

# CREATIVE LEAFING

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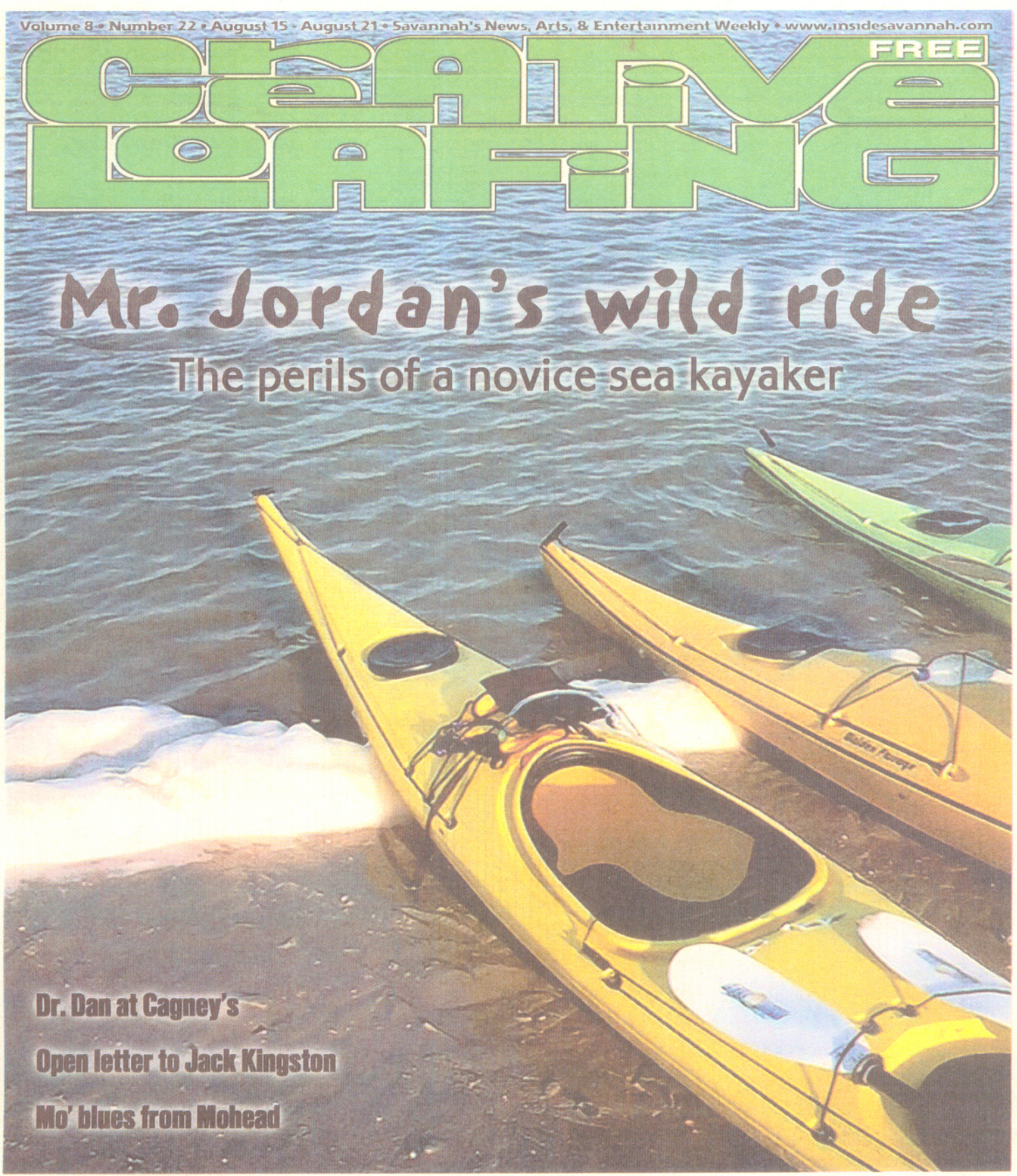
## Mr. Jordan's wild ride

The perils of a novice sea kayaker

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# Mr. Jordan's wild ride

## The perils of a novice sea kayaker



Tim and Michael in their leather kayaking 'skirts'

I GUESS MY FASCINATION WITH SEA kayaking began the first year after I arrived in Savannah. I'd eyeball the bright plastic kayaks lashed to the tops of SUVs and Volkswagens as I sat adjacent to them at traffic lights around town. Sometimes I'd see a solitary kayaker splashing in the surf off the beach at Tybee, and wonder what it must be like.

