



Long term and comparative test

VE Explorer Aircore Pro Carbon 2 piece straight shaft paddles

VE paddles are made in Nottingham and have built up a growing reputation among WW paddlers so it was great anticipation that I opened a package containing two of their new carbon sea kayaking/touring paddles. The VE Explorer Aircore Pro Carbon straight two piece shaft comes with 3 blade sizes, small (615cm²), medium (650cm²) and large (685cm²). This review tested the small and the large blades.

About the test

Before the test I had not paddled for nine months following knee and shoulder surgery so this would be an extra challenge on the ergonomics of the paddles. Testing paddles is quite tricky especially if you have a favourite paddle and seldom paddle with anything else. Any new paddle will feel very strange indeed. I paddle with a variety of Euro, wing and Greenland paddles and am always badgering my companions to swap paddles. By doing this I find it easier to appreciate good and bad points of a new paddle without having to spend half a season getting used to it. Nonetheless this test lasted seven months during which the paddles were used for day touring, playing in surf and tide races, kayak paddle sailing in F4-5 winds, camping trips, paddle sailing a loaded kayak through a tide race and 7 open crossings of 14 to 25km when loaded and unloaded. Winds varied from F0 to F6. The test took place in open and sheltered water in the Firth of Clyde, North Channel and Solway Firth. Nine people used the paddles from 5* level to beginner. Paddlers ranged in weight from 65 to 90kg and 167-183cm in height. The VE small blade covered 650km and the VE large blade covered 300km during the test. All the testers favoured feather angles of 40 degrees or less.

Design and construction

The Explorer Aircore Pro Carbon blades have a marked dihedral on the power face. The blades are made buoyant by a hollow spine on the back face of the blade. Unlike some other buoyant paddles, there is no foam core near the blade edge that could be damaged by ingress of water, if the edge of the blade is damaged. The two-piece test paddles were supplied with a superb adjustable joint. It is a lever lock made from anodised aluminium with a stainless steel lever and is of a design that is seen on an increasing number of high-end paddles. It allows tool less, on the water adjustment (of feather -90 to +90 degrees and of length +10cm). Although the VE Explorer Aircore small paddle is 100g heavier than the Cyprus the increase seems to be centred round the extending joint in the shaft and the swing weight does not seem to be significantly different. The outer end of the shaft on the control side is ovalised but it does not extend in far enough and (particularly when the paddle is used extended) I found I was gripping the round section of the shaft. VE paddles are aware of this and the ovalisation will be extended in the future. At the moment they supply an optional index grip and shrink-wrap so that you can customise the paddle to your own grip. I found this to work excellently. Perhaps due to the increasing familiarity with Greenland

paddles, many Euro blade paddlers are now paddling with low feather angles such as 0 to 30 degrees and tend not to have a control hand. Some manufacturers such as Werner are aware of this and can supply shafts which are ovalised on both sides like the Cyprus. VE paddles come with one side ovalised as standard but can supply both sides ovalised on request or can supply two index grips with shrink wrap. We have used four examples of VE Explorer paddles. All were finished to the highest standard. Even the logos are moulded in and so will not peel off.

VE Explorer Aircore Pro Carbon 2 piece straight shaft small

This paddle was compared with the Werner Cyprus (see table) which I have used for about 10% of my paddling over three seasons. The VE blade is longer and narrower than the Werner which gives a more gentle catch and also allows a longer stretch forward without clipping the edge of the blade on the fore deck. Both the VE and Werner carbon shafts are very stiff and one of the reasons the Werner Cyprus is not my main paddle is that I find my joints ache at the end of a day's use. Although the VE shaft is stiff the VE small blade's higher aspect and resultant gentler catch makes the paddle easier to use for extended periods. The pull with the VE small blade is very smooth without a hint of flutter. The exit is very clean with little scooping of water. The blade is less spooned than the Werner blades and following three paddlers with VE Explorer Aircore, Cyprus and Shuna paddles the VE blade scoops less water on the exit, regardless of which paddler was using it. Acceleration is good but not quite so good as the Cyprus. Cruising speed was about the same as the Cyprus (loaded and unloaded) but on long crossings I found the VE Explorer Aircore easier on my joints than the Cyprus. Over several head into F4-5 wind days I travelled at the same speed as a friend using a Cyprus when fully loaded. I found it much easier to maintain that speed when using the VE small blade than with my own Cyprus. At the end of one long hard day I reduced the VE length to 200cm and found the paddling much easier. I then pulled ahead of my companion who was by then finding his fixed length Cyprus hard going. The lever lock joint makes it so easy to adjust length and feather on the water that I would now look for this feature on any future 2-piece paddle purchase. On another trip I used my Cyprus to cross 15km to Ailsa Craig then used the VE Explorer Aircore on the way back. There was little wind (and what there was benefited the trip out with the Cyprus). At the Craig my joints (particularly my recovering shoulder) were aching with the Cyprus but I found the return with the VE Explorer Aircore much easier. I think the VE Explorer Aircore small blade shape and size is ideal for the majority of paddlers for touring. Only if you are at the larger end of the spectrum should you need to consider the medium blade. One powerful 183cm tester has bought the small blade to replace a larger blade Lendal Kinetik touring. For my size, a 210cm shaft length is ideal for high angle paddling (which I prefer) but some of the smaller paddlers found it suited their low angle style and they could convert to high angle paddling by shortening the shaft to 200cm. Personally I would ►



order a shaft that extends to the length you normally paddle with, then you can benefit from “lowering a gear when tired” by shortening it. The VE Explorer Aircore small blade performed support strokes, rolling and steering strokes very effectively and felt similar to the Cyprus. However, several testers commented that they found the Cyprus shaft, which is indexed on both sides, gave better control of such strokes on the non-dominant side. All the testers commented that the fixed length of the Werner joint made the Cyprus less versatile than the VE paddle for touring when tired. At the end of the test, two of the team bought VE Explorer Aircore small blade paddles, one to replace a Werner Shuna and the other to replace a Lendal Kinetik touring.

