle can take years to truly master. These simple instructions offer beginner guidelines to the most essential aspect of canoeing.

1. Kneel or sit in the canoe facing forward at either the stern or the bow. If you're canoeing solo, sit or kneel in the middle.
2. Hold the paddle with your inside hand on top and your water-side hand 2 to 3 feet down (wherever feels most comfortable) with knuckles facing out.
3. Insert the blade of the paddle completely into the water, at least 2 feet in front of you, or as far forward as you can reach without lunging your body forward.
4. Push your top hand forward and pull your bottom hand back, drawing the blade through the water. Keep the top of the paddle handles lower than eye level.
5. Pivot your shoulder to draw the blade straight back. Don't follow the curve of the canoe.
6. Pull the blade back through the water as far as your hip.
7. Lift the blade out of the water and turn the blade parallel to the water (this is especially important on windy days) to carry it forward to the starting position.
8. If you forward paddle on the left side, the front of the canoe will track to the right. If you forward paddle on the right, the front of the canoe will track left.
9. Use the braking method to straighten your canoe's trajectory. This works just the opposite of step 8. If you back paddle on the left side, the front of your canoe will track left. If you back paddle on the right side, the front of your canoe will track right.

How to Back Paddle a Canoe

Turn in your seat, and paddle the opposite direction to put your canoe in reverse. This paddling technique is especially useful for getting out of navigational mishaps.

1. Kneeling in your canoe, turn your shoulders 90 degrees toward your paddling side.
2. Look toward the back of the canoe.
3. Reach your paddle back, and insert the blade into water a foot or two behind you.
4. Push with your top hand and pull with your bottom hand to draw water toward the front of the canoe.

How to Land a Canoe in Currents

Landing a canoe in currents is trickier than you might think. Done improperly, you may capsize your canoe. Follow these simple instructions to do it right.

1. Learn to ferry and understand how ferry angles work (see "How to Ferry a Canoe")
2. Decide that you want to land your canoe, and choose a safe spot.
3. Turn the back of your canoe in the direction of the bank you wish to land on.
4. Back paddle until the back of your canoe hits the shore.
5. Allow the current to push the front of the canoe parallel to the shore.
6. Use a paddle to stabilize your position against the shore and get out of the canoe one person at a time.

How to Self-Rescue a Capsized Canoe

Capsizing in rapids can be a terrifying experience. Knowing what to do when it happens can save your canoe and equipment, as well as your life.

Try not to lose your paddle. You will have a long trip with no paddle.

1. Go to the upstream end of your canoe immediately upon capsizing and grab hold.
2. Keep your feet high and away from the bottom of the river unless it's very shallow.
3. Consider the situation you're in and decide whether your life or your companions' lives may be in danger. Is there a dam or major rapids ahead? Does everyone have life vests and can everyone swim.
4. If your life or someone else's is in immediate danger, forget the canoe and do whatever you have to do to avoid a disaster. If you're not in immediate danger, stay with the canoe.
5. Attempt to swim the boat to shore. Remember the concept of ferrying. This is vitally important here.
6. Turn the back end of the canoe toward the shore you wish to swim to and kick in that direction. Keep your feet up to avoid rocks.
7. Swim until you're in water shallower than your knees before trying to stand. Remember that the weight of the boat is going to pull you when you try to stand.
8. If two people can get the boat to waist deep water, completely submerge the canoe, turn the canoe upside down under water, lift the canoe straight up from both ends and set the canoe right side up on top of the water. Get to the bank and reenter the canoe.

How to Stay Safe While White Water Canoeing

White Water Canoeing is lots of fun, as long as you follow a few simple rules for staying safe. Remember: Safety First!

1. Have all your equipment with you. This means not only a canoe and paddle, but also a life jacket and helmet as well. If you are canoeing through whitewater, you should be wearing a lifejacket and helmet at all times, except when you are on land. We do not carry helmets for rental at this time. You must bring your own helmet!
2. Go canoeing in groups. You may have a partner in the same boat as you, but it's generally a good idea to have a few boats out on the river at once. That way if something happens to you (or your boat), other people will be there to help.
3. Avoid obstacles. Sometimes this is easier said than done, but you can do a lot of damage to yourself or your equipment by ramming into a large rock, fallen tree, or anything else that's lying in the middle of the river. Remember that your canoe is meant to stay on water, not to run into anything solid. Watch for fast moving water, that tracts toward low hanging tree limbs. It is always better to go through white water with the front or back of the canoe

facing down river. You do not want to go through white water sideways. Look for the V's in white water. This is where the water is naturally flowing, this is where you want your boat to go through also.

