

TIDERACE SEA KAYAKS PUT THROUGH THEIR PACES

OBSERVATIONS FROM AN EXTREME EXPEDITION AND OPEN-WATER CROSSING RECORD HOLDER, PATRICK WINTERTON AND OTHERS ON THE TIDERACE RANGE OF SEA KAYAKS.

TIDERACE XPLORE



LONG TERM REVIEW 1

The Xplore was my chosen boat for attempting one of the most committing sea kayaking challenges in the British Isles, a 2500 km trip culminating in a three day open-water crossing from the Hebrides to the Faroe Islands. I have now done over 3500 km in this boat and have paddled it in all conditions. It is the best constructed boat I have ever paddled and has survived a number of thumping collisions, careless rock-hopping sessions and numerous emergency landings. Spend time fitting it to your body and getting the correct seat placement and it will feel wonderfully responsive and efficient.

The Xplore is a full-sized expedition sea kayak. This carrying capacity was pushed to the limit during the first Faroes crossing attempt when carrying an 80 kg paddler and another 80 kg of expedition kit (including a full complement of film recording equipment). Overloading of this nature has a limiting effect on boat handling and makes for a wet ride; be more reasonable and these problems are ironed out. For typical expedition use, there's easy access into ample storage space. I drilled 1 mm holes in each of the bulkheads to equalise

pressure and had dry kit for 7 weeks. With the new, more flexible, Kajaksport hatch covers (as on the Xplore_X) there is no need to drill holes. The awkward centrally located day hatch has now been offset which improves access when on the water (this requirement is anyway infrequent as there is also a small deck hatch in front of the cockpit). Combine that with a small deck bag, and possibly some spare clothing under your knees, and there is more than enough storage space to keep everything you need for a long day at sea accessible.

The cockpit is snug and allows good body/boat contact, therefore giving good kayak control. During long crossings I enjoy paddling with my knees together, K1 style. I reduced the size of the thigh grips to allow for this, but do not recommend it as a mainstream modification however as it reduces contact with the boat. The old-style footrest was a big slanted footplate, quick to adjust when out of the boat. This took as much leg pressure as I could apply, but limited the number of positions that my feet could effectively adopt. I believe this has already been changed and improved.

Carrying handles and deck lines are strong, well placed and durable. The fine ends

of the bow and stern make the boat easy to grasp when carrying fully laden and without using the handles.

With the substantial load that I carried, some initial tracking issues were resolved by fitting a larger skeg which allowed the boat to sit firm on my chosen bearing in any wind aspect. The Xplore has been designed for speed and doesn't disappoint. Laden, it averaged four knots during calm weather days and is considerably faster when trying to outrun a thunder storm. The combination of a fine bow and an excessively heavy load reduced the boat speed when paddling into the weather. (I should say that I have only ever tested my speed against my Faroes partner Mick Berwick, who makes most people look and feel sluggish.)

The Xplore has a long waterline length, yet it responds well to edging. Despite its sleek design, it is stable enough to allow for good photography and for easy re-entry. The centre of buoyancy is slightly further forward than most kayaks; this facilitates wave-catching but increases the turning forces once you are off-line. Paddling it certainly sharpens up both reactions and skill levels.

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 549 cm, WIDTH: 53 cm, DEPTH: 33.5 cm, COCKPIT: 87 X 49 cm, RRP: CLASSIC £2250 / HARD-CORE £2450
THE XPLORE IS SUITED TO PADDLERS RANGING BETWEEN 5' 6" AND 6' 3" AND WEIGHING UP TO 17 STONE
THE XPLORE CAN ACCOMMODATE LARGE FEET

I had a love-hate relationship with this boat during the initial part of the expedition leading up to the record attempt. In retrospect, even the large volume of the Xplore proved too small for my extreme challenge. All in all, the Xplore is an outstanding expedition boat that is fast enough to ensure you always get first choice of campsite.

LONG TERM REVIEW 2

I have been paddling my Tiderace Xplore, Hardcore version, for one and a half years now. I am very pleased with it; it suits my type of kayaking very well.

The cockpit is very comfortable. The deck is tall enough for me to move my feet around while wearing boots over my drysuit. I have found that the boat handles best with the seat in the rearmost position. As an added benefit, this makes entries and exits, both dry and wet, quite easy even with my long legs. I prefer the footplate in the early production Tideraces (later boats have pegs). The plate offers support in all positions, and there is no risk of slipping a foot off a peg. The downside is that some storage room is lost between plate and bulkhead and it is not possible to fit a foot pump.

