

*Pelican celebrates
50 years with products
for summer fun*

Water world

By **Mark Cardwell**

CANADIAN PLASTIC watercraft maker Christian Elie says the first kayak prototypes that his family's Montreal-area company, Pelican International, made in 2001 were more a source of amusement than a viable commercial product. They made the kayaks using a non-traditional moulding process called twin-sheet thermoforming (TST).

"For kayaks you need a waterproof, tight seam, and TST provided that," says Elie. "The early ones we built—before we mastered the technology and matched



THE EXPEDITIONERS

it to the product—floated all right, but their tracking and manoeuvrability wasn't great. We joked that we were manufacturing flat doors, not kayaks."

But who's laughing now? Thanks in large part to the advent of TST in the company's manufacturing process—and its subsequent tsunami-like arrival on the world kayak market—Pelican is the world's No. 1 manufacturer and seller of plastic watercraft.

The lion's share of those sales come from the thousands of kayaks the company makes each year at its main plant in Laval, Quebec, and a smaller, newly renovated factory in the nearby town of Valleyfield. Both facilities run around the clock two-thirds of the year to meet peak seasonal demand during the warm-weather months and maintain two shifts a day during the quieter fall months.

Pedal your own boat

Most of those kayaks—along with the company's other top-selling watercraft products, such as stand-up paddleboards and pedal boats—are sold across North America and in more than 50 countries around the world.

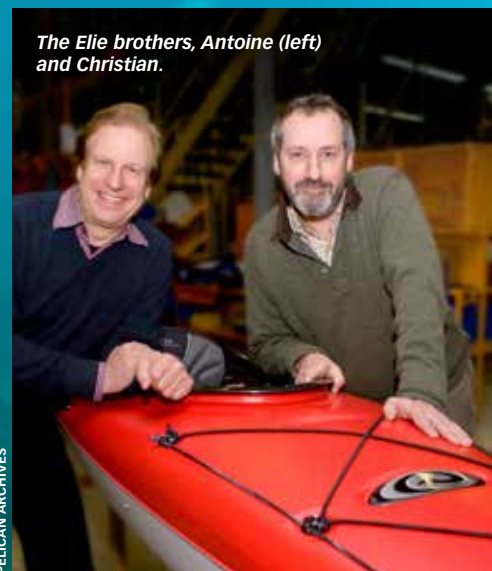
Though it competes in most kayak categories, Pelican notably dominates the first-time buyer, recreational beginner and intermediate-level market, a still-growing segment that the company helped to create following its experimentation with and mastery of TST in 2001.

"We basically democratized the kayak market," says Elie, who owns the company with his older brother Antoine and minority shareholders Marie-Christine Piedboeuf, the company's president since 2016, and the Fonds de solidarité FTQ, a Quebec union-run economic development fund. "Thanks to thermoforming we were able to make lightweight yet durable boats that we could sell for half the price. They were a perfect mix of performance, affordability and practicality."

In addition to science, Elie credits his family's long experience in both the plastics and outdoor recreational industries for Pelican's success, not to mention the innovative spirit and passion of the more than 600 employees who work in everything from manufacturing and marketing to research and development.

Founded in 1968 as a custom plastics moulder near the Pelican plant's current location in Laval, the company was bought two years later by the Elie brothers' late father, Gérard, an entrepreneur who wanted to get into the growing consumer watercraft market by making boats out of plastic instead of heavier fibreglass.

The company soon started to produce and sell its first plastic boat—a two-seat, one-colour (yellow) pedal boat the elder Elie dubbed Pelican "because he thought it looked like one," recalls Christian Elie, who joined the company in 1975—the only one of his eight siblings to do so until Antoine arrived in 1983.



The Elie brothers, Antoine (left) and Christian.

PELICAN ARCHIVES

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Getting your feet wet

Canada isn't short on great places to kayak. Here are just a few, as suggested by Renée Brand of Pelican Sport's marketing department.

MARITIMES

Slow-moving waters and panoramic, tree-lined shores make New Brunswick's Rusagonis River a great place for beginners to take their first paddle strokes.

QUEBEC

The cold, clear waters of the Bonaventure River on Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula make for an A-list destination. It's also a great place to get started in the sport.

ONTARIO

The 24-kilometre Bell Lake–David Lake loop in beautiful Killarney Provincial Park takes two days to complete and requires four portages, one of them nearly a kilometre long. The placid lake waters and stunning scenery make it both doable and wonderful for paddlers of all stripes.

SASKATCHEWAN

For a fun day on the water try the 42-kilometre-long section of the South Saskatchewan River from the Pike Lake pump house to Saskatoon. It requires six hours of paddling time through the heart of the Canadian Prairies.

ALBERTA

The glacier-fed, blue-green waters of Moraine Lake in Banff

National Park are easy to paddle, and they offer scenic views of the surrounding Valley of the Ten Peaks.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

When it comes to places to spend an unforgettable day of paddling for experts and beginners alike, Alta Creek has a lazy pace, a winding course and a nickname that says it all: River of Golden Dreams.—MC

SUPPLIER PROFILE

Company: Pelican International

CEO: Pierre Arsenault

Employees: 600

Headquarters: Laval, Quebec

Website: pelicansport.com

Items at Costco and Costco.ca:

A variety of canoes, kayaks and pedal boats are available in warehouses. For additional items, visit Costco.ca.