4. Know what you can handle. If it's your first time Whitewater canoeing, be sure to stick to lower class rapids. Faster waters may be perfectly safe for experts, but quite dangerous to you. Just because another person feels safe doing something doesn't mean that you should.
5. Designate a captain or caretaker. If you're on a guided trip, the guide will likely serve this role. The captain should have a medical kit, and some way to contact land in case of an emergency. You must bring your own medical kit for the river.
6. Remember incidentals depending on your particular trip's circumstances. Although not as important as a life jacket and helmet, you may get burned if you forget to wear sunscreen. If you plan on stepping out of the canoe anywhere other than flat land, wear footwear as well -- a pair of old sneakers should serve this role perfectly. No flip-flops or heel-less shoes, These will get sucked off of your feet

How to Draw-Stroke Paddle a Canoe

The draw stroke paddle maneuver is useful for moving the canoe sideways and for quickly changing the direction of the canoe.

1. Position yourself in a well-braced sitting or kneeling position.
2. Hold the paddle with your inside hand on its top and your waterside hand 2 feet down the shaft.
3. Reach out over the edge of the canoe as far as you can without losing your balance. To move the canoe sideways, reach on the side that is the same as the direction you wish to go. For quick turns, reach in the direction you want your end to turn.
4. Insert the blade of the paddle into the water. Your lower arm should be fully extended and your top arm should be bent.
5. Straighten your top arm and bend your lower arm, drawing the blade of the paddle toward you through the water.
6. Pull the paddle inward until it is within 6 inches of the canoe. Imagine yourself pushing the water under the canoe.
7. Slice your paddle backward and up to remove it from the water, then reach out for another draw stroke.

How to Cross-Draw Paddle a Canoe

Used at the front of the canoe, or by a solo canoeist, the cross draw paddle is a quick way of turning your canoe.

1. Sit in the front of the canoe, and hold the paddle as you normally would, with your inside hand on top and your waterside hand a foot to two down the shaft.
2. Pull the paddle from the water, and twist your torso across the canoe to place the paddle in the water on the opposite side without changing your grip.
3. Reach out and insert the blade of the paddle into the water away from the canoe and toward the front.
4. Pull with your bottom hand and push with your top hand to draw the paddle through the water toward the front of the canoe. This will cause the front of the canoe to pull toward the direction you reached with the paddle.

How to Pry Paddle a Canoe

The pry stroke is excellent for turning your canoe quickly or, if you're solo, for moving sideways in the water. The opposite of a draw stroke, the pry stroke starts next to the canoe and pushes the water away.

1. Sit or kneel in a stable position in your canoe.
2. Hold the paddle with your inside hand on top and your outside hand 1 to 2 feet down the shaft.
3. Insert the blade of the paddle into the water directly next to the canoe on the side opposite the direction you wish to move.
4. Hold your top hand out with your arm extended and your bottom hand close to your body.
5. Pull with your top hand and push with your bottom hand.
6. Use the side of the canoe as a fulcrum for the paddle to push against the water.
7. Turn the blade of the paddle sideways, perpendicular to the canoe, and slide it back through the water to the starting position to begin another stroke.

How to Ferry a Canoe

To "ferry" means to cross a river. By properly angling your canoe, you can safely and quickly negotiate your way across the current of a river.

1. Understand what a ferry angle is: Imagine the force of the water striking an object angled 45 degrees to it. Which direction is that object going to move in?
2. Aim the front of your canoe upstream and at a 30-degree angle toward the side you wish to ferry to. If you wish to back paddle, aim the front of the canoe downstream, 30 degrees toward the side opposite the side you wish to ferry to.
3. Paddle forward hard. Paddle straight forward, not toward the side you wish to obtain. Your forward motion, combined with the force of the current against your angled craft, will cause you to traverse the river quickly.
4. Keep your eye on the opposite shore to keep your angle correct. Too much angle can turn you broadside to the current and put you in danger of capsizing.