

In Review PRODUCT: FirstLight Kayak (reviewed by Barbara Flanagan) ARCHITECTURE: Green Wal-Mart (reviewed by Michael Ennis) TECHNOLOGY: Babble (reviewed by Denny Lee) TRANSPORTATION: Mitsubishi Eclipse (reviewed by Joe Brown) BOOK: Japonisme (reviewed by Tom Vanderbilt)

Edited by Cliff Kuang

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Heaven and Hull A collapsible kayak makes light work of adventure travel.

Reviewed by Barbara Flanagan

FirstLight Kayak

Price: Model 420, \$2,675

(other models range from \$2,285 to \$3,100)

www.firstlightkayaks.com

Impossibility. That's the fuel that motivates explorers and product designers alike. They define an adventure—an untried or nearly undoable process—and try to design their way out of it.

How perfect then, that Murray Broom, a New Zealand biochemist, took some time off from genetics to conceive a design adventure for adventurers, and then to realize his impossible vision: the lightest possible serious kayak. Or, more precisely, the design and manufacture of a 20-pound, non-fragile kit of parts you can tote as backpack or luggage, then assemble, right on the coast of your choice, into a 13-foot 9-inch seaworthy boat. (I chose Italy's Amalfi Coast as a test site, but more on that later.)

To paddlers, Broom's FirstLight kayak is a sublime achievement. It means we can finally store our boats wherever we live, and take them wherever we go—on foot, by air, by subway—with unbelievable ease and navigability.

To designers, the museum-worthy vessel (sexiest as an all-transparent model—the deck is red, but the hull comes in black or clear urethane.) is thrilling proof that the age of textiles is here, and that metal is over. It's also a case study in technology transfer—borrowing materials and detailing from one realm to equip another.

Of course, the transportable boat—a skeletal frame with waterproof membrane—has been around for a long time, most recently in the form of a “folding kayak”: a \$4,000-plus aluminum frame with a textile skin. By reducing the length, bulk, weight, and price (about \$2,600, ruled by exchange rate and options), Broom has transformed the traveling boat from a cumbersome luxury into an indispensable vehicle for water obsessives.

The adventure starts with assembly. Decant the kayak parts from their bag and a big, floppy membrane slides out like a banana peel. That's the skin: a durable, transparent, urethane hull on the bottom with a deck of 1,000-denier, rip-stop, three-layer composite polyester. The bundle of 33-inch rods, shock-corded like tent poles, is the future frame. The rest is a miscellany of inscrutable straps, plus plastic and foam parts.

The improbability of it all is pretty fascinating at first. Although the hull is made of military/industrial grade urethane, it feels like a deflated kiddie pool. The light and skinny carbon Kevlar rods, rated indestructible, look rickety. The cross-ribs, injection-molded from Dupont Zytel Super Tough nylon, feel toy-like. And the “tensioning system,” said to hold the skin tight to the frame, starts out as a loose tangle of nylon belts and plastic buckles.

The puzzle gets more emotional, however, when frustration takes over. After tossing the written directions promising “a simple and intuitive assembly process taking 15 to 20 minutes,” I spent two hours, with my mechanically gifted niece, age 16, assembling the boat by screening and re-screening the instructional DVD on my laptop. (The need for the laptop prevented waterside assembly.)



Each Firstlight Kayak begins as a 20-pound kit of parts and assembles into a 13-foot, 9-inch seaworthy boat.



However, once the trial ended—with the triumphant zipping of four marine-grade G-lock, water-resistant zippers across the bow and stern—we congratulated ourselves, retracted the curses, and hailed the inventor. He/we had made a beautifully long, taut boat—red on top, transparent below—appear out of nowhere!

After construction, only one kind of suspense remained. How would this feather-light beauty handle the turbulence of the Tyrrhenian Sea surging against the volcanic cliffs of the Amalfi Coast?

From a balcony high on the mountainside of Positano, I lowered the completed boat to the tight street, balanced it on my head, and walked downhill carefully, trying not to whack any Vespas with the tail end. At the top of a narrow stone staircase, the only route to Fornillo Beach, I rebalanced the boat on my shoulder and headed downstairs, through a maze of houses, turning the boat upright at each hairpin turn. Reaching the beach felt like another victory. At that point the boat had traveled about 4,000 miles and 600 steps. All without reaching water.

Launching the demi-clear boat on the all-clear sea was the most religious of all gear-worshipping moments. The thing floated. Furthermore, it floated me. Still better, it skimmed through the water with amazing agility and lightness, flexing nicely with the movement of the waves. I watched the water glow and felt it surging, too, through the clear urethane bottom. For kayakers, who like to be “one with the water,” this is a dream boat. But everything that happened after that can only be described in the lurid language of travel prose. I left the crowded beach behind and skimmed along a wilderness of sheer sea cliffs and volcanic boulders, paddling into sea grottoes where sunlight backlit the emerald water. Between the wild cliffs were deep coves of civilization where legendary hotels—the San Pietro and Le Sirenuse—pampered guests dressed in bright linen, or undressed on blue canvas lounge chairs under blue canvas umbrellas. Above them, vertical lemon orchards stood protected by netting wide as fishermen’s nets. In between were noisy coves in different towns, where I landed to have Caprese salad and espressos at beach restaurants set with jacquard tablecloths. In the deserted coves I swam and rested in shade watching distant sailboats. Textiles everywhere.

After seven hours, I headed back to Fornillo beach, dismantled the kayak with great speed and pride, and headed back up the 600 steps, to an altitude where I could measure my sea route from an aerial view. Impossible! How could that bag of bones and peel have taken me so far away?

I spread out a map of Italy, checked the remaining supply of scenic water and watering holes, and found enough routes for a few lifetimes of continental kayaking. Next frontier: the canals of Milan.

Writer and product designer Barbara Flanagan is a contributing editor at I.D. and the author of The Houseboat Book (Universe).