

GEAR

Fun Inflatables

No longer glorified pool toys, inflatable boats are really going places

Mention inflatable boats and, for many sailors, the term conjures up images of flimsy and flaccid vinyl dinghies that are not much more than glorified pool toys. But times have changed, and new materials and construction techniques have combined to create a new wave of durable, rigid, high-pressure inflatable watercraft that are fun, affordable and pack up nicely for easy transport and storage.

The variety of different watercraft is almost endless, as well. From the familiar rowboats to kayaks and canoes, to sailboats and even paddleboards, there are plenty of ways to get out on the water on an inflatable. And it's simple to see their benefits. Inflatables are easy to set up and use, they pack easily into a car's trunk or sailboat locker and don't take up valuable deck space when taking them aboard a larger boat. Also, unlike inflatables of the past, they aren't prone to leaking or sagging in the hot sun and can withstand bumping and



The Airis Tandem inflatable kayak from Walker Bay uses high-pressure construction techniques (below left) to produce a highly rigid and durable watercraft.

scraping against rocks and other hard surfaces.

Kayaks in particular have become popular among cruisers in recent years. Once the reserve of white-water thrill seekers or limited to the big, expensive and technically demanding sea kayaks, today's kayaks are a great way to get off the big boat, which is often confined by its draft, and explore new anchorages and gunkholes. And companies including Sevylor, Sea Eagle, Walker Bay, Advanced Elements, West Marine and even Hobie are responding with an array of inflatable kayaks.

Sea Eagle, which has been making inflatable canoes and kayaks for the past 40 years, has introduced a

new line of sport kayaks for use on rivers, lakes or coastal areas. With their high-volume inflation chambers, the kayaks can float a lot of weight—550 pounds for the 11-foot 330 model and 650 pounds for the 12-foot 370—making them ideal for camping expeditions or for use as boat tenders, where a lot of gear needs to be hauled. The kayaks also use thick PVC hull material and an I-beam construction floor for better durability and stiffness.

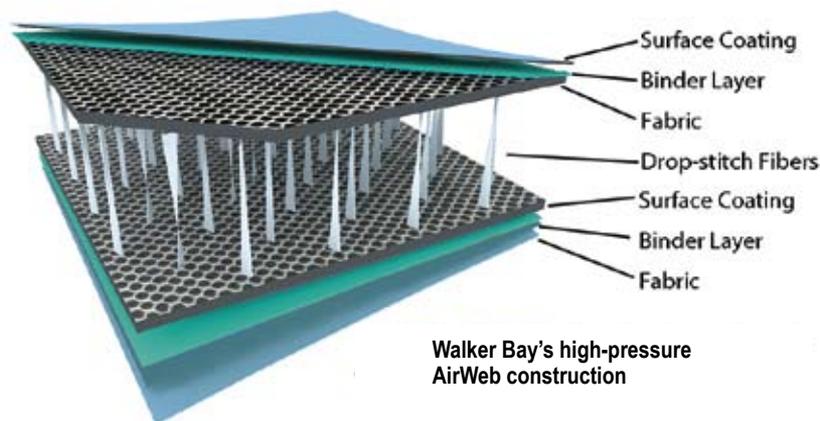
Hobie also has become a familiar name in kayaks with its Mirage line, and now the company offers three different inflatable kayaks, including the single-seat i9 and i12 models, at 9 and 12 feet respectively, and the 14-foot tandem i14. The kayaks incorporate Hobie's patented MirageDrive pedal propulsion system, which excludes the use of paddles, and all three models are made to carry the optional sail package, turning the pedal-driven kayaks into wind-driven boats.

Meanwhile, **Walker Bay** has latched onto high-pressure inflatable technology to produce a full line of rigid kayaks under the **Airis** name. High-pressure inflatables

use thousands of drop-stitch fibers woven into the inflation chambers, allowing them to be inflated to high pressures while retaining their shape (around 6 to 10 psi, as opposed to the typical 3 to 4 psi of standard inflatables). This creates a very strong and rigid structure, just the properties wanted in a kayak. Airis kayaks also include an integrated bow keel and rear skeg for better tracking.

Walker Bay first used this technology to build the floors of its Odyssey roll-up tenders, so it would appear that the move to the inflatable kayaks was a natural progression. The first Airis kayaks to be launched were the single-seat Sport, available in 10- and 11-foot models, and the wave-riding Play, available in 8- and 9.5-foot sizes. Late last year Walker Bay expanded the Airis line to include four new models, each geared to a specific use. These include the Velocity, Angler, Tandem and Tender, and their names pretty much describe their intended purpose.

