

to Article

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PADDLE POWER

People of all abilities can take advantage of a breathtaking way to view the bay

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An advertisement graphic for AT&T. It features a large orange speech bubble at the top with the text "Goodbye ordinary job. Hello amazing career with AT&T." Below this is a blue speech bubble containing a white silhouette of a family (two adults and a child). At the bottom left is a green speech bubble with the text "Connect today!". At the bottom right is the AT&T logo, which consists of a globe icon and the text "at&t".

Six years ago, Elena Van Loo went on her first "paddle" in a sea kayak in San Francisco Bay, an adventure she viewed with some trepidation as she contemplated skimming across such deep waters in such a skinny boat.

One thing she didn't need to worry about, though, was being sore the day after the excursion.

"I do wheelchair basketball, so I was pretty fit already," said Loo, recalling the trip organized by Environmental Traveling Companions, a nonprofit group based at Fort Mason Center.

Loo, 35, not only conquered her fear of the ocean, but fell in love with sea kayaking.

She recently became a volunteer guide for the group, which offers one-day and overnight kayaking trips -- even "full moon dinner paddles" -- for people with disabilities and special needs.

"I am disabled myself, so I can tell other people who have a physical disability that being disabled doesn't mean you can't do it," Loo said. "I can be a mentor. I can let them know I have that barrier, but I'm not going to let that barrier stop me. I'm going to go right through it. I'm going to jump over it. I tell them everything's cool."

Greg Milano, the group's sea kayak program manager, said volunteer guides go through an extensive seven-day training, including two days focused exclusively on disability awareness training.

Volunteers learn how to feel comfortable asking participants what kind of help they need to enjoy the trip.

"We don't do a whole lot of equipment adaption," he said. "We use two- and three-person boats, so we always have an extra person along. We have volunteers who are really strong paddlers. So somebody who might not have the best balance or the most arm strength can still be in a boat, still get out on the water, and still go on a long paddle."

Milano said volunteers are trained to help transfer people in and out of kayaks, which are launched from the beach.

He said some people wheel themselves to the water line and transfer into the kayak. Others are carried to waiting kayaks.

To help visually impaired kayakers, the group marks the paddles with tape so they can orient their hands to the blades without assistance.

He said guides also learn about the natural history of the bay and about the wildlife they might encounter on paddles, such as sea lions and pelicans.

"It would be irresponsible to bring people out into the wilderness and not try to teach them a little about what the issues are about preserving and conserving the wilderness," said Milano, whose group also offers river rafting and cross-country skiing trips.

"We try to make the trips not just adventures, but also environmental education trips, so everyone comes away from a trip having not just pushed themselves to do something new and physically challenging, but also with an appreciation for the bay and how incredible it is."

That beauty can also take on a special sheen during a midnight kayak adventure. On a recent balmy evening last month when the flags of many nations hung limp from their poles in Jack London Square and the siren smell of soul food wafted over Roscoe's Chicken and Waffles, 12 kayakers slipped away from the dock and into the dusk-dark waters of the Oakland Estuary.

They paddled, tentatively at first, over a surface as black and smooth as obsidian -- past the barnacle-encrusted pier pilings, past the masts that jutted into a sky, still clinging to the last light of day, toward the glittering lights of the Pasta Pelican Restaurant on the other side of the estuary.

Fifty yards or so from the dock they stopped and assembled around their leader, Keith Miller.

"OK, that's it," Miller jokes. "Let's head back to the dock."

Miller's Oakland company, California Canoe & Kayak, is one of several that offer sea kayaking trips. The kayakers, who were outfitted in water-repellent windbreakers, life vests, spray skirts and clutching paddles, listened attentively to Miller's "float plan."

"The float plan is to paddle -- that way," Miller said, pointing north to the Port of Oakland in the Central Basin. The group, maintaining a relatively tight formation, would then cross the estuary, paddle south, nearly circumnavigate Coast Guard Island and, finally, return to the dock.

Along the way, Miller promised the group -- some of whom had never been in a kayak before -- that he would point out the sights: the place where the WWII Liberty Ships were built, the original

Chevy's Restaurant, a light boat, the presidential yacht that was once owned by a Chicago gangster.

