

NORTHWEST WEEKEND

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FINALLY, A SORT-OF-KAYAK THAT PLEASES THE BODY AND THE WALLET

Trail Mix | *Ron Judd, Seattle Times staff columnist*



So a few weeks back, I noticed all the water around here.

Not the sheets-of-rain type or the rising-floodwater sort. Just these big bodies of beautiful, often calm liquid, all over the place.

OK, granted, I'd seen them around. If you live along Puget Sound all your life, it's tough not to notice the treasure trove of fresh and saltwater. From time to time, I've caught the small-craft bug, heading out in a canoe or rowboat on local waterways. Lovely, yes. Refreshing, too.

But unlike hundreds of thousands of other folks in these parts, I've never been much of a kayak guy.

I've been out in them a handful of times, and each time felt, literally, like a large square peg in a little round hole. I always feel like I'm wearing a kayak, not riding in it. Thighs and feet get claustrophobic. Limbs turn numb. I'm no fan of the wet exit, and even the most stable boats always seem too tippy for things I like to do on the water, namely fishing, bird-watching and photography.

So a few weeks ago, partially spurred on by Emjay — who, arriving here from desert-dry Colorado, gleefully took to the saltchuck herself — I commenced researching small craft. I looked at traditional sea kayaks and the increasingly popular sit-on-tops. Found some in each category that would float me around. But every one had some flaw — price, mostly, and length.

Sea kayaks that fit my offensive-lineman's frame are, indeed, out there. But they're huge — 17 feet long or more — and pricey — \$2,000 to \$2,500. That's an investment I wasn't quite willing to make in an activity I didn't know how long I'd hold dear.

And so I had put it all on the back burner until a news release arrived one day from a Bellingham company, NuCanoe (www.nucanoe.com). They make a boat, designed by Ocean Kayaks founder Tim Niemier, a pioneer in the sit-on-top class, billed as a "hybrid" kayak/canoe.

Truth be told, the NuCanoe is basically a sit-on-top plastic kayak, with rather unusual dimensions. It's 12 feet long and 42 inches wide at the beam (36 inches at waterline), which makes it look a bit like a sea kayak that got flattened by a truck.

It's billed as an all-around recreational craft. Primary selling point: stability. You can actually stand in the boat. It's

difficult to flip, and can be righted, easily re-entered, and paddled away, completely full of water.

The boat's indestructible hull has a rated capacity of 450 pounds. And thanks to inventive, inset modular attachment points all along the deck, it can be configured for one or two paddlers, fitted with rod holders, a bait box and — wonder of wonders — a trolling motor. Comfy, padded sling seats strapped onto basic seat platforms put the paddler about a foot above the water, keeping you dry and allowing the boat to be rowed with a kayak paddle, even with its broad beam.

Drawbacks: It's bulky and heavy, weighing in at over 80 pounds. And, I suspected, its broad beam would make it difficult to paddle in a straight line for a long distance.

But I resolved to test paddle a NuCanoe, which company President Blake Young said was increasingly popular among anglers, waterfowl hunters and rec paddlers with my aversion to being stuck in a traditional "sea coffin."

We met at a local lake a few weeks back on a cold, clear day. I stepped into the NuCanoe and, being an oaf by nature, slipped, grabbed one gunwale, and promptly dumped about five gallons of water into the bottom of the boat. Good start, I thought. But what the heck — good test, also.

I left the water in, pushed away from the beach, and started paddling. The boat, as expected, is no speed demon; it takes a while to get moving — especially half full of water. But it's very maneuverable with a long kayak paddle and tracks surprisingly well, thanks to a permanent skeg on the bottom. Best of all, it allows full freedom of movement for your legs and torso — and feels rock-solid stable while you're doing it.

An hour later, floating in the middle of the lake, I was peering up at snow-covered Cascade foothills and wearing a broad smile that told me I had to have one. With a basic model starting at around \$800, the price was right, as well.

I picked up my delightfully funny-looking boat last week. It's olive-drab green, rigged out and ready for day trips filled with, I like to imagine, fishing adventures, wildlife encounters, spectacular sunsets and all those other things I've been missing out on all these years.

Even though it's winter and my timing, as usual, is six months off, I can't wait. I sense the boat can't wait, either.

Just as soon as it stops blowing, one of us will get back to you.