Sevylor, long known for its inflatable boats, produces two performance kayaks that use a removable, high-pressure inflatable floor



Walker Bay's high-pressure AirWeb construction

for rigidity. Both the 10-foot, 4-inch single-seat Sevylor SVX100DS and the tandem 13-foot, 8-inch SVX200DS are made with the company's puncture-resistant Sevytex composite material. Meanwhile, **Advanced Elements** StraightEdge inflatable kayaks use aluminum ribs to add stiffness and performance characteristics.

High-pressure inflatable construction also lends itself to making paddleboards. What are paddleboards? They're kind of a cross between a sit-on-top kayak and a surfboard, where the rider either paddles the board like a surfboard or stands atop the board and uses a long paddle to propel him or herself, often referred to as stand-up paddle surfing. Paddleboards can trace their ancestry back to ancient Hawaii, but it was big-wave surfer Laird Hamilton who more recently ignited the stand-up paddle surf-



Hobie i9

world looks a lot different six feet above the water—stand-up paddle surfing offers a very beneficial cardiovascular workout.

A talk of inflatable boats wouldn't be complete, however, without a look at the available inflatable sailboats. As mentioned earlier, Hobie offers a sail package for its Mirage inflatable kayaks, which adds a 20.25-square-foot sail to the craft. Under sail, the MirageDrive pedals act as a keel or centerboard, while steering

ager for Praktek, has been taking the inflatable catamaran around to boat shows and we caught up with him at the U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis last October, where he said the boat had an "exceptional response." We were impressed with the solid construction of the AERE', which features an anodized aluminum frame with stainless steel fasteners. No tools are required to assemble the boat, and the 20-inch diameter hulls are made from the same time-tested fabric as the company's commercial-grade inflatable fenders.

The 12-foot inflatable catamaran weighs 130 pounds, can carry up to three adults or two adults and children, and, in the bag, the entire boat will fit into the back-seat of a PT Cruiser convertible—with the top up. While Kuntz was obviously proud of the boat's construction—"It is made for a lifetime of vacations, not for just a season or two of use"—he also touted the boat's user-friendliness. "People are amazed when they see the AERE' tack through 220

degrees from a broad reach, in very light air, without the person on board changing position or even touching the sheets," he said.

In these times when everyone seems to be downsizing, inflatable boats are making more and more sense. Without having to hitch up a trailer or load up a roof rack you can be out the door and on the water within minutes. Likewise, cruising with an inflatable stowed onboard can mean the difference between staying put while anchored out or getting off the boat and exploring new areas. Either way, the versatility of inflatables makes them worth a look.

MANUFACTURERS' LIST

Advanced Elements, (866) 262-9076, www.advancedelements.com • **Airis Walker Bay**, (888) 449-2553, www.airiskayaks.com • **Aquaglide**, (509) 493-4938, www.aquaglide.net • **Hobie**, (800) 462-4349, www.hobiecat.com • **Praktek AERE'** (877) 617-5615, www.aere.us • **Sea Eagle**, (800) 748-8066, www.seaeagle.com • **Sevylor**, (800) 835-3278, www.sevylor.com • **West Marine**, (800) 262-8464, www.westmarine.com.



The LongBoard from Sea Eagle is an inflatable stand-up paddleboard.

ing craze when he brought it to the mellow waves and water of Malibu. The high-pressure inflatable paddleboards offer the stiffness and carrying capacity similar to a solid board, but with the advantage of being able to deflate and stuff into a backpack.

From Sevylor, there is the Samoa, a 10-foot, 10-inch inflatable stand-up paddleboard with a 250-pound carrying capacity. The board includes three removable fins for better tracking. Sea Eagle, meanwhile, offers the 11-foot LongBoard, which comes with an optional kayak seat, allowing the board to be paddled either standing up or sitting down. Along with providing a different perspective when paddling on the water—the

is done using a hand-controlled rudder, which is standard on all Mirage kayaks.

Sea Eagle produces the 14-foot SailCat catamaran. The SailCat features a foldable frame holding two inflatable hulls and a 45-square-foot sail on a lanteen rig. The boat weighs 97 pounds, can carry up to four people and folds down into two bags. Inflatable boat enthusiasts may also be familiar with the Multisport from Washington-based **Aquaglide**. The Multisport can be used as an inflatable sailboat, windsurfer, kayak or even towable.

One of the more rugged looking inflatable sailboats we've come across, however, is the **AERE'**, made by inflatable fender maker Praktek. Dan Kuntz, project man-



The AERE' inflatable catamaran is easy and fun to sail.