

Review by Scott B. Williams

V-Eight PFD by Astral Buoyancy

Heat and high humidity are the norm most of the year where I live and do most of my paddling. Living in the Deep South, and kayaking the Gulf of Mexico and the slow-moving, swampy rivers that empty into it, I actually prefer hot weather paddling to cooler climates and waters, so when I look elsewhere to travel for kayak touring, it's usually even farther south in the tropics.

Hot weather paddling offers challenges of its own, not the least of which is staying comfortable sitting in the cockpit all day under the scorching sun. In cold weather, you can always add more clothing. When temperatures are 90 degrees-plus in the shade and not a breeze is stirring, clothing is the last thing you'll want, and it is a strong temptation to shed the PFD. Paddlers in this kind of heat often stuff their PFDs under the shock cords on deck, and I admit that I'm as guilty as any. Much of the time, the warm and somewhat protected waters I paddle do not merit constant wearing of a PFD, but if it were comfortable enough, I would keep one on anyway.

Most PFDs trap body heat as you paddle, adding greatly to hot weather discomfort. They also chafe bare skin, more of which is exposed when it's hot as paddlers will likely be shirtless or in a T-shirt or bikini top rather than fully clothed under the PFD. Astral Buoyancy has addressed the need for a comfortable hot-weather PFD with the introduction of their new V-Eight. Billed as "the world's first breathable lifejacket," the V-Eight has special contoured foam, which reduces body-to-PFD contact by 70 percent and has vents to allow hot air to escape and fresh air to enter.

I tested the Astral Buoyancy V-Eight



Sea Kayaker photo

A new PFD with contoured foam and lots of ventilation encourages paddlers to keep it on in hot weather rather than strapping it to the deck.

by spending a hot June day paddling on Lake Okhissa in the Homochitto National Forest of south Mississippi. This inland lake is surrounded by dense pine and hardwood forests and not a breeze was stirring to bring relief in the 92-degree heat as I paddled for miles over stagnant brown water. This was

certainly a day when I would not be wearing my old PFD, as the chances of capsize were slim to none and the water was warm, but I found the Astral Buoyancy V-Eight surprisingly comfortable.

The design places the buoyancy panels high and to the center of the body in the upper back and chest, getting them completely out of the way of the paddle stroke and clear of the rear cockpit coaming. The soft mesh liner on the inside is comfortable against the skin and allows the vent ports to function well. These ports consist of a large rectangular opening in the middle of the back panel and two smaller, oval-shaped openings in each chest panel. The PVC-free foam buoyancy panels are dense, but quite flexible and able to contour to the body. The inside faces of these foam panels use what Astral Buoyancy calls "Airescape technology": a convoluted surface that minimizes the amount of foam surface in contact with the body and that creates passages to allow air to circulate. The inside surface of each panel is also specifically contoured to fit the part of the body it will be in contact with. The foam is dense enough to retain its shape after compression, but flexible enough to allow it to conform to the wearer. The glue lines visible in the vent ports indicate that the panels are laminated from two layers of foam: Gaia foam on the exterior and EVA foam on the interior, according to the manufacturer.

I found that paddling for hours with this PFD was no nuisance at all, and I did not feel that it contributed to my discomfort in the heat. The only time I noticed any chafe was when the sides of the front panels rubbed against my

inner arms while using an extended power stroke, as in sprinting. If additional ventilation is needed, the zipper can be undone completely and the PFD will stay in place with just the front quick-release buckle secured.

In the water the V-Eight PFD had more than enough buoyancy to keep my head and face completely clear of the water. With the straps adjusted properly, the PFD stayed in place, shifting upward only about an inch while supporting my full weight in deep water. Swimming with the PFD on was natural and unrestricted.

An expandable mesh pocket on the front of the right chest panel provides space for emergency gear such as signaling devices. This pocket is located low on the panel and to the outside of the vent ports in the foam and does not interfere with the circulation of air through the front of the PFD. There is room for a compact VHF radio as well as basic emergency gear. An identical pocket on the other side would allow

better distribution of this gear. There is a single attachment point for a rescue knife on the right side of the PFD, located above the vent ports. I would prefer to have one of these on each side as well to provide more options for carrying the knife. As a right-hander it is easier for me to reach a knife across the chest than it is to reach one attached on the right side.

The Astral Buoyancy V-Eight PFD comes in red or blue, and is offered in three sizes, measured at widest torso circumference: Small/Medium 31-37", Medium/Large 38-44", and Large/Extra Large 45-51". The buoyancy is rated at a minimum of 15.5 lbs. at the time of manufacture. Shell fabric is 420 x 210 denier ripstop nylon. Liner fabric is polyester mesh. Hardware is acetal plastic and zippers are self-locking Vislon teeth from YKK.