Miller had then led the way through a gate unlocked by a security guard and down a flight of steps to the water's edge. Those who wanted to travel as a couple or were inexperienced were placed in double kayaks. Others slid into the cockpit of single kayaks, slipped their spray skirts over the lip around the opening to form a watertight seal and stroked away from the dock for what would turn out to be a 3-hour, 3 1/2-mile trip. From his kayak, Miller pointed toward a huge crane rising above the Port of Oakland. With Miller leading and his wife, Tammy Borichevsky, bringing up the rear, the group started paddling in the direction of the crane.

One of the great things about kayaking on the bay, says Mitch Powers, a manager at Sea Trek Ocean Kayaking in Sausalito, is that once you slip away from the water's edge, you're immediately removed from the hustle and bustle of urban living. You enter an environment that is quiet and peaceful, a place where harbor seals occasionally bob to the surface, where pelicans skim the water in search of a meal, where winter loons and cormorants thrive.

Powers' company offers introductory to all-day classes, and a variety of trips including a full-moon paddle, a dinner paddle and a paddle to Angel Island. "It's an extension of your backyard," Powers said. "If you're a kayaker you can take advantage of it. The views alone are worth the price."

The nighttime views of Sea Trek's moonlight paddle include Tiburon, Angel Island, the illuminated spans of the Golden Gate and Bay bridges and, of course, the black-and-light San Francisco skyline.

Part of that skyline, as well as the eastern span of the Bay Bridge, is visible as Miller leads his group into a small cove he calls Oakland's version of the Hyde Street Pier. The kayakers "raft up," maneuvering their kayaks alongside one another like the logs of a raft, and listen.

Moored to the right is the Potomac -- the 165-foot yacht President Franklin Delano Roosevelt used during his tenure. One of the two smokestacks, Miller pointed out, is fake. It contains an elevator that ferried the wheelchair-bound president from deck to deck. The red hull of the Lighthouse Relief, a ship that served as a floating lighthouse, looms to the left.

Before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Miller often led groups beneath the pier, where they would thread their way through the pilings to the other side. Those days are gone.

"We are probably being watched right now," Miller said. "There are so many cameras around it's unbelievable."

If any doubt concerning the increased security in the estuary remains, it is quickly dispelled as the kayakers, after looking in both directions as if crossing a busy intersection, paddle to the other side of the estuary. A passing tug turns on its searchlight and sweeps the kayakers as it heads north. A patrol ship operated by the Alameda County Sheriff's Department suddenly appears. A machine

gun mounted on a tripod stands on its bow. Powerful twin outboards churn the water at its stern.

After checking to make sure the kayakers are carrying lights, the patrol boat moves on. Like his counterpart across the bay, Ted Choi, owner of City Kayak in San Francisco, has noticed an increased vigilance.

"There are more patrols and they definitely keep an eye out on some of the more sensitive areas," said Choi, whose firm also offers a moonlight cruise, as well as trips to Alcatraz, Treasure Island and, when the Giants are playing, a watery tailgate party at SBC Park's McCovey Cove.

The excitement over, the group heads south at a relaxed pace, passing the ramp where Liberty Ships were launched, one every six days, during the '40s. They glide past a row of houseboats named "Classy Lady," "Sea Scape," "My Shrink" and "Sea Castle."

Soon the group rafts up again, this time for some refreshments -- sparkling punch and assorted sweets -- facing the nearly full moon and the lights of the Oakland Hills.

As the group gets ready to begin the final leg of its journey -- a paddle around Coast Guard Island to its home dock at Jack London Square -- one of the kayakers makes the embarrassing discovery that he has lost his paddle. Fortunately, paddles float. A fellow kayaker recovers the paddle and returns it to its owner.

In single file, the kayakers follow a path of light reflected by the moon to the other side of the estuary.

Once across, the group pauses at a respectful distance to inspect a heavily armed Coast Guard cutter used for search and rescue and for drug interdiction on the high seas. Then they paddle the final half-mile around the island and back to the dock at Jack London Square.

"We made it," someone yells.

Chuck LaBue of Berkeley is inspired to take lessons. "It was a perfect moon rise. The estuary was just like glass."

Learn more

Here are some of the San Francisco kayaking companies. Most offer trips and classes designed for children and families as well as adults.

Environmental Traveling Companions, (415) 474-7662; www.etctrips.org.

City Kayak (415) 357-1010; www.citykayak.com.

Outdoor Programs UCSF, San Francisco. (415) 476-2078; www.outdoors.ucsf.edu.

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