

WindPaddle Cruiser (1.59m²) Review by Pete Bursnall for windpaddle.co.uk



I have been thinking about getting around to wondering which sailing rig to buy for my Open Boat (Canadian Canoe) for some time. There are several to choose from, most resembling a traditional gaff sailing rig or mast and boom combination of some kind. The problem for me has been that I rarely paddle alone, I almost always have my wife and two kids in the boat with me. Given that, the prospect of adding two more poles and a bundle of cloth to the paddles, drybags and other family boating essentials has been a little off-putting; especially as space is a bit of a premium when four up in the family yacht. Not to mention the requirements to

modify the boat for fitting a mast.

When Nick at windpaddle.co.uk asked me to review his sail I jumped at the chance, and then promptly failed to get out on the water for ages and ages for one reason or another. The threat of seeing the sail disappear back to Nick without even trying it out was enough to get me out with the brood on a less than perfect, gusty day on Llyn Mymbyr in Snowdonia.

The concept of the WindPaddle is simple enough, a spring-loaded hoop of fibreglass and ripstop nylon clipped to the deck of the boat and controlled by a loop of line from the shoulders of the sail. Sounds simple, is simple, apart from one small aspect that I will come on to later.

First impressions of the WindPaddle are good, well thought out and put together, as sturdy as is reasonable and colourful in an extravert, confident way. Fitting it to my open boat required the minimum of work, I just drilled just two holes in the gunwale and tied a loop of line through each one to enable me to clip the WindPaddle on, job done.

I wanted the sail as close to the front of the boat as I could get it for downwind sailing, with the skipper sitting in the back to make sure that the boat weather cocked as well as possible. The only limit to this was that I didn't want the sail to be able to fall over the bow of the boat where it would fill up like a spinnaker under the water and cause untold amounts of mayhem. In the end I chose a point a few inches behind the front seat as the best compromise and I think I got it about right.

We set up the first time with the boat still half on the beach just to make sure everything was ship shape. Aila, Owen and Riannon all sat just behind the sail with the control loop and then I pushed off and jumped in at the back. I am not sure what I was expecting but only good things happened. We shot off downwind nice and stable, everyone happy and no drama. Aila was easily in control of the sail right from the off and we soon proved beyond any doubt that controlling the WindPaddle was in fact child's play.

We had a few runs during the afternoon with various numbers of people on board and it was only towards the end that I was allowed to have a go solo as everyone was happy to play. The 'load at the back, power at the front' combo worked very well and we never had any sense of being unstable or out of control, even at speed, and you can get some good speed up very quickly. It turned out to be possible to let the sail find its own way downwind or to steer it up to 45 degrees to either side by pulling on the lines and twisting the sail across the deck. We also found that paddles were completely superfluous much of the time, I hadn't expected that amount of maneuverability for an un-boomed rig. Thinking about it later though it was obvious that when powered up the sail stiffens

and the hoop acts like a boom. In the swirling, eddying wind at the bottom of the lake Owen (8yrs) happily steered us through 270 degrees of sail with no problems whatsoever, just an impish grin.

The one thing that we did need to do was to make sure that the sail was pulled well down onto the deck of the boat by adjusting the length of the clip lines on the sail. Failure to do this saw it yawing around above the boat causing us to waggle about, it also made the sail a lot less manageable. Making like a windsurfer and 'closing the slot' completely removed any of this tendency and the sailing experience was simple and enjoyable.

Should the wind get up too much it was easy to just lower the sail onto the boat and dump all the power. It is possible to de-power a bit by partially lowering the sail (either forward or backwards) but in truth it is a 'mostly on' or 'mostly off' affair. The rig seemed to be able to take a wide range of wind speeds from puff to blow to 'huff and puff' with no problem.

When the WindPaddle is stowed away it takes up barely any space and weighs nothing, when it is deployed it still weighs nothing but takes up a lot more room. Not that this matters when you are sailing it, especially with the big window in the middle, but it does matter when you lower it. This brings me to the only downside of the WindPaddle, the point I referred to earlier and the one thing about it that you really do need to learn and practice, putting it away, back in its box, spring loaded and ready to go again.

There is a video of how to do this on the website and it makes it look really simple, and, I am finding that after a bit of practice it is, however! I have yet to do this en route, in the open boat, though I am getting close to the point of being able to do so. The first few times you try on a windy day will either leave you with an aching stomach and tears rolling down your cheeks from laughing or with an urge to tether the thing like a kite to a tree and leave it there!

Grasp the sail at the 10 and 2 o'clock points with your thumbs pointing down, twist the hoop until your hands are the other way up and you have formed a shape in the hoop best described as three zeros stacked one on top of the other and then roll the zeros up on top of each other, simple. It helps to still have the sail clipped to the deck or to put your foot on the bottom of the hoop to stop it jumping away. It helps a lot when you have a mental picture of what the heck you are supposed to be doing and I would suggest that the best place to develop this picture is in the kitchen, close, but not too close, to a good cup of tea / stiff whiskey.

It is possible to have the coiled sail clipped to the deck in such a way that a quick pull on the control lines makes it jump out of the restraining band and into action. One of the two changes that I would make to the design would be to move the restraining band outside of the clip-in loops to avoid accidental deployment if you set up in this way, but that is a very small matter. That and some kind of handle / grip on the control loop as the line is thin and if you were holding it for a while in a blow...

In summary, a well designed, sturdy and easy to use sail that takes little effort to set up, hardly any space in the boat and no time to deploy. I am going to ask Nick if he will let me keep this one as paddling downwind has never been so relaxing!

Pete Bursnall (March 2009).

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