Quote about Costco: "Pelican has been doing business with Costco Canada for decades. This long-standing relationship between the two companies is a reflection of mutual respect, loyalty and trust. Pelican has been delivering high-quality and great-value products to Costco members, continuously surprising them with the latest designs and colours."

— Pierre Arsenault,
CEO Pelican International

World of watercraft

According to Elie, both the original two-seat and a later four-seat pedal boat proved hugely successful, especially in the Quebec market, where Pelican International was the leading brand name in the pedal boat heydays of the 1970s and '80s. "We've probably sold close to 200,000 units over the years," says Elie. "We still sell about 4,000 a year. But pedal boats are a niche market for us now."

Though pedal boats were their bread and butter, the Elies continued to make and sell a variety of plastic watercraft and other consumer products in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, using the newest and most innovative plastic products and processes on the market.

Among them were a canoe made of polyethylene—the first of its kind in the world, according to Elie—a small plastic rowboat–fishing boat, several different models of cabooses for snowmobiles and

even toboggans and wading pools that Christian and Antoine Elie began making in a start-up toy division called Pelican Recreation in 1995, the same year they bought Pelican International from their father.

The new division enjoyed quick success, sending company sales soaring from \$4 million a year to \$22 million. "You can't imagine how crazy the market was for our products," recalls Christian. "In three months we had to hire 150 people. It was a very profitable but stressful time."

Knack for kayaks

Despite annual double-digit sales growth across North America from core Pelican products and other partner-involved side ventures, like H2O Recreation, which made kiddie pools and sleds (and was sold off in 1999), and the purchase of camping gear giant Coleman's canoe line (later ended to make way for Pelican's own

Kayaking provides a good workout and good fun.

WEEKEND VOYAGERS





OUR DIGITAL EDITIONS

Click here for a video on how to paddle a kayak. (See page 7 for details.)

line of canoes), the Elies' knowledge of plastic technology and their fascination with innovation led to their entry into the world of kayaks.

"We did our homework," says Elie, who estimates Pelican has sold more than 3 million watercraft in 50 years, roughly half of them kayaks since 2001. "We developed a more comfortable, sturdy, stable and affordable kayak for beginners and people who are not looking for speed or to go on an overnight expedition. And with a weight of only 16 kilograms [36 pounds] for a 3-metre [10-foot] kayak, which is our most-sold product, almost anybody can get one in or out of a car."

Other design and feature innovations, many of them developed in-house by the three dozen people who work in Pelican's research and development department, include boat accessories and vibrant colours thanks to the company's use of the latest plastics manufacturing innovations.

"From a value standpoint of boats under \$700, Pelican is the hands-down market leader," says Dave Larson of



The original "Pelican" two-seater pedal boat circa 1970.

PELICAN ARCHIVES

Duluth, Minnesota-based Larson Brothers, a well-known sales agency in the paddling business that works with top manufacturers, including Pelican, which it represents in 13 American states. "Using TST in their manufacturing allows them to make a durable boat that's lighter and of superior quality for the price. The hard job for me is convincing people that Pelican boats are so well made for the price."

Larson adds that Pelican is unique in the marketplace because it is first and foremost a manufacturing company that brings passion to the sport—not the other way around. He explains, "In this business it's usually paddlers who have passion but little knowledge about running a company or making quality products and getting them out the door on time."

Keep on paddling

It's that combination of savoir faire and commercial success in the outdoor recreational market that helped to convince Pierre Arsenault to join the company as chief executive officer in June 2017, a hiring that allowed the Elie brothers to step back from daily operations and take a more boardroom-oriented role in their company.

"Consumers are always looking for what's new and exciting—and sometimes they don't know what they want and need until they see it," says Arsenault, an engineer and a former general manager of

Bombardier Recreational Products (aka BRP), where he was responsible for the global Quebec powersport maker's iconic Ski-Doo and Sea-Doo brands. "That's what Pelican is all about in terms of product innovation and development. We are very close and connected to both consumers and retailers, and we strive to offer high-quality, high-value products that perform great and look fantastic at really affordable prices. Pelican generates excitement—and there is a lot more of that to come." **C**

Mark Cardwell is a freelance journalist and writer in the Quebec City area.

ANATOMY OF A KAYAK

ERGONOMIC CARRYING HANDLE

QUICK LOCK HATCH

ADJUSTABLE FOOTRESTS

COCKPIT TABLE WITH BUNGEE CORD AND COMPARTMENTS

PREMIUM KNEE PADS

BOTTLE HOLDER WITH BUNGEE CORD

ERGOFIT G2 SEATING SYSTEM™

10CM (4") DAY HATCH WITH STORAGE BAG

VERTICAL ROD HOLDERS

STORAGE PLATFORM WITH MESH DECK COVER

DRAIN PLUG

ERGONOMIC CARRYING HANDLE



PELICAN INTERNATIONAL

Item #1196179
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