



Nature reclaimed

Petoskey artisan, furniture maker turns to building custom wood paddleboards

JUST LIKE HIS CUSTOMERS, Jason Thelen's hand-built paddleboards are one-of-a-kind.

And Thelen, a direct descendent (great, great, great grandson) of Chief Petoskey — the 19th-century French-Ottawa merchant and fur trader for whom the city and official state stone are named — is the only person constructing boards of this sort in Michigan.

Drawing on his years as a furniture maker, Thelen launched Little Bay Boards (littlebayboards.simpl.com) in 2014 to introduce others to artful, hollow, wooden stand-up paddleboards. He claims they are stronger, lighter and last longer than tradi-



tional foam boards.

Thelen builds them using salvaged wood — found locally and from exotic locales — like African mahogany and Colorado aspen. He pieces them together like a giant puzzle, using knotted or crooked pieces to create intricate design patterns. No nails, foams or chemicals are used, just glue and low VOC (volatile organic compound) resins, making the boards eco-friendly, as well.

"Though my boards cost \$2,600 to start, we are working very hard to build a more affordable line," Thelen said. "The wood (paddleboard) industry is priced from \$1,800 to \$5,000, and I've placed my

boards in the middle."

Well before Thelen begins to build, he spends time getting to know who will ride it. Will they paddle on a lake or a river? Will it be freshwater or salt? Will they carry backpacks and tents, or small children or pets? Do they plan to fish from it? The answers, combined with the rider's age, height, weight and paddling experience, create the formula Thelen builds upon.

Inside his small studio attached to the house where he grew up just north of Petokey, Thelen may put 60 hours into each board and companion paddle. He produces about 30 boards a year and ships them to customers as far away as Florida, California, Texas and even Switzerland.

"The first time I saw stand-up paddleboarding on Lake Charlevoix, I knew in my heart it was a sport I would someday indulge in," said Nancy Jaye Kowaleski, who grew up in Ontario, Canada, and today works as a critical care nurse in northern Michigan.

"... I was introduced to Little Bay Boards and some of Jason's work. I was immediately drawn to his philosophy of creative design using repurposed wood, and I experienced the joy and energy he commits to each of his creations," Kowaleski said. "We worked together that fall of 2014 picking woods and designing a personal SUP unique to me."

Kowaleski has since traveled extensively with her board, from Myrtle Beach and the Atlantic Ocean salt flats to Florida, where she says a baby manatee playfully pushed on her fin while paddling. She's paddled it on the crystal-clear waters of Georgian Bay in Canada and Lake Superior.

Thelen said his custom-built boards are unique in the market place. He hopes they'll become family heirlooms that will be passed



Above and left: Jason Thelen created a rosary design for one of his clients. Below: An unfinished paddle in progress.

Opposite page top: Jason Thelen polishes one of his creations. Bottom: A scale model VW microbus with a stand-up paddleboard on top is one of Thelen's favorite things.

on and enjoyed for generations.

— Dianna Stampfer