

Go Fly a Kite

Thanks to advances in equipment, kiteboarding is no longer only for daredevils. Combining the best of snowboarding, surfing, and paragliding, kiteboarding just may be the most fun you've ever had in the water.

By JAYME OTTO

My first morning in Aruba, I woke before the alarm. Kiteboarding lessons started at 8 a.m. and I couldn't wait to get into the ocean. Bikini, sunblock, rash guard, board shorts. Check, check, check, check! I wondered if I'd manage to keep my sunglasses while careening on a kite-propelled board across the water. I honestly wasn't sure what I was getting myself into.

"First we learn to control the kites on the land," said Thjis, my 23-year-old Dutch instructor, as he led me and three other neophytes to an open field. The kites lifted easily off the ground when he launched them—but crashed even more readily when I took a turn. Lesson No. 1: how to *not* crash your kite.

Kiteboarding—wind-propelled surfing over water—is the brainchild of French brothers Bruno and Dominique Legai-

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gnoux, who developed board designs to enable skimming atop the water in the 1970s. In 1984, the brothers patented an inflatable kite design. Then in 1994, American Bill Roeseler, a Boeing aerospace engineer, and his son Corey patented the KiteSki system. By the late nineties, equipment had standardized, and the sport really took off when big-wave surfer Laird Hamilton got into the action in 1996. The first competition was held on Maui in 1998, and over the past 10 years, innovations in kite design, safety-release systems, and instruction have made the sport accessible to beginners.

There was no mistaking the fact I was a beginner. If my pasty-white skin and DayGlo sunscreen didn't give me away, my kite—the kiteboarding equivalent of a training bra—certainly did. "Keep your kite out of the power zone," Thjis said, grabbing the back of my safety vest as my heels lifted toward Cuba.

After two hours on land, we headed for the water. The kites were bigger, about 15 feet wide, but the premise was the same. We donned helmets, strapped on safety vests, and took hold of the 2-foot bar controlling the whole thing. The trick: Grasp the bar with hands shoulder-width apart and arms relaxed. "Don't pull," Thjis kept saying. "You'll power up the kite!"

For the next two hours I stood waist-high in the Caribbean, keeping my kite in the neutral position, *not* in the power zone—for the most part. I occasionally goofed, getting yanked out of the water and experiencing the power of the wind firsthand when I face-planted back into the surf.


On September 18, 2008, during the Luderitz Speed Challenge in Namibia, kiteboarding became the fastest way to sail on water when American Robert

Douglas clocked 57.4 miles per hour. His record held for 12 days before Frenchman Sebastien Cattelan hit 57.5 miles per hour on his kite in early October and kiteboarder Alex Caizergue, also from France, topped 58.2 miles per hour the day after that. Caizergue's record still stands.

As for my lessons, on Day 3 Thjis introduced me to the board and demonstrated powering the kite by pulling the bar in, giving it a twist, turning it back to neutral while curling his body forward, standing up, and pulling the board across the water. Simple, right? *Right.*

In ready position—butt in the water, knees bent, board parallel to the shore—Thjis commanded me to go. "Alright, pull in," he yelled several times. But I hesitated. I wanted to move with grace. To stand, in control of my body and kite. Finally, I pulled the bar in to power up. And I stood. And zipped across the water. The roar of the waves sounded like a crowded football stadium.

Snowboarders and wakeboarders take to kiteboarding easily, due in part to their comfort on a board. The kiteboard is a bidirectional board, but there are many variations for different styles and conditions: wave-riding versus big-air tricks, for example. There are also different kites: for all-around riding, for getting maximum hang time, and for doing unhooked (meaning unhooked from your harness) tricks.

I wanted to see what hang time was all about. After our lesson, Thjis invited us to a local beach to watch "real" kiteboarders. I watched them speed across the ocean, leap off choppy waves, launch into the air, and combine grace, power, and speed into a form of aerial acrobatics I'd never seen. I was completely hooked. I wanted to fly again. 

Top 10 Hotspots

Experts at Cabrihna Kiteboarding tipped us off to these 10 breezy bastions of the sport:

Maui, Hawaii

The mecca of kiteboarding, Kite Beach is the destination for die-hard boarders.

Dominican Republic

Cabarete is known for beautiful beaches and consistent conditions.

Key West, Florida

Flat, warm water off this southernmost U.S. city is best post hurricane season from late October to June.

The Gorge, Oregon

Mount Hood and the Columbia River combine as the epicenter for wind-, water-, and snow-based recreation.

San Francisco, California

Home to an active boarding scene and the annual U.S. Kiteboarding National Championship every summer.

Cape Hatteras, North Carolina

Popular for the long down-winders that blow through from March to November

Bahamas

Picturesque lagoons, Atlantic winds, and stunning white-sand beaches—need we say more?

La Ventana, Mexico

Less than 100 miles south of the border, it's a wind-blown destination weekend for serious SoCal borders.

Philippines

Try beautiful Boracay December through March for a mix of both flat water and waves.

Antigua

Perfect for any level of riding and a destination-worthy tropical setting

Getting There

You can't beat the warm water of the Caribbean for your first lesson. Palm Beach, located just seven miles from the Aruba airport, has an unobstructed ocean breeze on the west end, making for a perfect kiting zone. Stay oceanside at the Aruba Marriott Resort where the Mandara Spa complements your classes. www.arubamarriott.com

The Dare2Fly Kiteboarding School is located on the Marriott's beach, just steps away from the kite launch. The school is the only one in Aruba certified by the International Kiteboarding Organization. The beginner's package includes three hours of lessons for \$375. www.dare2flyaruba.com