

How about those inflatable PFD's

By Jim Cole

I've been on a couple paddles this year where some of the kayakers were wearing inflatable PFD's. My first reaction was "that sure looks comfortable" to which the paddlers quickly agreed. My next question was does it automatically inflate when you go in the water? Both paddlers said no, you have to pull the rip cord and they tried pointing out the yellow rip cord handle hanging from the right side of the PFD. The only problem was that one of them was looking for the rip cord on the left. My estimate is it took a good 3 to 4 seconds to find it. After the paddle, I went home and did a little research to see what else there is to learn about these new PFD's and if they really belong on someone in a kayak or canoe.

There are a couple different types of inflatable's, starting with auto-inflating PFDs, which have a sensor which causes them to inflate when they come in contact with water. A device called a bobbin disintegrates when wet and released a pin which punctures a CO2 cartridge which in turn inflates the bladder. Auto-inflating PFD's can also be inflated by pulling the rip-cord or by using the oral inflation tube provided on all inflatable PFD's. From what I've read so far, the auto-inflating PFDs are considered Type V (Special use) PFD's.

The manual inflating PFDs only have two ways to inflate. They can be inflated with a rip-cord using the CO2 cartridge or by using the oral inflation tube. These are considered Type II or III PFDs depending on the style and other characteristics.

After checking around, I've found prices on these PFDs running from a low of about \$95.00 to a high of about \$400.00. There seems to be a good selection in the \$150.00 to \$180.00 price range. But don't forget at some point you will need to replace the CO2 cartridge and also get a re-arming kit. These go from as little as \$10.00 to about a high of \$30.00 and will be needed after each time the PFD is inflated.

So, should a paddler get an auto-inflating PFD? My instinct tells me no. Most paddlers (canoeist or kayakers) tend to get wet at some point. The auto-inflating mechanism is designed to activate only if they get soaked and they are shielded from some splashing and rain. But I can't tell you how many times someone has fallen into the water while getting into a boat before the start of a trip.

They are not recommended for swift water, white water, and surf. Imagine trying to roll in white water or surf and having the PFD suddenly inflate. Would you still be able to complete that roll? Also, once you have recovered, will you leave the PFD inflated for the rest of the trip or will you deflate it? If deflated are you carrying a re-arm kit so it can be reactivated and used again if needed?

The manual-inflating PFDs would seem like a more logical choice for kayakers and canoeist since you don't need to worry about them accidentally going off. Let's say in either white water or surf you find yourself needing to roll, but for whatever reason you can't complete the roll. Now you have a choice to make. Do I pull my spray skirt grab loop first or do I inflate my PFD? That's not a decision I want to make while trying to get back to the surface. To me, it's just one more thing that can go wrong for whatever reason.

Here is a list of things that you need to think about with any inflatable PFD.

1. With each use of an inflating PFD you need to check to see if the inflator mechanism is armed, make sure the bladder is in good condition and does not leak.
2. Make sure you are familiar with its use and operation. What side is the rip cord on? How do I repack or fold the deflated PFD?

3. Inflatable PFD's are not approved for use with anyone under 16 years old.
4. Because there is usually a delay in inflating, they are not recommended for non-swimmers.
5. Auto- inflating PFDs are not recommended for swift water sports such as waterskiing, PWC, small sailboats, sailboards, whitewater or surf.
6. In cold weather the buoyancy provided by the CO2 may be reduced.
7. The Bobbin in auto-inflating PFDs may deteriorate in wet conditions causing accidental inflation.
8. It may be necessary to carry spare CO2 cartridges and re-arming kits (in waterproof containers). On multi-day paddling/camping trips, several spare cartridges and kits might be appropriate.
9. I would also suggest that you test inflate your PFD at least several times each season. The time to find out it doesn't work is not when your life is depending on it.
10. Inflating (Inflatable) PFDs give no protection against hypothermia.
11. Inflating (Inflatable) PFDs MUST ALWAYS be the outer layer. It may be impossible to add or remove clothing layers or a raincoat while wearing an inflatable PFD.

With a traditional PFD you visually inspect it before each use. You should also check it for buoyancy at least once a season. You can always put raingear on over your traditional PFD if you need to.

Would I get an inflating PFD? NO.

Do I think a person the average paddler will be able to inflate a PFD after they capsize? I don't think so.

Do I what someone with an inflatable PFD on my trips. NO WAY.

For more information on PFDs please visit any of the following sites:

All about inflatable PFDs <http://www.pfdma.org>

A guide to inflatable Lifejackets (PFD) <http://www.go2marine.com/docs/mfr/stearns/inflatable/inflatables.shtml>

Auto Inflate PFD Review: <http://www.boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/082000c.htm>

RICKA April 2010 Newsletter http://www.ricka.org/paddler/2010_Paddler/paddler1004.pdf