My Xplore is doing a very good job as an all-round boat. Most of my paddling is day trips, with no other ballast than my lunch. When empty it tends to weathercock more than other kayaks I have paddled, but not more than the skeg can handle. Thanks to the design it handles and turns like a smaller boat, and responds very well to edging. When edging, there is a distinct point when it tells me not to proceed if I prefer to keep my hair dry. It becomes very stable when filled up with camping gear, while still handling excellently. Despite the low rear deck, it took all the supplies and gear for a week-long trip around the Arctic Circle/Northern Norway where we encountered all kinds of conditions. The laden Xplore took it all in its stride.

The finish and workmanship seem generally very good, and the kayak has held up well to quite intensive use. There is no gelcoat chipping; in fact, the gelcoat seems harder and scratches less easily than my previous boats. The fact that the kayak looks great on the water is another positive feature!

There are only minor details regarding the Xplore. I quickly replaced the hard plastic Kayaksport backrest with a backstrap, as

the backrest had a nasty tendency to pinch the skin on my bum between backrest and seat – ouch! The bulkheads had no breathing holes, so I once worriedly watched the front hatch cave in after launching a warm kayak on cold water. What made things worse was that the front and rear hatches were not secured to the kayak and would sink if lost. They have inside eyelets, but there were no anchor points inside the hull. I made my own and attached a line. I recently found a small but annoying leak at the cockpit rim, which was easily fixed with Sikaflex. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR – LONG TERM REVIEW 2

Height: 188 cm

Weight: 80 kg

Shoe size: 11 / 13 w/drysuit.

Experience: I began sea kayaking in 1983, but later converted to open canoeing for years due to family situation. Returned to sea kayaking six years ago. Trips vary from day-long paddles to week-long expeditions, mostly in sheltered water (fjords or archipelagos). Have recently qualified as club instructor for introductory/beginner level.

TIDERACE XCITE



LONG TERM REVIEW

The boat is a 2008 model Xcite in 'Hardcore' construction, a vacuum bag, vinylester resin layup. It is a composite hybrid of fibreglass with multiple layers of hybrid cloth (a woven cloth incorporating carbon 3k, aramid, glass and diolen) to hull and deck, spheretex core reinforcement and a carbon unidirectional 30 cm wide internal keel strip. Since construction of TideRace boats was moved to Finland for 2009, developments have been introduced in design and construction.

The Hardcore construction is very strong and stiff. There is virtually no flex in either deck or hull; the whole boat feels very strong and well made. The finish on my boat is immaculate and is proving very hard wearing. The strength of the deck and hull is noticeably greater than other boats, even when strapping to a car roof carrier.

The cockpit is simply the most comfortable and ergonomic I've used. The seat pan is glass and is adjustable fore and aft. It sits very low in the boat and has a foam shim to protect the inner hull. The back band originally fitted was comfortable, but had a tendency to fold under when entering the boat. TideRace have since developed an improved back band which is a modern variation of a simple back strap. It has lots of adjustment and provides unobtrusive support. The improved version has been retro-fitted to my boat and (for me) is better.

The 2008 Tiderace boats came with an angled footplate which I find very comfortable and positive. It is adjustable fore and aft and has a cutaway at the

lower edge to permit legs to be stretched. A thoughtful touch is that the nuts used to adjust both seat and footplate are rounded rather than a thumbwheel, so that the nuts don't catch legs and ankles. On newer boats, the footplate has been replaced by a SmartTrack footpeg arrangement, which has the benefits of the footplate (natural angle, etc.) with additional strength and consistency of foot position for smaller paddlers.

The thigh braces are quite aggressive, but the design of the cockpit with a knees-up paddling position allows the paddler to either lock in to the braces or have plenty of space for the thighs by adjusting foot position on the footplate. The cockpit is easy to enter and exit, and though I've found that wet exits are more conveniently done one leg at a time due to the pronounced keyhole shape and thigh brace angle, this does not feel restrictive in any way.

Four hatches are fitted. The fore and aft hatches are 24 cm round with rubber Kajaksport covers. The day hatch is a 20 cm round hatch with a plastic centred cover. A 15 cm round deck pocket hatch sits just forward of the cockpit. All are securely tethered, and none of the hatches have leaked. The usefulness of the deck pocket hatch is out of all proportion to its size!

