

BOUYANCY AIDS AND LIFE JACKETS:

First things first, there is no such thing as a 'buoyancy aid jacket'. A buoyancy aid is a form of personal flotation device which helps keep you afloat in water, nothing more than that. It is designed to provide support to conscious people who can help themselves (i.e. adults who are competent swimmers). It is inferior in performance to life jackets.



Inflatable life jacket



Solid life jacket



Buoyancy aid

Life jackets are intended to help keep you alive by keeping your head above water. They are high-performance flotation devices designed for offshore or severe conditions where maximum protection is required (e.g. if you're a poor or non-swimmer or where you might be wearing heavy waterproof clothing). Life jackets provide significantly better levels of protection from drowning to those who can't help themselves. They don't guarantee to self-right an unconscious user in heavy waterproofs but the buoyancy they provide will ensure they will in the great majority of cases.

Their design incorporates buoyancy behind the neck, thereby ensuring a person's face is kept upwards if, for example, they are unconscious when they enter the water. They are therefore ideal for young children and non-swimmers (although, of course, very young children and non-swimmers should not be exposed to a high risk of sudden immersion in very cold water anyway).

Sailors often wear inflatable life jackets because they need freedom of movement and don't expect to find themselves overboard but, if they do, the jacket inflates thanks to a canister of carbon dioxide that inflates automatically on contact with water. Canoeists do not use them because they are not suitable for surface watersports – they will inflate if they get wet (something that happens frequently in canoes) and then you then have to recharge them (for a typical cost of around £15-20 a time) before re-use.

What canoeists use are either buoyancy aids (if you're a competent adult paddler) or a solid life jacket (if you're not a confident swimmer or if you think you need more protection than that offered by a buoyancy aid).