

P&H Virgo sea kayak first impression. Dr Douglas Wilcox 11/19

The end of August was rather sad. I had to return the P&H Valkyrie kayak and in its place I was loaned a P&H Virgo. Both boats are new in 2019. I found the Valkyrie to be a unique and sublime blend of fun and performance in a hull that owes more to surfski design than other FSTs (fast touring kayaks). I have reviewed the Valkyrie here on FB and in Ocean Paddler magazine. I was very sorry to see it go.

In truth I was not expecting much of the Virgo. It is designed as an all round day/weekend touring kayak to replace the aging Easky which I have paddled and found to be heavy and on the numb side of boring. The Easky has now been discontinued but the Virgo is available in single skin PE construction at the same price point as the Easky.

These thoughts about the Easky were going through my mind as I took the roof rack straps off and started to unload the Virgo. My goodness it was light! This one was in the CLX Corelite X construction and once I got all the wrapping off I discovered it was 3kg lighter than my P&H Aries 155 in performance kevlar construction! Mostly I was able to carry the unloaded Virgo on my own but carrying it to the beach with two people, one at the bow one at the stern revealed absolutely no bounce or flex. This boat in CLX is very stiff, (the hull is considerably stiffer than that of my composite Nordkapp LV.)

Fittings and design features.

It has all the fittings and lines you would expect on a full size touring kayak. There is even a nice elastic paddle park on the starboard side of the cockpit. This would also be ideal for securing a furled sail and mast! There is no rear day hatch. This helps keep the weight down and because of the short length of the kayak it is easy to reach up to the cockpit bulkhead through the rear hatch. I have heard several people criticize the lack of a rear day hatch. In practice the only thing I have ever taken from a day hatch on the water was a cag, when it turned chilly. I would be quite happy keeping a cag rolled up under a deck elastic if I thought the weather might change while I was on the water and I did not want to land. However, I know people who carry items for every conceivable on the water emergency in their day hatches, so maybe the Virgo is not for them. As I also surfski I am enjoying transferring the lightness and simplicity of that activity into my sea kayaking so I did not miss the day hatch at all. This boat had a sizeable mini day hatch in front of the cockpit. This was much more waterproof than most such hatches on RM boats. The footrests adjust easily while seated using easy to reach wands. Despite the mini day hatch on the foredeck, there was plenty room for a 1.88m tall paddler's size 45 boots. The Connect seat is very comfortable. Initially the back rest in the Virgo did not seem as comfortable as the higher backrest in the Hammer (also Connect specification) but that was fixed when we loosened it off a bit.

I wasted no time (and little energy it was so light) getting it to the beach. It has a long waterline length at the keel for its length which boded well for its cruising speed as I was about to set off in company with a much longer and presumably faster P&H Scorpio. Looking at the modest keel rocker it was apparent that this was designed for a very different role than the highly rockered and ultra manoeuvrable Aries and Delphin designs (see photo of Aries). However, as soon as the Virgo is edged, the waterline shortens considerably giving the Virgo great manoeuvrability. I also noticed the lovely lines of the chines, these add stiffness to the hull and also serve as water release edges (more of that later).

Paddling the Virgo.

This is where I was really surprised. I took to the Virgo straight away. This is not just a boat for beginners. Mostly I have paddled the Virgo on my own in exposed tidal waters (up to 4 knots) of the outer Solway Firth in the North Irish Sea. Winds varied from F1 up to F5 and swell up to 1.5m. In company, I have paddled alongside a P&H Aries 155, a P&H Hammer a P&H Scorpio Mk1 and a Scorpio MV mk2 CLX. My goodness, if I thought the Virgo was light compared with the Aries, it was like a feather compared with the surf specification Hammer.

The Virgo had no trouble cruising with the Scorpio. It is easy to keep on a straight track and if you stop paddling in a wind, it does not lee cock, like an Aries or a Delphin. Along a rocky coast it was unsurprisingly more manoeuvrable on edge than the longer Scorpio but less so than the highly rockered Aries 155. It was impressively stable when holding an edge in a hard turn.