The deck fittings are recessed and glassed over on the inside; they've proved strong and haven't leaked. The deck elastic arrangement is well thought out and includes a loop with a plastic clamp on both fore and aft decks to retain paddle shafts.

A wire skeg is fitted with the wire centrally located in the blade. The blade itself is quite small but very effective. It's been reliable and kink-free so far.

The coloured hull does show scratches more than a white hull; a white hull is now available.

Production of TideRace boats was moved from Poland to Finland following some issues with quality control. I can honestly say that I'm mightily impressed with the quality and finish of the particular boat I own. A minor leak from the skeg box was fixed promptly and effectively by TideRace/Knoydart – customer service has been excellent.

PERFORMANCE

This boat is very comfortable. It has been paddled by others in a wide range of sizes and all have been able to get a good, comfortable fit. Initial stability is very good, and the boat feels immediately reassuring for novice paddlers.

The rockered hull gives great turning response and, when coupled with the sitting position and positive leg and hip contact, makes for a fantastically manoeuvrable boat. It is predictable and stable on edge, even when on a fairly radical (for me) edge.

Touring speed is very acceptable. It isn't an expedition greyhound (the Xplore fits that role), but covers the ground with ease. Coming from a mountaineering and hillwalking background and being accustomed to packing kit into a 65 litre sack, I find that I can fit everything

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 525 CM, WIDTH: 53 CM, DEPTH: 31 CM, COCKPIT: 87 X 49 CM, RRP: CLASSIC £2195 / HARD-CORE £2395
THE XCITE IS SUITED FOR PADDLERS RANGING BETWEEN 5' 5" AND 6' 2" AND WEIGHING UP TO 16 STONE
THE XCITE CAN ACCOMMODATE LARGE FEET
THE XCITE MAY BE USED AS A "DAY BOAT" BY TALLER / HEAVIER PADDLERS

needed for several days into the hatches with ease. The round hatches mean that the tent poles need to be packed separately, but that's the only compromise I've found.

The cockpit design and the position of the deck pocket hatch would put a map too far away for comfortable reading if stowed on the foredeck, so a spraydeck with map elastics is useful.

The very low back deck makes laying back comfortable; indeed, one of the noticeable features of the boat is how svelte it appears just behind the cockpit. The low back deck and raised foredeck don't create excessive windage, and the fitted skeg is useful in moderate to strong crosswinds. The design carries a fair bit of volume forward, but the ride is dry and free from excessive slamming.

I've hit the boat pretty hard on a few occasions while rock hopping, both end-on and under the hull. It has simply shrugged off what I suspect may have damaged some other boats.

In rough conditions, the Xcite comes alive. The design brief was for a rough-water-capable boat, and this has carried through. The boat feels as if it can take anything, and remains predictable and reassuring in all the conditions in which I've paddled it. In a following sea, the boat just loves to surf. It accelerates quickly and holds waves with ease. The hull design just seems to fit the short standing waves we experience at the mouths of Scottish sea lochs and the volume forward prevents the nose burying. I have always felt that this is a

boat that will look after me if I don't do anything too stupid!

SUMMARY

During the time I've owned the Xcite I've got to know the boat pretty well. I have to say that I love paddling it. It does everything I want to do with consummate ease, is hugely comfortable, well-finished and bullet tough. My interest is in the interface between the land and the sea i.e. in exploring the coast and its features rather than in extended crossings. The Xcite is an ideal boat for this. It's nimble and stable enough to stop and take in the view or take photographs even in quite choppy conditions. Aled Williams' designs are quite rightly well-regarded, and this is no exception. It is, for me anyway, the complete boat.

MANUFACTURER'S COMMENT XCITE LONG TERM REVIEW

We wish to thank the author for his kind comments about the Xcite. At Tiderace, we strive to build boats that both we and our customers enjoy paddling. The Xcite is the product of many years of development in pursuit of building the ultimate 'advanced boat'. We define an Advanced Boat as one which does not intrude into paddling performance: a boat which turns when you want to turn, accelerates when you want to go faster, remains stable and composed on the water when things get a little scary and surfs a wave just as you imagined. The author has obviously gained empathy with the Xcite and it makes us proud to see our products performing in the way we intended.

