

The Ultra kayaking experience

The price may not be right, says **Andy Benham**, but the new Ocean Kayak 4.3 really slices across the surface of the sea

It was nearly 18 months ago that I first got my hands on Ocean Kayak's super yak, the Ultra 4.7, which at the time was probably the pinnacle of the fishing kayak designer's art form. If you wanted one boat and wanted it to do everything, then that was the boat for you.

The vessel has sold well in the intervening period, and you see lots of them about, but as I wrote at the end of my review of that boat, there were two downsides to the design, the weight and the price.

Well I'm not claiming to have had any influence on Ocean Kayak, but I can't say it was a huge surprise when rumours started to circulate that the Ultra 4.7 was soon to be joined by a smaller and cheaper model.

Luckily for me, I'm now in possession of a long-term test Ultra 4.3, so not only am I able to give you this first review of the boat, but also I'll be fully fitting it out, and using it to fish through the winter to see how it performs in a variety of conditions.

Basically, it is smaller and lighter, but it isn't any cheaper. It still comes in at just a pound short of a grand, just like its bigger brother.

I'll readily confess to really liking the Ocean Kayak boats, which are designed in New Zealand. The Prowler Elite 4.5 was probably my all-time favourite OK design, and one of the company's first Southern Hemisphere boats, and I also raved

about the Ultra 4.7, another product of OK's Auckland-based design team. So I had high hopes for the shorter Ultra 4.3.

This review covers the basic version, which comes out of the box at £999, rather than the XT version, which adds a rudder, but another £199 to the price. I decided to try the basic version first, to see if I needed a rudder, and also because it would be good fun fitting one myself if it needed one.

All the features

In common with the 4.7, the 4.3 is dominated by the huge hatch cover that takes up the space between your knees. This cover enables you to fit a fish-finder and have it within easy reach, but thanks to a clever revolving hinge mechanism, the whole thing can be rotated through 180 degrees and the fish-finder disappears into a long moulded recess below the cover.

The hinge is a tubular stainless steel affair, and by running the cables through it you make sure nothing gets twisted as you operate the hatch.

The stern of the 4.3 is identical to its bigger brother and will take the same cavernous insulated fish box, although the chances of needing to keep a vast quantity of fish safe from the blistering sun requires some imagination for UK use.

There are four rod holders in a line behind the seat, two facing backwards and two vertical, the vertical mounts being new additions, although the livebait well fitted to the 4.7 has gone to achieve the reduction in hull length.

While there is another pair of forward-facing holders in the gunnels - useful for holding your rods while baiting up - I'll probably also fit some RAM mounts and RAM tubes for mounting the rods while fishing at anchor.

So that's the stuff that has been brought over from its larger brother, but what makes the 4.3 even more interesting is the new stuff that we are seeing for the first time.

Starting from the bow, the standout change is a new front hatch design. In the past Ocean Kayak hatches were simply put over the coaming, and held in place with a couple of straps. A decent system but one that could leak if the boat was upside down for any length of time; this meant that some people chose to seal their hatches with a neoprene cover but, frankly, these could be difficult to get on and off. The 4.3 sees the debut of an all-new hatch design, with a rubber rim, which locks down with a lever.

So what else has changed? Well, the floor area has for one. On older OK boats you put your feet into preformed grooves in the boat floor, which enabled you to really wedge yourself in, but didn't give a perfect fit if your leg length left you between grooves, so to speak.

With the Ultra 4.7, the grooves had been flattened off somewhat, but augmented by side mounted foot pegs, which could be placed in

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exactly the right place for your legs. With the 4.3 the process has gone even further, and it now comes with a flat floor pan, and foot pegs that you adjust from the seat without having to reach too far forward.

It also has a different transducer scupper, which can now take the transducer from Humminbird's side imaging sets. For those of you unfamiliar with this concept, a transducer scupper is a tube through the hull, and a moulding in the bottom of the hull, which enables you to mount a fish-finder without any of the faffing around with glue and cable glands. It's a truly great idea, but it does mean that you are pushed towards using products from other Johnson Outdoors companies, as transducers for Garmin's and the like don't fit.

