

OPEN BOAT = OCEAN BOAT

by Burt Kornegay

If you're a whitewater canoeist who likes to surf beautiful waves, ride fast currents, and power your boat over haystacks, then head to Florida—or to Georgia and the Carolinas. That's right, go south, where blackwater streams lazily meander between trees shagged with Spanish moss. Because that's where you're going to find some of the best whitewater canoeing in North America too—there where the Atlantic washes against sandy beaches like a perpetual wave machine.

Think of the southern coastline as being a 1000-mile-wide whitewater park, with rapids that range from Class I on up to whatever you're game to try. The water is warm, the temps are mild, the place is open year-round, and it's made for open boats.

I first canoed in the southern surf in the 1990s and have made a surfing pilgrimage there every year since. The first time was unintended. My wife and I had taken a 16' flatwater tandem with us to Emerald Isle, North Carolina, to explore the salt-water marshes. But the more I looked at those gorgeous ocean waves, the more I wanted to ride them. Becky said *she* wanted no part of it, so I carried the canoe down to the surf alone.

Kneeling behind the center thwart and waiting for a lull in the waves, I paddled out through the surf zone. Then, turning on top of an incoming breaker, I stroked hard towards shore.

It was a thrilling moment when the canoe tipped down onto the face of the wave. I thought, "This is gonna be good!" That is, until the trough of smooth, green water in front of the boat pinned its bow and stopped it, while the onrushing crest of the wave at my back spun the stern sideways and over, wiping me out. I held onto the waterlogged craft and struggled back to shore. First try and I'd gotten tumbled. But that downhill rush on the face of the wave had been everything I hoped it would be . . . and it promised even more.

What happened next, however, was carnage as I wiped out on wave after wave. People stood on shore and watched. "I've never seen a canoe in the surf" a couple of them said.

Finally the moment came when I caught a wave just right—when the bow skimmed the surface and the canoe shot forward, buoyant, pushed by a curling crest. Glancing sideways, I saw the

wave's whitewater edge powering me along, and I felt like I was riding the Atlantic's entire 77-million cubic miles of water all the way to shore!

If you want to give saltwater surfing a try, here are a few things I've learned since that day at Emerald Isle. First, leave the classic tandem canoe at home. Take a solo whitewater playboat instead, outfitted with float bags, saddle, thighstraps, kneepads, and footpegs.

Second, to enjoy long, manageable rides, find a gently sloping beach, with waves that break far out. If you go to a beach that slopes steeply and where the waves crash right on shore, your surfs are going to be short and they'll end violently, assuming you can even make it out.

Third, start small. Breakers just 2-3' high will give you a tall challenge. If the crest of an oncoming wave is at eye level when you're kneeling in your canoe, it's a three-footer.

Fourth, to avoid that enemy of the canoeist, wind, go out early in the morning, when the air is often still. Or look for the glassy conditions that can prevail in late afternoon after thunderstorms have passed.

Fifth, if you try canoe surfing and find that you like it, then to save yourself a world of bailing install a battery-powered bilge pump in your boat. I use a 1200 gal-per-hour Tsumani pump, the size of a soup can, run by a Rhino rechargeable, 12-Volt, 5-AMP, sealed lead-acid battery, powered by a simple toggle switch. No waterproof connections are needed.

You'll have a leg up if you're already a Class II or better river boater and know how to front surf on waves and sidesurf in holes. There's one big difference, however, between river and ocean waves. River waves keep their shape and stay put. Only the current is moving. This means you can sit in an eddy to study a wave or hole, then paddle out repeatedly until you've gotten a feel for how to ride it. But in the ocean's surf there are no staging eddies, and it's the waves themselves that are on the move as they build, break and race towards shore.

Complicating things, the size and shape of ocean waves change as the tide ebbs and flows, as the wind builds, or when a storm passes at sea. In other words, you can't get to know an ocean wave the way you know Surfer's Rapid on the Nantahala or

Brennan's Wave on the Clark Fork. You've got to paddle out and see what's there that day, that hour, that next oncoming wave.

In spite of all this oceanic flux, here are some guidelines to paddling in the surf. In waves that are relaxed or moderately sloped when they break, with their crests spilling down their faces, simply let one sweep you up and carry you along. A couple of forward strokes will get you going. Once you're sliding down the wave's face, draw and pry in the stern to keep the boat headed straight. Waves like these are the easiest to ride.

But when the waves stand straight up, with their faces curling and dumping, change tactics. Paddle out to the breakers and turn, then with strong forward strokes to build up steam, position yourself on a steepening face and ride it down. Lean way back and pull up with your knees when you go into the drop to keep the bow from pearling. Brace if needed, then draw or pry. The crashing foam pile will want to buck the stern around—always a big challenge.

When a wave *does* turn you sideways—and many will—then to avoid windowshading, immediately lean the boat away from shore and *towards* the foam pile, and brace there with your paddle for an exciting ride. You'll find the churning water to be surprisingly supportive. Once you're used to this, try turning the canoe into a backsurf, or even spin it 360 while the whitewater carries you along. Some waves will do the spinning for you. Let it take the lead and enjoy the ride.

Though I haven't tried, I think accomplished playboaters should be able to do enders and pirouettes in the surfzone too.

Timing, position, and forward speed are everything. And just like catching waves on a river, surfing ocean waves can only be learned with lots of practice—and spills.

Besides being a lot of fun, you'll discover that playing in the rollicking surf improves your paddling skills in general and your sense of balance in the boat--improvements you'll notice as soon as you return to running whitewater rivers.

For example, the ocean's surf is a great place to hone your ability to paddle sideways through river waves and to sidesurf in holes. Here's one way to do it. Float parallel to shore in the surf zone where the water is thigh deep, then lean the boat and brace with your paddle as you ride sideways up and over the frothy run-out from wave after wave. Practice this on both your "on" and "off" sides. Now,

still parallel to shore, paddle forward and, without breaking your stroke cadence, continue taking the oncoming waves abeam, using just your knees and weight shifts to lean and balance the boat. The ocean will keep on sending in the waves for as long as you want to practice!

Obviously, the tremendous tumbling power of even small ocean waves must be respected, and they can hurt you. Wear a lifejacket and helmet and keep your arms in the “paddler’s box”! Also, know how to do make a quick wet exit or to roll the canoe when you head out to the breakers. Occasionally breaking waves *have* ground me into the bottom, mainly when I’ve paddled close to shore. But when it comes to sudden stops, I’ll choose contact with ocean sand over river rocks any day.

Here’s who definitely *is* in danger when you go out to play in the surf—swimmers. A runaway boat will bowl over anyone in its path. Kids playing near shore are especially vulnerable. Play away from other people! I give surfboarders a wide berth too—unless I get there first. And I never try to jump on a wave that they are going for. Respect for others in the surf zone goes a long way towards maintaining good relations. And I’ve yet to meet a surfer who hasn’t been friendly in return.

I’ve saved the best thing about canoe surfing for last: riding waves in is only half the fun, because you can also enjoy quality airtime while paddling back *out*. Here’s how. Size up the oncoming waves, then power up the face of one when it peaks. If you’ve timed it right, the canoe will go airborne at the crest and you’ll land on the other side with the best “boof” you’ve ever heard. (If the wave crashes early, punch straight through its foam pile.) Don’t stop to twirl your paddle. Regain speed, carve a turn, and surf the next wave in!

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