The Xcite and Xplore have undergone many developments since the reviewed '08 model. These improvements include the following.

Deck redesign: the hatch recess profiles have been changed to make the deck stiffer and accommodate a new manufacturing technique. A compass recess has been added, cockpit rim and thigh braces have been updated and the overall deck profile makes for a more rigid shape.

Cockpit and sitting position: the footplate has been replaced with SmartTrack footrests. The footplate's lack of versatility and its loose fit for smaller paddlers rendered it obsolete. The original concept was to connect the seat and footrest in a way which did not stress the kayak's structure – this has been revised so that all cockpit components share and dissipate the loads through the whole structure. The seat is now firmly fixed with the paddler's centre of gravity directly over the hull's centre of buoyancy.

These numerous small changes and adjustments are part of the continuing process of refining the Tiderace cockpit system to give paddlers the most comfortable paddling position and best interface with which to control the kayak. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Height 1.75m, weight 74kgs

Experience: I've owned a Tiderace Xcite for 18 months, and during that period have paddled over 1000 km in conditions varying from flat calm to F6. I paddle around the coastline of Scotland, in both summer and winter.

TIDERACE XPLORE_X



Built for the larger paddler, it makes the ideal solo expedition boat. It is a beast of a boat that I would trust anywhere. Mine has only been on two outings: a circumnavigation of Skye and a jolly from Oban to the Faroe Islands. Although most of the increased volume is in the centre of the boat making the cockpit very spacious, its carrying capacity is huge (12 days with filming equipment and no re-supply other than water). Impressively, the hatches have yet to ship their first drop of seawater.

I padded out the seat to accommodate my skinny hips, but don't feel I've lost any boat control as a result. For long journeys, the extra cockpit space is a welcome luxury. With the aid of Velcro, a lot of essential stores can be stowed above your legs and there is plenty of room for spare kit under your knees. The wide cockpit rim allows you to paddle with knees up or locked out and, if you choose to do so, you can slide past the footrests and sleep long and deep!

The dimensions of the boat make it slightly slower than the Xplore. Tested flat out over 10 kilometres in flat conditions, the difference between the two boats was only 0.6 kmph (0.3 kn). It responds well to edge control and was easier to keep straight on the waves than its smaller

brother. It is both dry and smooth when paddling into the weather and doesn't penetrate the wave or buck over it. Mick and I had a lumpy (force 6) trip across the Minch and it performed well in a large cross swell. In calmer conditions you can sit on the back deck with no problems; if kayak stability is an issue this might be the one for you!

For the second record attempt, my Xplore_X was fitted with a rudder. I opted for a rudder as I was recovering from a hernia operation and wanted an easy crossing to the Faroes. If you opt for the rudder, spend some time adjusting the controls to suit. I failed to do so and found my webbed toes weren't long enough! Those who prefer skegs will find that you can easily adjust the footrests on the move.

I would take this kayak anywhere. It has proven to be a most capable record-breaking expedition sea kayak. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 549 CM
 WIDTH: 60 CM
 DEPTH: 35 CM
 COCKPIT: 89 X 52 CM
 RRP: CLASSIC £2250 / HARD-CORE £2450

A HIGH VOLUME EXPEDITION
 SEA KAYAK FOR EXTENDED TRIPS

SERVICING YOUR KAYAK

The kayak should be hosed down inside and out with fresh water after every use. The salt in sea water dries out in direct sunlight, but will absorb moisture and become wet as soon as the air around is damp. All metal parts used in the kayak are stainless steel, A4 grade, suitable for salt water environments and should not corrode much. Rinsing off sea water will help preserve metal parts.

Check the condition of the kayak regularly, ideally after every paddling session. Deep scratches through the gelcoat should be repaired. Slight impact damage, such as small star cracks, should not affect the long term life of the kayak, especially if it is stored dry. Gelcoat scratches are inevitable in a sea kayak, and do not pose a threat to your kayaks lifespan. Repeated beach and rock landings/launchings will wear away the hull gelcoat and expose the laminate, especially at the ends, and this should be avoided when possible. New gelcoat may be applied to these worn sections.

Keep deck lines taught and inspect all ropes for wear and tear regularly. Pay special attention to the condition of toggle ropes as they usually take the strain of carrying and towing, replace them when they begin to show wear. Toggle ropes should long enough not to trap a finger should a finger be inserted between the two ropes and the toggle swung around the end of the kayak.