Years of watching white-water kayakers on TV, clad in thick helmets and life vests, bouncing between jagged rocks and pitching back and forth in heaving foam – not to mention occasionally rolling upside down and then righting themselves again – had instilled a healthy fear of kayaking deep in my psyche.

I knew I had to give this kayaking thing a try.

In late 1999, I took advantage of the free kayak lessons offered Saturday mornings at Lake Mayer by a Southside Savannah wilderness gear retailer. This time, I was squeezed into a plastic two-person kayak with a twelve-year-old who wanted to join the Marines.

Our day on the muck-clogged water consisted of repeated trips around the little island on the south end of the filthy lake, using our paddles to fend off an angry mother goose that nested on the bank. I was left with sore arms and an acute paranoia concerning nesting waterfowl.

This experience fell far short of my romantic ride across the Back River the preceding spring. My jonesing for kayaking lay dormant for more than a year.

Fast-forward to summer 2001. A twenty-eight-year-old news anchor in the throes of a pre-mid-life-crisis crisis decided it was time to take paddle in hand once again...

One Saturday morning, with a newfound boldness and resolve to try new things, I phoned Sea Kayak of Georgia – that striking two-story building on Tybee's Highway 80 next door to the new Tango tropical cafe – and got details: \$45 per person, minimum of two to reserve a session.

My as yet unselected kayaking friend and I were to show up around 7:30 Sunday morning at the store on Tybee, at which point a guide would take us on an exploratory kayak foray back on the Back River. I immediately signed up and enlisted the grudging participation of my co-worker Tim (who really doesn't fancy getting up before two in the afternoon on the Lord's Day). The plan was set in motion.

The bright, searing sun was still low in the sky as Tim and I arrived at Sea Kayak's gravel-topped parking lot the next morning. I looked at him, he looked at me, and I

knew he hated me for what we were about to do.

We met our guide, Seth, and two other kayakers – a local couple that would be joining us on our excursion. Then, forming our various vehicles into a little kayaking caravan, we followed Seth to the same sandy alley where Wil and I had first kayaked two and a half years before.

I felt my heart rise into my throat as a contemplated the upcoming excursion. The briny smell of the nearby salt-marsh stung my nostrils, and a crisp sea breeze wafted through my hair. The cries of numerous sea birds punctuated the already humid morning air. This was living! Seth asked us to help him hoist the kayaks off his trailer and onto the little beach.

Then things got weird.

Seth asked us all to put on skirts. That's right – skirts. Not exactly the type of thing a self-styled masculine mariner likes to wear on a typical weekend at the beach.

These particular skirts were made of thick, black leather, longer in the back than the front, and held in place by adjustable matching black suspenders. The skirts hooked onto a plastic lip that ran around the edge of the openings of the kayaks, and functioned as drapes that kept the salt water from swamping our boats.

Once in the kayak, the skirt/drape kind of makes you look like an extension of the boat, a sort of aquatic centaur – half man, half watercraft.

Next, Seth turned his attention to our feet. Hidden out of sight inside each kayak were two adjustable footrests, one on each side. These slid backward and forward, and were connected to either end of a cable that ran across a pulley in the tail of the kayak. In other words, they were counterbalanced; move one pedal forward, and you moved the other one back.

Getting the footrests adjusted proved tricky, because we also had to move them up and down with little canvas straps and grasping plastic buckles, kind of like the

type you find at the bottom of the straps on a student's book bag.

Seth went from kayak to kayak, making sure everyone's footrests were properly placed, so that our knees rested against the sides of the kayaks, just inside and below the lip of the openings.

