

Qayaq – KAYAK



From the Arctic Ocean to Prince William Sound, Alaska's Native people crafted swift, seaworthy boats from wood and animal skins. Each culture had a distinct style of *qayaq* with unique qualities. Alutiiq/Sugpiaq *qayat* were long and slender, built for flexibility in the rough, windy waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Carefully crafted, well-maintained boats allowed men to harvest fish and sea mammals from the ocean, to travel and trade over great distances, and to carry supplies home. In coastal Alaska, every man was a *qayaq* builder and paddler. No man could be a successful provider without his own skin boat. *Qayat* were a lifeline.

ALUTIIQ QAYAQ TYPES

- *Qayangnaq* (little kayak)-Single-hatched: For fishing, traveling, and hunting fast animals like porpoise.
- *Qayarpak* (big kayak)-Double-hatched: For team hunting, particularly sea otters. The man in the front hatch hurled weapons while the man in the rear steadied and steered the boat.
- *Paitaalek* (has many hatches)-Triple-hatched: Made in the Russian era. A large hatch in the center held a Russian trader, smaller hatches in the bow and stern provided seats for Native paddlers. These larger boats carried quantities of gear and supplies.

BUILT FOR FLEXIBILITY

Made from natural materials pegged, lashed, and sewn together, Alutiiq *qayat* were light, bendable, and stable. Flexibility kept them from breaking in rough seas or when landing.

It took months to collect the wood for a *qayaq* frame, and different parts of the skeleton required different types of wood. Carvers preferred dense, water-resistant spruce for bow, stern, and deck pieces. They chose elastic woods with straight grains, like hemlock and alder, for stringers, ribs, and gunwales.

Alutiiq men used strips of hide and baleen to tie their *qayat* together. They never used nails. Nails can make the frame stiff or rub a dangerous hole in the skin cover.



An Alutiiq kayaker. Photo courtesy of Eric Waltenbaugh.

One of the most distinctive parts of the Alutiiq *qayaq* is its split, upturned prow. The lower curved part is slightly hollowed on the sides, helping the boat cut through the water. The tall upper part provides buoyancy, helping the boat float through waves.

A SKIN OF SKINS

A kayak's cover provided protection for the hunter inside. This thin layer of animal skin kept water out and created a smooth surface that slipped through the water. Women created boat covers, a task that required great precision.

Alutiiq people used both seal and sea lion skins to cover their boats. A hunter preparing to cover a boat would collect skins and age each one to remove the hair. When it was time to create a boat cover, women soaked the skins in water to moisten them for cutting and sewing. They laid skins over the *qayaq* frame, positioning them to form a cover. Each skin was marked and then cut to shape. With the cut pieces, sewing could begin. It took at least a week to stitch a *qayaq* cover. Knowledgeable women supervised those with less experience, checking their work carefully, as poor sewing could cost a hunter his life. When the cover was complete, men pulled it over the frame, sometimes using seaweed to help the cover slide into place.