



Kayaking the Dry Tortugas



A kayak can be a great way to explore the beauty of the Dry Tortugas. As you paddle you can look down through clear water at the diverse marine life that makes the seagrass beds and coral reefs their home. Quietly paddling and taking in the wonder of these islands where terns and frigatebirds nest offers an amazing experience. Before you begin your adventure there are many things you need to plan for and consider.

Planning Your Visit

Depending on your level of experience there are many trips to be made in the park. From quick jaunts near Garden Key to longer open water paddles. Open water kayaking can be dangerous and requires more experience and specific equipment.

Places To Go

Bush and Long Keys are the closest to Garden Key and home to thousands of nesting birds in the spring. A trip around these two islands generally takes a few hours.

Loggerhead Key is 3 miles to the west of Garden Key and can take several hours to paddle round trip. Loggerhead is the largest island in the park and offers great snorkeling and nearly empty beaches. This trip involves crossing deep, open water with very strong currents. Access to Loggerhead Key is limited to 24 persons per day. The trip to Loggerhead needs to be listed on your boat permit.

Important Tips And Regulations

Permits

A boating permit is **required** for all vessels in the park, including kayaks. The purpose of the permit is to inform boaters about the Research Natural Area (RNA) and for park staff to study visitor use patterns. Please meet with park staff upon arrival to complete this free permit.

What To Bring

Required equipment for any kayak trip includes a PFD, a sound producing device such as a whistle, and a flashlight, even if you do not plan to paddle after dark.

It is also strongly recommended to bring a VHF radio, personal locator beacon, signalling devices visible by both day or night, spare paddles, paddle float, wet suit, food and water, first aid kit, nautical chart and compass and/or GPS. See suggested equipment list on back.

Closed Areas

There are several closed areas such as the Shark and Coral Special Protection Zones. Please ask where these are located to avoid accidentally straying into them.

When You Arrive

It is the responsibility of the kayaker(s) to know their equipment and capabilities and to have a plan for self rescue should an emergency occur. Park staff may not always be readily available for a search and rescue effort.

Park staff may meet you as you arrive to give a briefing on paddling in the park. If no staff meets you, please contact park staff before entering the water to receive the required boating permit and for a briefing before you begin your paddle trip.

Before starting your trip, let a fellow camper know where you are going as well as an estimated return time. Check the weather, tides, and winds.

You can launch your kayak at the dinghy beach which is between the main dock and the old south coaling dock.

When you return from paddling, check back in with either a fellow camper or park ranger.

Safety

Questions To Ask Yourself

Have you left your trip plans with a fellow camper?

Do you have a VHF radio?

What is your plan for self rescue?

How will you call for help if you need it?

How will you identify your location if you are able to contact searchers. ?

How will you signal searchers?

Do you have an anchor or sufficient line to tie off to buoys or markers to minimize drift?

Is the weather forecast for winds less than 10 mph and calm seas for the duration of the open water kayak trip?

What are the tides and currents? Are they favorable for your planned trip?

Does everyone in your group have open water kayak experience?

Are the kayaks sit-on-top self bailing kayaks?
Are the kayaks brightly colored?

Are you aware of landing areas and swim areas on Loggerhead Key?

What You Must Be Able To Do

Kayakers must be able to self rescue and re-enter their kayaks. If you are unable to re-enter your boat you must be able to immediately call for help. If you call for help you must know or be able to describe your location. You must have a way to signal a searcher. Signals must be visible at night, in daylight, from a plane, or a boat.



Equipment Checklist

REQUIRED EQUIPMENT

- PFD
- Sound producing device
- Flashlight, preferably waterproof

SUGGESTED EQUIPMENT

- Personal Locator Beacon
- Waterproof VHF Radio
- Waterproof Strobe light
- Compass and/or GPS
- Nautical Chart
- First aid Kit
- Spare paddles
- Paddle float
- Signal flares
- Mirror or reflective material
- Line or rope to tie to buoys or markers
- Anchor
- Wetsuit and booties
- Dry change of clothes
- Matches
- Food and Water
- Dive Flag
- Kayak repair kit
- Spray skirt, hatch covers, keel, rudder depending on the model of kayak