

Skinboat school

In the wilds of Washington state's west coast, Corey Freedman runs one of the only traditional Baidarka making courses.

Whereas George Dyson began baidarka boat building with unusual twentieth-century materials – aluminium and special cloths – others out on the north-west Pacific Coast went back to the original Aleutian and indigenous material including, not completely surprisingly, wood. The Skinboat School is one such, started by New York refugee Corey Freedman in the town of Anacortes over ten years ago. Since moving out to Washington state, Freedman estimates he has helped people coming through the school with nearly 800 baidarkas, and over 1000 different boats, approximately 100 a year.

The school also runs courses on building the larger passenger-carrying Umiaks, on West Greenlandic kayaks, and on the craft of paddle carving. People sign up from

all across North America to work for a week on creating their own very individual skin-frame boat from inception to completion by the end of the seven days. While the core of the boat usually comprises steam-bent western red or yellow cedar, pegged together to avoid entirely either metal or glue joins, the skin is made of an 8–14 ounce ballistic non-flammable woven nylon coating, reinforced with a strong, durable resin. Each boat reflects the student's particular size, shape and, to a certain extent, their personality, which means ending up with an individual, one-off creation. The baidarkas are painted in traditional colours, including applying facial motifs to these vessels, as if they are living entities.

As befits the Aleutian tradition the skin boats are extremely light, around 25 pounds for a 17 foot baidarka, rather than the normal 80 pounds for a boat of equal size, making the self-built baidarkas easy to transport. Although the school is based indoors, in good weather Freedman and his students often take to building on the



beaches nearby, or elsewhere outside. Freedman also offers on-site accommodation, with a field for camping, a tree house, and independence during the courses. And, he adds, the courses are so popular that people often come back year on year. Not surprisingly, he says the baidarkas are unique and he can't imagine any other boat type replacing it, although he also points out that the school is just that, a school, and not a boat-builders yard. Umiaks can be built as social events, where families and friends all take part, usually resulting in this larger vessel being completed within 80 hours, being 16–40 feet long and 4–8 feet wide yet still only weighing 200 pounds. *OL*

The Skinboat School

4744 Welch Lane, Anacortes, WA. USA 98221

Phone (360)299-0804

www.skinboats.com

e-mail: corey@skinboats.com