



A person wearing a hat and life vest is paddling a colorful folding kayak (orange, blue, and red) on a calm body of water. The kayak is reflected in the still water. In the background, there are rolling hills or mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

THE KLEPPER

THE STORY OF MODERN KAYAKING BEGINS WITH A GERMAN TAILOR named Johann Klepper. He didn't invent the folding kayak—that honor goes to Alfred Heurich, borrowing liberally from Greenland Inuit—but Henry Ford didn't invent the automobile either. In 1907, Klepper bought Heurich's patent and began mass-producing folding kayaks with rubber and canvas skins over birch frames.

Klepper applied production-line efficiency to his new kayak business, but his real genius was in marketing. Simple machines that gave people a measure of freedom—bicycles, in particular—had taken hold of the public imagination, and Klepper's ad campaigns made the folding kayak into bicycling's waterborne analog (the wood and canvas canoe played the same role in North America). His factory in Rosenheim, Germany, turned out kayaks by the thousands. Eager buyers carried them out of the cities on trains, bicycles and backpacks, exercising their newfound freedom on rivers and coastlines throughout Europe.

Others weren't content with weekend sojourns. In 1923, Karl Schott paddled his from Germany to India. Five years later, Capt. Franz Romer sailed a custom-built Klepper from Portugal to St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. (Weeks later, en route to New York City, he was lost in a hurricane.) Adventurers sailed and paddled Kleppers around Cape Horn, to the magnetic North Pole, across the South China Sea, and halfway around Australia.

None of those expeditions can match the audacity of Hannes Lindemann, a German doctor who sailed a production-model Aeriis II across the Atlantic Ocean in 1956. He had the boat delivered to the Canary Islands off the west coast of Africa, where he assembled it, packed it with 176 pounds of provisions—primarily canned milk and beer—and sailed 72 days across the Atlantic to St. Thomas. For the last 14 days he endured persistent gales, capsizing twice and once spending nine hours in the ocean, watching Orion's slow progress through the heavens as he waited for daylight before righting his craft. His 17-foot double kayak is still the smallest boat ever to cross an ocean.

Lindemann claims he made the trip, and an earlier Atlantic crossing in a modified African dugout, for medical research. But we know better. Like Klepper owners before and since, he was captivated by the possibility of this folding craft. His imagination was just bigger than the rest. —JM

Lindemann's Klepper Aeriis II is now in the Deutsches Museum in Munich, but you can buy the same model today in traditional birch and canvas, or with a carbon-Kevlar frame. Both are still hand-made in Rosenheim.