Despite use by many paddlers and many encounters with rocks the test paddles were returned to VE paddles with no evidence of wear or damage to the blades. The lever lock joints still worked perfectly with no sticking or play. My Werner Cyprus paddles (which have covered about the same distance as the VE Explorer Aircore small paddle in this test) have developed play at the joint. This is not related to the button as it only occurs at my favoured feather angle. One of the testers who also has a low mileage Cyprus has returned his for warranty work for the same reason.

VE Explorer Aircore Pro Carbon 2 piece straight shaft large

This paddle was compared with a Lendal Nordkapp carbon 4-piece straight shaft paddle (see table) which I have used for 10 years for short day trips, especially for playing in tides and surf. I particularly enjoyed using the VE Explorer Aircore large blades for surfing and paddle sailing. Since my shoulder injury I have found the Nordkapp blades to be just a little large for a full day use. The slightly smaller VE large blade now suits me better. Its catch is more gradual than the Nordkapp and even under full acceleration there is no flutter when in similar circumstances the Nordkapp does begin to flutter. Being buoyant I much prefer the VE large blade's exit to the Nordkapp's exit. Neither of these blades create much spooning of water on exit despite their size. When swapping between the VE large and Nordkapp it felt like changing down a gear in terms of strain, but surprisingly the VE large did not seem to give too much away to the Nordkapp in terms of acceleration to catch a wave or power to punch out through a wave. The VE large blade is superb for steering and support strokes on either side. It is especially good for stern rudders on a wave (either with or without a sail). For this it is much better than my Lendal Kinetik Wing which I often use for paddle sailing due to its performance at speed but the KW is not good for stern rudder strokes. I have already mentioned that the VE shaft has only a little ovalisation (if you order it

without the optional index grip and shrink wrap). When using the VE large blade in a variety of conditions both myself and one of the other experienced testers found we were gripping the round section of the shaft. We suffered some involuntary slicing when compared with using the Nordkapp paddle, which had a prominent grip index. Two beginners suffered capsizes using the VE large blade after slicing but neither had problems with the VE small blade. One paddler who had a good offside roll with his own Werner Shuna paddle could not offside roll with the VE Explorer Aircore large paddle. I then fitted the optional shrink-wrapped index grips to both ends of the shaft and what a transformation. The VE Explorer Aircore large is now my favourite paddle for tide races, surfing and paddle sailing in rough conditions. In comparison with the VE large the Nordkapp design is now showing its age and there was a much bigger difference between using these two than between the VE small blade and the Cyprus. Although the Lendal VariLok allows adjustment of feather and 7cm length it requires an allen key which is inconvenient on the water. In summary, the VE large blade has almost all the performance of the Nordkapp but in a smaller more user friendly and versatile package.

I did try the VE Explorer Aircore large blades for touring on several long crossings and on a on a windy camping trip to Kintyre but for me the blades were too big. I developed a sore shoulder and wrists at the end of each day. On the camping trip, being able to easily reduce the shaft length by 10cm got me through the first day but I switched to the VE small blades for the rest of the trip with no further problems.

Conclusion

The VE Explorer Aircore Pro Carbon small blade paddle has an ideal blade for touring and its construction and performance parameters compares with and exceed paddles costing considerably more. The adjustable lever lock joint gives it advantages that some more expensive paddles lack. Fitted with the optional index grip I rate this paddle 5/5 and 4.5/5 without. In comparison I rate the Cyprus 4/5 dropping a point for its inferior joint.

The VE Explorer Aircore Pro Carbon large blade paddle makes a wonderful paddle for playing in rough water on the ocean, you can really feel its white water heritage. I especially like it for paddle sailing and won't be parted from it! I think the optional index grip is essential for this paddle and indeed I have fitted grips on both sides. I rate this paddle 5/5 with the optional index grip and 4/5 without. In comparison I rate the Nordkapp 3/5 dropping a point for usability and another for an inferior joint. 🇬🇧

	LENGTH (cm)	WEIGHT (g)	BLADE AREA (cm²)
VE EXPLORER AIRCORE PRO CARBON 2 PIECE STRAIGHT SHAFT SMALL	200-210	810	615
WERNER CYPRUS CARBON FOAM CORE 210 2 PIECE CRANK SHAFT	210 FIXED	710	615
VE EXPLORER AIRCORE PRO CARBON 2 PIECE STRAIGHT SHAFT LARGE	200-210	830	685
LENDAL NORDKAPP CARBON 4 PIECE STRAIGHT SHAFT	203-210	770	725