The test boat has the skudder, which I have used on various Scorpions and works very well, especially with a sail. However the Virgo is so manoeuvrable on edge I would say that unless you really like rudders or intend to paddle sail, the simple skeg would do just fine. I paddled the Virgo without the skudder in situations where I would have used a skeg in both the Delphin and the Aries.

Paddling out through steep wind over tide waves I found the Virgo to be noticeably dry compared with the Valkyrie and its wave piercing bow. The Virgo has a noticeable V in the bow which flares out as the chines approach the deck towards the bow. This design effectively deflects the water. Dryness going upwind is something I value in a touring kayak, especially on cold winter days. The trade off is that the bow rises and falls quite noticeably in waves and this does slow the rate of progress compared with the fast wet ride of the Valkyrie.

The kayak feels remarkably stable when the water gets rough. When you turn downwind it is also a lot of fun. It does not catch fast deep water waves as easily as the highly rockered Aries and Delphin (or the Valkyrie!) but if you get your timing right and accelerate your paddling as you feel the stern begin to lift, the Virgo surfs with some style. What I was not expecting on a recreational boat was that when it starts to plane on a wave of about 1m, it will carve a turn by lowering the inside edge. That is the benefit of those well defined chines acting as water release edges.

The Virgo is an easy boat to roll as the rear deck and cockpit are low for layback rolls. The low wide rear deck also facilitates cowboy re-entries. In an assisted rescue of the Virgo, the rescue kayaker found it easier to empty the upturned Virgo than the highly rockered Delphin and Aries.

The Virgo took all my weekend camping gear with space to spare. Mind you I have gone on a 6 day / 5 night self supporting camping trip in winter in my Aries! With a full load the Virgo lost some of its feeling of liveliness and agility but it was able to maintain a good pace alongside a Scorpio MV Mk 2 CLX. It also felt wonderful compared with a loaded Easky.

Any snags?

This was a pre-production boat and there were a few niggles which will be fixed for production models. However, I can only report what I found in the boat tested. P&H have an excellent track record of taking paddler feedback and using it to fine tune their kayaks.

One of the sandy beaches on the Solway has a grain size that jams in the jaws that hold the skudder blade. The jaws are just inside the skeg box. It does not happen on any of the other beaches. Because I know about this, I do not drag the stern of the kayak on the sand of this beach and operate the skudder several times in the water before I leave the beach. Of course skegs on other boats also jam, usually with bigger gravel or small pebbles.

The deck elastics ran over the skeg/skudder slider. Now fixed with realigned elastics.

The brass inserts to screw an optional mast base to the deck were mounted a few centimetres far forward of the decline RDFs the side stays would attach to. Now fixed.

The last was a personal gripe. The seat was mounted on a huge thick wedge of foam. (in contrast the seat in the Valkyrie was mounted as low as possible). There is case for having a high seat in a performance kayak but this is clearly a recreational touring kayak. To me the Virgo is stable in rough water but increasing seat height reduces stability (seat pad raisers are often used to train surfskiers who are wanting to move to a faster, narrower, less stable ski). However, I am only 172cm tall and 72kg and have been paddling for some time. The 188cm tall 90kg paddler (who had a higher centre of gravity) commented that the Virgo was a bit livelier than he expected in one of the local tide races off the islands. Now fixed with lower seat..

Conclusions.

What a wonderful surprise paddling the Virgo has proved to be. The Virgo is a lively day/weekend all round touring kayak that will handle pretty much any conditions you are likely to meet. It is very accessible to newcomers but experienced paddlers will still find it rewarding and responsive to paddle. It is lighter than many composite kayaks of this size but seems to be just as stiff. It is easy to handle and store when ashore. Finally, I have not paddled my Aries in the time I have had the Virgo...I have enjoyed it so much.

Specifications, as tested in CLX with skudder and minihatch:

Length: 443cm

Breadth: 59cm

Weight: 24.7kg

Volume: 313l (quoted)

Max paddler weight: 100kg (quoted)

Price range: £875 single skin MZE PE, skeg no forward minihatch to £1409 CLX, Skudder, forward minihatch (as tested)

I am grateful to P&H and SeaKayakOban for the loan of the Virgo. It will need to go back but hopefully not just yet as I am looking forward to paddling it across to Arran.