

VALLEY ETAIN



I need to confess something. I've been having an affair. Well, to be more precise (and before my Mother-in-law lynches me), I feel like I've been having an affair. My own kayak (a P&H Cetus) has been playing second fiddle to the new Valley Etain, Valley Sea Kayaks' first completely new kayak design for over a decade.

MANUFACTURER'S DESCRIPTION

For 2011 we decided to introduce a new strand of DNA into the Valley range, one that is a little more contemporary both in style and paddling feel.

What do we mean? Valley kayaks are traditionally 'fish-form' i.e. widest point slightly forwards of centre. The Etain is more neutral, in fact very slightly Swede-form i.e. widest point rear of centre. Swede-form kayaks have a different feel, slightly more glide and a perception of speed that is more noticeable because you are now paddling in a narrower part of the boat. Paddling stroke is also less encumbered and there is a general feeling of having less boat between you and the water. Better... no; different... yes!

Other features are a hull that has shallow to moderate 'V' in cross-section for good initial stability, and rocker that would best be described as moderate i.e. slightly less than some other Valley boats to provide secure tracking but still enough to provide a lively ride.

The Etain is designed to appeal to paddlers looking for an expedition-style boat with a contemporary feel. Arguably, the Etain should appeal to those who are already familiar with the performance of a Valley kayak but also to those who have previously not been a fan of Valley's traditional style!

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 534 CM
 WIDTH: 55 CM
 DEPTH: 34 CM
 WEIGHT: 23.5 KG
 IDEAL LOAD SUITABILITY: 77-109 KG
 RRP: £2245
 FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:
WWW.VALLEYSEAKAYAKS.COM

ABOUT THE TEST: PADDLER AND PADDLING CONDITIONS

The Etain was primarily tested by one paddler, intensively, over a two-week period. It was paddled in a range of wind conditions over F2-6 and a range of sea states around the Solent area. In addition, thoughts and impressions were sought from Douglas Wilcox who has also had the opportunity to paddle the Etain (which are written up on his website). Unusually, this review started with a short but very interesting discussion with the designer of the boat, allowing me to have a first-hand insight into the design brief.

DESIGN

The most notable aspect of the design of the Etain given Valley's history is the move to a Swede-form hull. This means the widest point of the kayak sits behind the mid-point of the boat. Traditionally, Valley Sea kayaks are fish-form (the widest point sitting forwards of the kayak's mid-point). With the Etain, the Swede form is quite subtle with the widest point sitting a couple of inches behind the mid-point (which is at the front of the seat when viewing the cockpit from above). This is in contrast to my Cetus where the widest point is more significantly behind the mid-point.

The hull has what I would describe as a shallow to moderate V shape, similar in some ways to the Tahe Marine Reval I have paddled. It is certainly less pronounced than the Valley Nordkapp, Aquanaut or Avocet range, but more so than for a kayak like the Cetus. The rocker would also be best described as moderate.

The soft chines of the Etain are evident from looking at the bow and stern. The bow is large and somewhat flared on the hull, with a

reasonable high rounded deck rising up to the cockpit. Viewing the cockpit side on, you see that the coaming contours down from this high front deck to the lower, flatter rear deck before rising to the point of the stern. The stern hull has an element of skeg built in to its shape but curves up to the end point unlike the shorter, angular stern of a Cetus.

The Etain runs at 17'7" in length, with the widest point sitting at 21.5".

CONSTRUCTION, FINISH, FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

The Etain on review was a standard composite fibreglass/diolen construction and the finish was absolutely superb. The unloaded weight of the boat felt surprisingly light when lifted with the actual weight being 23.5 kg (51 lbs) – the same as a Valley Nordkapp. In comparison, my Cetus is a heftier 28.2 kg.

At the bow and stern, comfortable yet simple hand toggles are fitted with elastic retaining cord to keep them from flapping during transit and paddling. This retaining cord is attached to the customary Valley stainless steel ring at the far end of the bow and stern decklines. Sturdy, decent diameter cord runs almost the full length of the bow and stern and simple recessed attachment points keep the layout taught and lean. There are ample deck elastics on both bow and stern to allow for split paddles, charts and other items to be secured. There is always a discussion over whether splits should be carried on bow or stern; if you choose the latter the raised nature of the rear deck hatch keeps the splits nicely off the rear deck, preventing the usual scratches.

