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## kayak review: Sea Kayaking UK - Nigel Dennis Explorer

by Alex Matthews (Wavelength USA)

Since its introduction in 1993, the Explorer has been used extensively on a great number of ambitious expeditions and is considered in many circles to be a classic design.



The Explorer is an attractive kayak with a traditional British look. Both the upswept bow and stern come to fine ends, and a simple but useful deck layout follows the “form follows function” design adage: there are no bells and whistles, and no extraneous features that serve no purpose. Nigel Dennis favors a somewhat “old school” laminate construction, employing chop strand mat rather than cloth materials. The result is a relatively heavy, resin-rich layup that is built for rough use & expedition paddling. Chop strand mat laminates, are easy to repair, as damage from impacts tends to be more localized, rather than spread over a bigger surface. Weight for our “Standard Fiberglass Layup” test boat was a manageable 58 pounds.

Length is 17 feet 8 inches, and beam is a narrow 21.5 inches. The hull has a distinctly hard chine, and the cross-sectional shape of the boat is quite boxy, resulting in very good initial stability for such a narrow craft. The boat’s internal volume is divided by three bulkheads, and sealed by three round rubber hatches. The day hatch is a proprietary unit, while the main fore and aft compartments are sealed by 10 inch Kayak Sport hatches. The bulkiest item in my kit is a synthetic sleeping bag, and I found that it packed into the bow fairly well, but that the stern was too low to easily angle the bag through the small round hatch opening. While the small openings make loading more challenging, the hatches were absolutely bone-dry even after playing in surf or rolling many times. I hate leaky hatches and so was very pleased with the absolute dryness of this system. Whether it’s worth trading off on ease of access in favor of a smaller but totally watertight hatch is a personal choice for each paddler to consider. Since the Explorer is a mid-volume sized kayak, there isn’t a ton of space below deck, but careful packing, employing more of a backpacker’s philosophy, yields enough room for extended trips.

Several skeg setups are available. Our test boat had a slider adjustment system located on the paddler's left, and the skeg deployed smoothly and worked fine.

The keyhole cockpit makes getting in and out easy, but still provides a large surface area for thigh contact with the deck. Overall fit is very good and a secure grip with the legs is easily achieved. The seat is a small contoured fiberglass unit that some liked, while others complained that it was uncomfortable and too short to provide leg support (a foam seat is also offered as an option). Due to the low back deck and angled coaming, leaning back in the Explorer is very comfortable. This combined with the excellent fit, makes rolling the boat remarkably easy.

Afloat, the Explorer is very reassuring and easy to paddle for such a narrow beam. It tracks well and holds a good touring pace comfortably. It will also turn quite sharply, but needs to be edged aggressively before it will carve a tight turn. Secondary stability is very good and the boat rolls up onto edge very nicely, making it fun to maneuver. The Explorer is also very good in wind, feeling neutral and holding a course well. I also had an opportunity to play in some two to three foot waves and I thoroughly enjoyed the boat's great fit and solid handling. The bow does a good job of staying at the surface and doesn't deflect easily or dive when surfing waves.

In my mind though, the Explorer isn't really the all-out "play-machine" sea kayak that it's often represented to be. For that there's the shorter Nigel Dennis Romany, Valley Pintail, or Impex Currituck, but when it comes to covering miles and still having fun along the way, the Explorer is awfully good. Above all else it seems to have wonderful poise in just about all situations and impresses perhaps more with its distinct lack of faults or handling quirks, rather than with any one specific performance attribute. It's a terrific boat that helps a paddler confront challenging conditions, and feel confident doing so—it's a classic!