Then

came instruction in paddling – surprisingly brief and simple. A little raised bump indicated which end to hold in your right hand. The rubber fins on either end of the paddles were cupped like the outstretched hands of a swimmer, and set at different angles.

Seth showed us how to roll the paddle back and forth in our hands as we slid through the water, so the paddle was angled just right to catch the water with the cup turned down. Gentle, smooth, and shallow strokes provided forward motion; deeper, pointed thrusts would start a turn.

With the verbal instruction over, and brightly colored lifejackets buckled across our torsos, Tim and I and the other two novice kayakers climbed into our kayaks for the last time on dry land.

We hooked our skirts over the lips of the openings, which proved difficult once the skirts were stretched tight all the way around. We lay our paddles across our laps, and hung on to them tightly as Seth pushed each kayak into the Back River. Overlapped bungee cords made X's on the tops of our kayaks, and we secured our water bottles, sunblock, and snacks tightly underneath.

There was a slight bounce as my kayak slid into the water. I was immediately aware of the bobbing of the two-foot swells. Several hundred yards away, we could see big whitetops kicking up where the river met the onrushing sea.

Seth commented that the distant waves were especially violent on this particular day, so instead of heading east toward the sea and hugging the seaward coast of Little Tybee Island, we aimed the noses of

our kayaks landward, to the west.

Seth directed us toward a sailboat moored in the middle of a little creek that fed into the river, and told us to paddle in that direction at our own pace. Today, we'd see how far we could go before the water got too shallow for us to go any further.

I was surprised at how easily the single-person kayak sliced through the waves. I made quick time toward our goal, stopping once to get Seth's help readjusting my footrests. He held my kayak tightly, as I unhooked the skirt and reach deep inside the kayak to move the annoying devices.

As we paddled further and further upstream, the waves diminished in size and strength, and patches of saw grass poked up from beneath the water. I imagined fat, sleepy alligators sliding through the grass to do battle with my kayak, and tightened my grip on the weapon, wondering how effective a weapon it would make.

As you've no doubt noticed boating or driving around the coast, salt-marsh creeks in this area give new meaning to the verb meander. They curve back against themselves over and over as they slowly wind their way out to sea.

At this early stage in our sea kayaking experience, Tim and I still followed every bend and twist in the creek, stopping at every hairpin turn to point our kayaks in the new direction. But as we paddled deeper and deeper into the marsh, I realized I needn't steer around the grassy obstacles; since my kayak only drew a few inches of water, I could simply paddle straight through the grass and out into the creek on the other side.

The reeds and saw grass made a foreboding hissing sound as I slid through. At one point, realizing I was far ahead of the group, I turned around to look for the other kayakers, almost tipping the kayak over as I craned my neck. I couldn't see anything for a second.

Then I made out the shape of Tim's paddle, poking over the tall grass time and again like a big spinning Q-tip. I knew he wasn't far behind, but I couldn't even hear the splash of his paddles. These kayaks were quiet!

Our route took us past a captivating parade of rickety shallow-water docks, in back of Tybee houses that really had character. I noticed a crazily decorated school bus in one backyard, with a paint job that looked like it was done by Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Seth remarked that the bus – and the yard – belonged to a Four-H camp.

Along the way, our kayaks slid past homeowners out on their docks for an



early-morning smoke, or cleaning their boats for a Sunday ride. Some nodded and said hello. Others merely grunted as if they hadn't even seen us.

I wondered how often a gaggle of kayaks paddled past their homes. It felt as if we were invading their privacy, gliding past unannounced in our silent vessels.

This is the point in my narrative at which I almost lost my life – or at least consciousness (that's the "peril" mentioned in the title).

I never got very good at stopping my kayak when it really got going. Light and sleek, the little boat really had a mind of its own.

At one point, I noticed a dock looming up ahead. Even at high tide, there was barely room to move past on the side between the dock and the reeds (at this stage in the game, I was still trying to avoid the grass), and a big bend in the creek made it impossible to hit the curve the right way.