As a hot-weather paddler who normally leaves my PFD strapped to the deck, I'm happy to have found a PFD that is specifically designed for my kind

of climate. An additional pocket and attachment point would make Astral Buoyancy V-Eight everything I need in a PFD. Wearing a PFD at all times is smart, even when it's hot, and I'm glad the need for one that is comfortable enough to wear in the heat was finally recognized. **SK**

Scott B. Williams has been sea kayaking since 1986 and has published numerous articles and books on paddling. He lives in Mississippi and enjoys sailing and building sea kayaks and other wooden boats. Scott can be reached via his website: www.scottbwilliams.com

V-Eight PFD

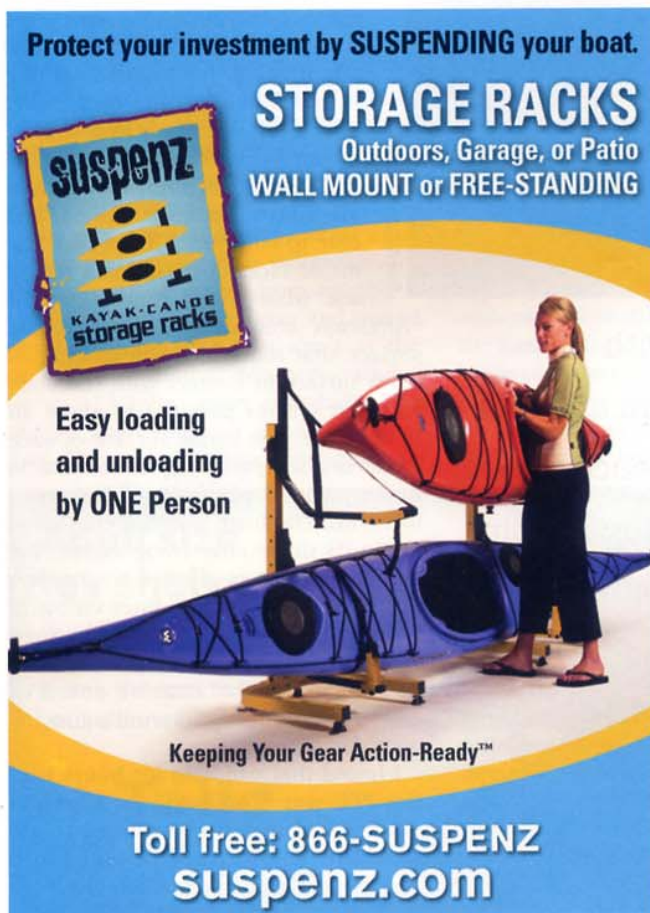
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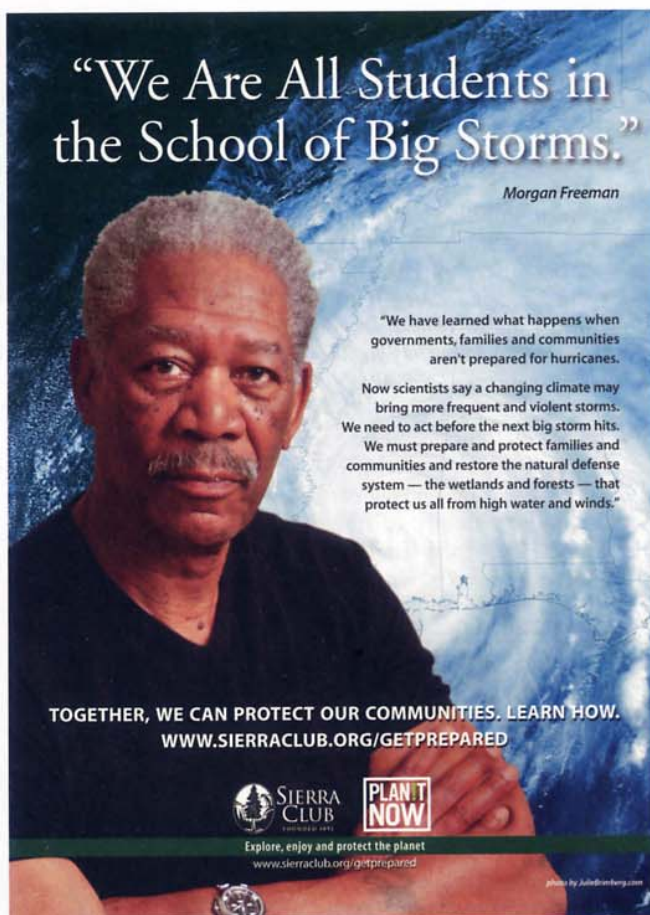
"We Are All Students in the School of Big Storms."

Morgan Freeman

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