The Etain has a four-hatch design. The forward and rear compartments are accessed through oval

hatch covers. These are smaller hatches than on some kayaks but I found the hatch covers (Valley's own design) to be very sturdy, water tight and very easy to use, particularly when replacing them with cold wet hands. The day hatch is situated on the rear right-hand side of the cockpit and was easily accessible on the water. Unique to the Etain is Valley's take on a deck hatch. As opposed to a glassed-in, under-deck compartment with a surface mounted hatch, they have designed a removable plastic pod with a small hatch cover which sits snugly in a moulded area on the front deck and is secured by the front deck elastics.

Bulkheads were all well finished and I liked the vertical bullhead behind the seat, allowing space to carry emergency items or potentially mount a battery-operated pump solution.

A standard wired Valley skeg was fitted to the review Etain; the skeg box sits relatively unobtrusively at the rear end of the stern compartment. The skeg control utilises a push/pull bar fitted in a completely removable unit for easy maintenance. The control was smooth-actioned.

The cockpit is large and wide relative to the boat allowing an easy entry/exit, aided by the high front and relatively low back of the cockpit. The coaming is nice and sturdy and sits quite high off the deck, allowing for easy use of a range of spraydecks (particularly those with a corded edge). Although I had to battle somewhat to utilise a Peak corded deck on the Cetus (due to the narrow gap between coaming and deck), it fitted beautifully on the Etain. The seat is plastic with a padded cover attached by studs along with side pads and a padded back strap.

The Etain is finished off with quality decals of both the newer Valley Logo and Etain wording. ►

'THE ETAIN PROVED TO BE A BEAUTIFUL BOAT TO PADDLE ON A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT LEVELS. IMMEDIATE IMPRESSIONS ON THE WATER WERE OF EXCELLENT PRIMARY STABILITY... SECONDARY STABILITY IS ALSO EXCELLENT. I WAS ABLE TO PUT THE ETAIN RIGHT UP ON EDGE SUPPORTED BY A CONFIDENCE-INSPIRING CUSHION OF SECONDARY STABILITY.'

The review boat was white-hulled with an orange deck and black coaming, deck lines and seam.

PERFORMANCE

The Etain proved to be a beautiful boat to paddle on a number of different levels. Immediate impressions on the water were of excellent primary stability, subtly less than a Cetus due to the more V-shaped hull, but excellent nonetheless; there are rewards to reap from this subtle difference in terms of tracking. Secondary stability is also excellent. I was able to put the Etain right up on edge supported by a confidence-inspiring cushion of secondary stability.

On the move, the Etain has a wonderful sense of gliding through the water. It feels like a much shorter boat than it is, partly due to the slight Swede form meaning you see less boat in front of you, but I also think the high foredeck adds to this illusion. I found it to have a reasonably fast sprint speed although perhaps less than the Cetus and, as Douglas feels, a tad less than his Nordkapp LV. However, in more usual day-long paddles I found the Etain to hold a good average speed which was comparable and, particularly in rougher conditions, faster than the Cetus as it tracked better.

The Etain responds very positively to edging. Using slight edge to aid directional control was effortless and responsive; this would be a nice boat in which to introduce the principles of edging to a paddler. The Etain also responds very well to tighter turns on edge: while maybe not as quick to turn tightly as a Cetus, it is a remarkably manoeuvrable kayak for its size. Douglas likens its turning potential to that of the Rockpool GT; on my part it out-turned the Tahe Marine Reval, another expedition-capable kayak I had been impressed with.

Tracking on the Etain is very positive; I found myself using the skeg a lot less often than I am used to. In particular, it coped very well with rear quartering seas/winds. Paddling the Etain loaded only served to improve this performance. When I did need to utilise the skeg, I found it worked perfectly and I was impressed not only with the action of the skeg control but the fact that it can be removed for care and maintenance as opposed to a sealed fibre-glassed-in system that would require return to manufacturer if it became defective.

