

A man is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark brown hooded kayak suit with yellowish-brown patches. He is holding a long, orange paddle with both hands. The background is a body of water with small ripples. The text "What's with that skinny stick?" is overlaid at the top.

What's with that skinny stick?

*Traditional Paddling
Simplified*

Answers to questions about
Greenland style kayaking

1 - The Paddle

A traditional paddle is usually made of wood, has long narrow blades, and is unfeathered, i.e. the blades are aligned in the same plane instead of being offset.

Common reactions to trying one for the first time: “It feels more user friendly.” “It’s easier on my shoulders.” “I like the natural feel of wood.” “It solves my wrist issues.”

If you are handy with simple woodworking tools you can make your own traditional paddle quite inexpensively.

Most beginners find that learning to roll a kayak is easier with a traditional paddle. The more limber and flexible you are the faster you will learn because Greenland rolling techniques rely more on finesse than muscle.



Each skin-on-frame kayak is built to fit its owner



2 - The Kayak

A purely traditional Greenland kayak is much narrower, much lower, and has a smaller cockpit than most commercially available sea kayaks.

Traditional kayaks are built using a skin-on-frame construction method practiced for centuries in the Arctic. Cloth or animal hides are sewn around a handmade wooden framework. Each kayak is custom built to fit its owner, and is as snug and comfortable as an article of clothing. With patience, dedication and enough space you can build your own skin-on-frame kayak for a few hundred dollars.

The influence of traditional design ideas can be seen in the low back decks of many modern kayaks. This makes them easier to roll. But you can use a Greenland paddle enjoyably with any sea kayak.



Rolling demonstration at Delmarva Paddler's Retreat



South Sound Traditional Inuit Kayak Symposium

3 - The Community

Whether you are drawn to building, rolling, or simply paddling with a traditional paddle, there's an extensive network of similarly minded people. Go to **qajaqusa.org** to see the many resources available on the subject.

Many weekend gatherings are held annually in various parts of the country where you can meet, learn from, and share ideas with a wide spectrum of traditional paddling enthusiasts. These include:

Delmarva Paddlers Retreat – Oct. in Delaware

South Sound Traditional Inuit Kayak
Symposium (SSTIKS) – June in Seattle area

Michigan Training Camp – Aug. in Michigan

Hudson River Greenland Festival – June in
New York

Ontario Greenland Camp – Sept. in Toronto
area



Racers at the starting line



Winning competitors

4 - The Games

Every year a National Kayaking Championship is held in Greenland. The weeklong contest has several races, a rolling competition where contestants attempt thirty-five different rolls of increasing difficulty, a harpoon throwing event, and a contest of traditional gymnastics done on ropes. Foreigners are allowed to compete, and several of the more passionate U.S. traditional paddlers have made the pilgrimage.

At some of the Greenland style gatherings in the U.S. smaller scale versions of the games are held. These are a great opportunity to test your skills and measure your improvement. On the other hand, if you aren't competitively minded, you will find watching these contests entertaining and educational.



Maligiaq Padilla

5 - The Personalities

The most influential and impressive athlete in Greenland kayaking is Maligiaq Padilla, who has taken the championship title nine times starting in 1998 at the age of sixteen.

Maligiaq has appeared at kayak events all over the world and is an expert on every aspect of Greenland paddling: racing, rolling, kayak building, harpoon throwing, ropes, the Greenlandic language, and the Inuit culture. He has a webpage at **maligiaq.com**

Some other notable people with professional reputations in the traditional kayaking field include: Harvey Golden, Brian Schulz, Turner Wilson, Cheri Perry, Helen Wilson, Don Beale, Chris Raab, and Dubside.

6 - The Culture

As the name implies, “traditional” kayaking has a long history. It was developed out of necessity as a means of obtaining food to survive the harsh climate, and over many generations was refined to a remarkably high degree. To this day hunting seals from a kayak is woven into the rich fabric of Greenland history. Changes brought by modern technology have largely replaced these old ways of life, but the tradition continues with the recreational use of Greenland kayaks and the practice of the techniques that are associated with them.

The language spoken by seal hunters of old times is alive and well. Bearing no resemblance to root words and grammatical construction of European languages, Greenlandic is a fascinating repository of hunting terminology and the Arctic outlook on life. The word ‘kayak’ comes from Greenlandic, although it is spelled ‘qajaq’ and uttered far back in the throat.



Hunter's kayaks in the Greenland National Museum



Women in traditional Greenlandic dress

7 - The Future

The popularity of traditional paddles, Greenland rolling, rope gymnastics, and skin-on-frame kayak building continues to grow year after year, spreading to places around the world, far beyond Greenland's borders. Many exciting developments and initiatives point to a continuation of this trend.

Meanwhile as a country, Greenland is on the path towards complete independence and nationhood, ending a long relationship as a protectorate of Denmark. Global concerns regarding climate change, Arctic mineral and oil production, the rights of indigenous people, and the politics associated with these issues ensure that Greenland will continue to show up in world news for many years to come.



Rope gymnastics at a New Jersey paddlesport show



The Greenland flag

8 - The Recommendations

A - You don't have to take sides. While zealous devotion to the skinny stick happens a lot, there's no rule that says you can't carry both a Greenland paddle and a Euro or wing paddle with you and switch off whenever you feel like it.

B - It's not exclusively about rolling. Rolling fanatics are often very obsessive. There are plenty of other Greenland style paddlers who don't especially favor rolling but have found an enjoyable experience with the many other facets of traditional kayaking.

C - There's no right and wrong. There are shortcuts to faster results, techniques that are more efficient, and things that generate a positive emotional response. But each of these varies widely from person to person. You find your own path by traveling it yourself.



Whichever paddle you use...



...it's all good

9 - The way to get started

For the best hands-on introduction to traditional Greenland paddling, all you have to do is:

- 1 - Try one of the paddles.
- 2 - Ask the person you borrowed it from what they like about it.
- 3 - As you experiment for yourself, pay attention to what the paddle tells you.

And you're on your way.

Happy Paddling!



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