The centre attractions

Coming to the centre of the boat, the other really major change for this design is immediately obvious - the 4.3 has a captive seat. Earlier OK designs had a seat that you could separate from the hull, and these were attached with snap hooks.

I never found them particularly comfortable, and the fact that a fairly healthy aftermarket in seat upgrades sprung up suggests I wasn't the only one. I actually place a lot of store in the seats fitted to fishing kayaks, and purchased my own first yak based primarily on how comfortable it was to sit still for long periods of time, so I think that this new, deeply padded design is a major step forward.

The base is some type of rubber, with decent levels of padding, and this is permanently attached to the hull, and your back is then supported by a pop-up backrest that folds flat while you are transporting the yak.

Another thing you cannot help but notice is the sheer number of

fittings. There are no fewer than 138 different inserts fitted to this hull, most used by OK to fit things such as the rod holders and running rigging, but there is also a generous sprinkling so that when you come to customise the boat its unlikely you'll end up drilling and riveting, as there should be an insert in the right place.

Another neat touch with this boat is the addition of a 6in screw hatch in the front wall of the rear tank well. This gives access to the inside of the hull and gives more storage, if needed, for a battery for instance.

One last thing that I noticed when dragging this boat around was the front handle has been upgraded and now comes with what feels like a soft rubber insert. Top marks for that one, as the older handles could be a bit of a pain. The same handles are also used either side at the point of balance, making unloading from a car roof relatively easy. A single handle is fitted at the stern, in such a position that two people can carry a pair of boats between them without the boats taking out your knee caps.

Performance rating

So, what's she like to paddle? In a word: eager. Paddling against a fairly strong tide I found the boat was quick off the mark and once she was moving required very little effort to keep going.

I did find that on my first trip out, and with very little on the boat besides myself and a camera, the bow was a little high in the air and had a slight tendency to slam into waves, sending sheets of spray out each side of the transducer scupper. No water came into the foot wells.

It was interesting to note that the next trip out, with full fishing gear, and a lot more weight both bolted to and sitting below that massive revolving hatch, the slamming reduced markedly. When



A seagull's eye view of the Ultra 4.3

Technical Information

OCEAN KAYAK ULTRA 4.3

Length: 4.3 metres

Width: 0.74 metres

Weight: 29.7kg

Capacity: 195kg

Price: £999 (XT version)

£1,199 including rudder

heavily loaded, there was also less tendency to turn into the wind. This turning tendency is the main reason that people fit rudders to fishing kayaks, as they make paddling across wind a lot easier.

The 4.3 is quite easy to handle, and when trimmed with a little more weight in the bow, I didn't really find I needed a rudder but it is definitely something I'll be thinking about over the coming months as I take her out in more testing conditions.

If I found the boat to be fairly rapid paddling into a strong tide, when I turned around to come home, I was amazed at how quickly we covered

the ground. The Ultra 4.3 is one of the fastest sit-on-tops around, and will be capable of covering long distances with very little effort.

I didn't notice the new seat at all. It wasn't until I came to write this review that I was forced to think about it, so it must have been comfortable, and as my back didn't hurt, even after a few decent five mile paddles, the back support works well.

There was only one way to test that new hatch, so over we went. Righting the boat is fairly easy, although she is broader in the beam than some other designs so takes a little more effort to flip. Once upright, it took very little effort to climb over the gunnels and sit back down. I even tried clambering back on the upturned hull to push the hatch further underwater. Then it was back to the beach and time for a look inside. Remarkably, the hull was as dry as a bone.

Any fishing kayak design is by its very nature a compromise, but this boat seems to be a very good one. The price puts her at the very top of the market, but considering the standard of fit out, she still looks like good value. **SA**

More information

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Above: the Ultra 4.3 has a captive seat. Right top: there are four rod holders behind the seat, while the circular hatch gives access to the hull. Right bottom: the lockable hatch.