While surfing with swell and windblown waves (as well as the wake from local ferries/fast cats), the Etain tracked well on the wave without fear of broaching. I had a lot of fun playing in a small tidal race that can appear off Stansmore Point in certain conditions, and benefited from the nicely designed hull of the Etain.

I was very comfortable in the Etain. The footrests are a nice solid design and provide a much sturdier feel when applying foot pressure compared to other footrests I have utilised recently. The seat padding was more than adequate and is nice and low in the kayak. On a personal level, I would add some thin foam padding for my knees and lower thighs to complete the outfitting. The back band was also comfortable and did not tuck under even with a wet exit and re-entry drill. Foot/legroom was also excellent. The deck pod has been carefully designed not to intrude too far into the kayak. In my Cetus, I struggle with size 10 Lomo boots whereas the Etain has a nice roomy feel.

Having grown used to larger deck hatches, I was initially concerned about the deck pod's size. However, it has really grown on me due to a combination of the removable aspect and the extra cockpit room which it provides. Although not

advertised as 100% watertight (with advice to use small dry bags for wallet/keys, phone etc.), I have yet to find any water ingress even after self-rescue practice. The main compartments are very roomy and the Etain can certainly swallow a decent load, earning its expedition-capable credentials, while remaining nicely trimmed/balanced on the water without overly careful packing.

Rolling was nice and smooth and re-entry to the cockpit is clean and easy with the kayak settling nicely after a roll (no braces required). A reasonably low rear deck and the excellent stability allow a straddle and re-entry to be performed with no hitches.

CONCLUSION

The Etain is built as an expedition-capable kayak with the aim of appealing to paddlers who have not previously been fans of Valley's traditional style. In my humble opinion they have succeeded with these aims and more. The Etain is certainly a very viable expedition craft, but with its excellent manoeuvrability and small kayak feel it also has serious potential as a day/weekend boat. While the excellent primary and secondary stability make it an appropriate boat for beginner/intermediate paddlers, it retains a lively ride and should appeal to a wide range of paddlers. With its nice tracking and solid performance in waves and surf, I would suggest this is a true all-rounder and will make a superb addition to Valley's current range.

For those interested in how my 'affair' will end after the review period – the superior tracking (particularly in confused, rear-quartering seas), increased foot room and lower unloaded weight relative to my current boat mean the Etain has won me over. If I were buying a kayak today, it would be the Etain. ■

MANUFACTURER'S RESPONSE

Wow! I could leave it at that but that would be a little unprofessional. With the Etain we set ourselves a stiff task; this task was all the harder because we were so upfront about what we wanted to achieve and the boats we were aiming to compete against. In short, we stated the Etain needed to keep Valley's famed performance in wind and waves but also match the sensory gratification (the 'feel') afforded by the newer designs of some companies in less demanding conditions.

Throughout the process we have made big play of the word 'feel': it should feel different, it should feel faster, etc. What we meant is that it should have the extra glide and sensation of moving through the water afforded by Swede-form hulls but without the compromises some of these designs appear to make once in wind and waves. This review confirms that we have successfully achieved these two (often conflicting) aims. So yes, we are very happy that the test positively reinforces our own beliefs about the Etain.

The tester mentioned that he would add foam to the thigh-grip area: new boats do ship with pre-shaped self-adhesive foam pads especially for this fine tuning of the cockpit area, allowing them to be positioned exactly where needed. Finally, while we do warn people about protecting the contents of the pod against possible leaks, this is purely precautionary as we have no reason to doubt the integrity of the hatch seal. Considering the exposed nature of the foredeck when accessing the pod while on the water (and its likely contents e.g. phone, keys, etc.) we felt it wise to remind people of good practice when storing important items.

Peter Orton
Valley Sea Kayaks

VALLEY

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Valley's first completely new kayak in many years, the Etain introduces new DNA into the Valley Sea Kayaks range with a more contemporary style and paddling feel.

- Swede form hull increases speed.
- Shallow V in cross section offers good initial stability.
- new cockpit design with updated ergonomics for improved contact and control.
- also introducing the new daypod, a tough polyethylene storage pod recessed into the front deck for convenience and security.
- Length: 17ft 7in
- Width : 21.5in
- Depth : 12.5in





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