

# Touring



Shaun Cavan in a sea kayak.

## Scottish Sea Kayak Symposium

When you organize a get together for 250 paddlers in a world class destination like Skye you have to make sure the event lives up the promise of its surroundings. Fortunately, the team from Skyak Adventures have the experience to know what people want and the pulling power to attract top names.

Seattle based Nigel Foster left us amazed with his boat and blade control. His *Fun With Foster* sessions involved a lot of paddle twirling and standing up in boats while his approach to *Discovery Learning* had other coaches reaching for their notebooks to scribble down tips. Nigel and his partner, Kirsten, only just arrived in time for the event. An airport strike in Sweden forced last minute flight changes and a drive through the night in a rental car. I admire his commitment but then, as Nigel later proved in his slide show about dodging polar bears in Labrador, he's not one to let a little thing like an air strike stand in his way.

Chatting to other participants, it seems many benefited from the forward paddling sessions taken by Shaun Cavan. Better known for coaching the British Olympic team, this was Shaun's first time on Skye

and only his fourth time in a sea kayak. Those of us who tried to keep up with him as we paddled from Armadale to the event centre at the Gaelic College simply could not believe this. From rotational advice to suggestions on how to get the blade into and out of the water at the correct point, Shaun's advice switched on light bulbs in many paddlers, including me.

All the major boat manufacturers offered demo boats, Valley, Point 65 North and Sea Kayaking UK, formerly Nigel Dennis Kayaks. P&H's new Cetus was a popular paddle, as was the new boat from the new company In-Uit.

If there is a complaint about this biannual event it is a positive one, that participants are spoiled for choice. It's hard to decide between having Nigel Dennis advise how to choose a paddle, Jeff Allen guide you through incident management, try out a superb Greenland kayak made by Anders Thygesen from Norway, or spend a whole day beachcombing by kayak with the author of *Blazing Paddler*, Brian Wilson.

There are only three times everyone comes together, to drink in the bar, to eat at the Gaelic College, Sabhal Mor Ostaig, where the staff cope superbly with the sudden influx of slightly soggy clients, and to watch the evening presentations. Patrick Winterton tackled the biggest







crossings in Scottish waters, from Tiree to Mingulay, to St Kilda, to the Flannan islands (the first time that crossing had been done), then to Lewis and on to Shetland. To make it more of a challenge he videoed the trip and we were treated to the final cut of the resulting film. The long list of people who put their names down to buy copies prove this went down well.

Nigel Foster's illustrated talk on his expedition to Labrador was another chance for mere mortals to gaze open mouthed at an adventure few of us would dream of attempting, not only because of the paddling but also because of the polar bears. Nigel and Kirsten had close encounters with sixteen of these huge predators, some of which stalked them across the ice.

It's a huge tribute to the organizers, Duncan Winning, Ken Nicol and Morag and Gordon Brown, that, despite the mammoth logistics of dealing with such a large number of paddlers, the whole event managed to keep an atmosphere of friendly informality in which everyday paddlers could sit down to breakfast with superstars of their sport. Many who came for the weekend stayed in the Highlands for the whole week. Some put newfound skills into practice while others joined training courses and assessments for SCA/BCU awards.

Sea kayaking is growing in popularity partly because it feels like hill walking as it used to be. There's that thrilling sensation of humility in the face of powerful natural forces. Overnight camps are intensely special in isolated places. Best of all, you never follow a well worn trail. No one ever left a footprint on a wave.

If you'd like to listen to the contributors to the Scottish Sea Kayak Symposium, log onto [seakayakroutes.com](http://seakayakroutes.com) where I have recorded interviews with many of them. You can listen on the website or download the podcasts onto your home computer or MP3 player. If you're in doubt how to do this, ask a teenager.

**Simon Willis**



*Nigel Foster with a coaching group.*



Simon Willis photographs