Gazing wide-eyed in abject horror, I was able to do nothing but watch as the nose of my kayak slid under the dock, and the big wooden structure bore down on my head.

Bringing a free hand up reflexively in front of my face, I was able to smack the dock and stop my motion just as the board was about to hit my head. My hand stung with the force of the barely-avoided decapitation or severe cranial maiming (I was protected by nothing more than a flimsy baseball cap), but I was able to use that

same hand to push myself out and start the turn again with a better angle.

But my navigation woes weren't over yet. Soon I was once again unable to stop my careening kayak, and bumped repeatedly into the exposed and expensive engine of someone's moored motorboat.

Our pack of novice kayakers followed the little creek until it dead-ended on the shoulder of Highway 80, right in front of a billboard and just east of Sea Kayak of Georgia. Too bad, I thought, that we can't just haul these plastic boats out of the water and drag them back to the parking lot. But we had to go back the way we came.

With some effort, Tim and I managed to turn our kayaks around. Using the paddles as poles, we pushed against the soft mud under the water and pointed the noses of our craft back out to sea. The return trip was faster, and we found ourselves back in the swells of the Back River in no time.

It was about this time that I became the first and only member of our crew to roll

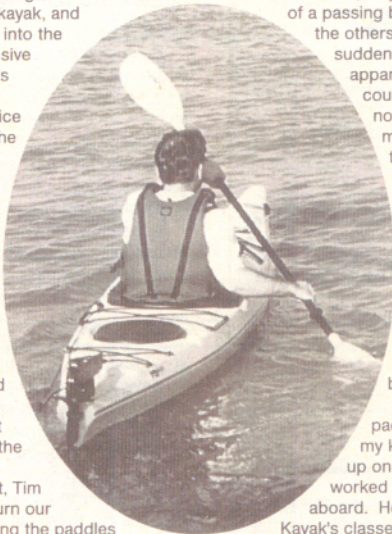
over and fall into the water.

Tim and I were sitting near the grass at the convergence of the creek and the Back River, staying out of the way of a passing boat and waiting for the others to catch up, when suddenly, and for no apparent reason that I could think of then or now, I discovered myself pitching over to the left side and getting a faceful of seawater.

My biggest fear about kayaking turned out to be no big deal. The skirt automatically popped loose, freeing me from the overturned boat.

Seth eventually paddled up, and held my kayak as I climbed up on my belly and worked my way back aboard. He said one of Sea Kayak's classes teaches you to do this on your own.

The worst thing that happened to me was losing a shoe (I soon found it) and feeling the sharp saw grass poke at my feet and slice across my arms. I'm sure rolling over would have been a much less pleasant experience if my kayak had been



in a freezing mountain stream strewn with rocks, instead of the warm, soft-bottomed bathwater of the Back River in July.

As we beached our kayaks near our vehicles, Tim remarked what a great workout the two-and-a-half-hour trip had been. He was right; my arms really ached.

But the nervous apprehension that accompanied my arrival at this adventure had vanished, only to be replaced with the warm buzz of a goal reached and a new hobby at hand.

Sunday-morning grouch Tim was in a great mood now, too – and even suggested we make a monthly pilgrimage back to the beach to go kayaking again. I heartily agreed.

At least in our own eyes, we were novices no more. ▀

*When not paddling around area waterways with cheerful abandon, Michael Jordan anchors WSAV-TV's 5 p.m. newcast.*

*Sea Kayak of Georgia offers a variety of classes for beginning kayakers, including guided excursions and advanced safety training. Call 786-8732, or (888) KAYAK-GA, or visit them on the world wide web at [www.seakayakgeorgia.com/](http://www.seakayakgeorgia.com/). Other area outfitters include Altamaha Outpost Rental & Sales in Darien, at (912) 437-6010, and on the web at [www.altamaha.com](http://www.altamaha.com/); Ocean Kayak at Isle of Hope Marina-354-8187; and Outside Hilton Head at Shelter Cove Marina, toll-free (800) 686-6996, and on the web at [www.outsidehiltonhead.com](http://www.outsidehiltonhead.com).*