
With Flying Colors

Kiteboarding is the fastest-growing watersport in the world. And for good reason—you can get the thrills in no time.

By Jeff Book

★ | I'm standing in Choctawatchee Bay, playing tug-of-war with a 19-meter kite as it swoops high overhead like some enormous bird of prey. The surging power of the wind thrums through taut lines attached to my control bar and waist harness. The water is shallow, so why do I feel like I'm in over my head? I'm awestruck at the coiled energy of this airborne slingshot, poised to loft me over Okaloosa Island into the Gulf of Mexico. Eyeing my white-knuckle grip on the control bar, instructor Curt Palermo says, "Relax, brother. Don't fight the kite."

I've come to Fort Walton Beach in Florida's Panhandle to learn kiteboarding (aka kitesurfing) from the aces at XL Kites. Considered extreme, or at least exotic, when it first gained popularity in the late '90s, it's now the world's fastest-growing watersport. Combining elements of windsurfing, wakeboarding, surfing, paragliding, and gymnastics, the sport has a sky-high cool quotient. At shores around the U.S. and beyond, you can find people skimming over the water with enviable grace, occasionally using the kite to vault into the air. It looks like something only athletes or daredevils should



attempt. But here's the truth: With motivation and practice, most of us can learn to kiteboard.

"Maybe two or three people out of a hundred don't get it," Palermo says. "It's like wakeboarding *and* driving the boat. But if you spend enough time, you can do this." Both equipment and instruction have improved since the sport's early days, which has broadened its appeal. The kites have an inflatable leading edge and struts for stability and buoyancy. Rigs include four or five lines connecting kite to control bar and a quick-release safety system. Boards come in various sizes and shapes,

The thrill of kiteboarding

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with the bidirectional “twin-tip” board among the most popular. Prices for a kite, board, and harness start at around \$1,500. Regular kites have a “quiver” of two or three kites in different sizes — smaller kites for stronger winds or lighter kites, bigger ones for lighter winds or heavier kites.

When XL Kites instructor Roger Mosley started kiteboarding in 1999, he learned by trial and error on Wisconsin lakes, which led to close encounters with shoreline trees. “What it took me nine months to learn I can teach you in six to nine hours,” he says. “Our lessons last three hours. In the first lesson you learn kite control. In the second you learn how to put kite and board skills together.” In the optional third lesson, the instructor uses a Jet Ski to follow the student and move the kite into position, which allows more board time and accelerates progress.

Starting on the beach with a small practice kite, I learn about the wind window. Imagine: your back to the wind, a half-dome radiating from you, defined by the kite’s range of motion. I learn to “park” the kite directly overhead, neutral position in the wind window, and practice flying it at different angles in the power zone; for cruising, the sweet spot is around 45 degrees. Then Palermo brings out a full-size kite in a backpack-size bag (a packed kite and a board fit easily in a car trunk). He shows me how to unfurl it, inflate it with a hand pump, and rig it. Some of his past students zip around offshore beneath their own colorful crescents.

In general, he tells me, the ideal wind for kiteboarding is onshore or side-onshore (coming off the water at an angle). A ten-mile-an-hour wind is enough to get going; windsurfing requires at least twice that, which along with kiteboarding’s shorter learning period and more compact gear, explains why many windsurfers have switched to the newer sport. Standing in the bay, I practice flying the kite in



Airborne on the Pamlico Sound in North Carolina

SINCE EARLIEST MAN WE’VE YEARNED TO FLY, AND KITING IS A WAY TO EXPERIENCE THAT.

— Roger Mosley,
XL Kites instructor

figure eights, feeling its power rise and fall. I learn to work the control bar (like bike handlebars, not a steering wheel), and when I crash the kite, I learn how to relaunch it from the water. “The wind’s picked up — this is too much kite,” says Palermo. He jumps on his board and flies it to the beach to get a smaller, 14-meter one (that means square meters; the number measures area, not wingspan). Soon I’m practicing body dragging — putting the kite

in the power zone so it can pull me through the water.

Choctawatchee Bay offers beginners the advantage of different shorelines to maximize onshore wind and shallow water to make it easier to recover from spills or, if need be, slog back to shore (aka the walk of shame). So does Pamlico Sound in North Carolina, where REAL Watersports has taught thousands of kites in the steady wind that brought the Wright Brothers to the Outer Banks. “In the beginning it was all single guys and some girls,” recalls REAL’s Trip Forman. “But now, a dozen years later, those people have had kids, and the whole family is kiting. We’ve taught ages seven to seventy-five.”

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AT SHORES AROUND THE U.S., PEOPLE SKIM OVER THE WATER WITH ENVIABLE GRACE, OCCASIONALLY USING THE KITE TO VAULT INTO THE AIR.

One role model is English business tycoon Richard Branson, who in 2012 became the oldest person (at age 61) to kiteboard across the English Channel. "It's not a muscle sport," says Forman. "That's why women can learn faster than men, who sometimes try to overpower the kite." As with skiing, kids often learn quickly, and some families go on kiting vacations. A growing number of surfers, snowboarders, and even skateboarders are using kites. And kiteboarding around a course is being considered as a future Olympic event (the 500-meter speed record is a ripping 65 miles per hour).

"In kiteboarding there are three 'aha' moments," Mosley tells me. "The first one is when you put together everything you learned and get up and ride the board for 20 feet or more. You may fall over,

but when you get up you can't stop smiling. Second is the first time you can go upwind, tacking back and forth using the edge of the board — it's the end of the walk of shame. Third is that first one-foot hop you get. Since earliest man we've yearned to fly, and kiting is a way to experience that."

In a matter of months, instructors say, even average kites are grabbing air, working up to jumps 20-foot-high or more. At this point I'm only grabbing water as my kite drags me around the bay (which is more fun than it sounds). But I know that after more spills than thrills, at the end of my next lesson I'll be up and kiting. As the Wright Brothers discovered, sometimes you have to wipe out before you can take off. ✪

Jeff Book is a frequent contributor to this magazine. His website is jeffbook.net.



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