

Go Surf a Kite



A seasoned kiteboard entrepreneur teaches newbies to ride flat water.

BY MAGGIE OVERFELT AMAGANSETT, N.Y.

ON A HAZY AFTERNOON IN LATE JULY, I'M FLOATING in waist-deep water off the South Fork of Long Island, my bare feet strapped onto what looks like a skateboard without wheels. Walker Brock, the 27-year-old owner of Skywalk Kiteboarding of Charleston, S.C., and East Hampton, N.Y., stands behind me like an anchor. Both of us grip the same footlong bar attached to a giant kite that is twisting and turning violently in the wind about ten feet above us. Brock asks if I'm ready, and when I nod, he lifts his hands from the bar and backs away from me.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID JOHNSON

OFF HOURS

Leisure Pursuits for—and by—Entrepreneurs



GREEN MONSTER

This bow kite lifts boarders off the water. Inset: pro Walker Brock hi-styling.

Global Kitesurfing

Want to learn kiteboarding in an exotic setting? Try these top Western Hemisphere schools, all owned by U.S. entrepreneurs.



Broneah Kitesurfing

Matt and Keegan Myers, based in Traverse City, Mich., arrange kiteboarding on Lake Nahuel Huapi in Argentina. Three days of lessons, four nights in a hotel, \$3,000; broneah.com.



NATY MAQUI/BRONEAH-BEST

I'M IMMEDIATELY YANKED UPWARD. Handling the kite feels like trying to control a herd of bulls with four pieces of string. I can't tell if it's my leg muscles or the wind power that lifts me, but for a split second I'm standing on the board, poised to ride across the harbor. Then I lose control, toppling face-first into the water. My instructor nods approval. "You got up!" he yells. But before I can try again, I glance across the bay and see two middle-aged men—at least ten years older than me and double my weight—effortlessly managing their kites, gliding smoothly across the water. One of them is serial entrepreneur Ian Huschle, the 41-year-old CEO of Best Action Sports, a \$16 million kiteboard company based in Delray Beach, Fla. Huschle, a former windsurfer, took over as Best's CEO in 2005.

Previously Huschle served a brief stint as an investment banker with Allen & Co. Huschle's group hoped to raise capital for Best from some of the venture capital players gathered at one of Herbert Allen's legendary Sun Valley investment conferences in Sun Valley, Idaho. Their plans were stymied by Google co-founder Sergey Brin. Using his conference keynote speech to introduce Google's new video search application, Brin projected onto the screen a grainy web video of a kiteboarder whose aerial stunt goes awry, causing him to crash into a reef. "Everyone saw this bloody face," says Huschle. "I figured I would have had a hard time getting any money for Best after that day." Instead of giving up on the deal, Huschle quit his job at Allen, signed on with Best, and has spent the past three years trying to make the sport more accessible by selling gear directly to consumers and board shops, bypassing distributors.

"Kiteboarding is not like surfing," says Brock. "Given the nature of the equipment, the patience it takes to learn, and the amount of money required to get involved, I see a lot of middle-aged men with plenty of money."

The U.S. kiteboarding community encompasses more than 200,000 people, according to the Association of Wind Sport Industries. The number of kiteboarders has doubled since 2005, partly because of a stream of windsurfers converting to the newer sport. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and white-collar workers have also fueled growth—members of "a generation that would rather be identified by their independent pursuits than their job," says Best's Huschle.



ALL IN A DAY'S PLAY

An expert's ride inspires awe (top); instructor Brock shows FSB staffers how to control the kite (above); one of Best's boards, the 2009 Spark 127 (left).

Kiteboard the World

View more photos and venues at cnmmoney.com/smallbusiness.



Stormboarding
Snowkiting in Vermont, January to March. Rachael Miller organizes kitesurfing lessons on both water and snow. A three-hour beginner's snowkiting class is \$95. stormboarding.com



New Wind Kiteboarding
Hood River, Ore. Owners Jim and Cal Bison teach kiteboarding in Oregon (\$329 a day) and in La Ventana, Mexico (three days of private lessons, \$667). kiteschool.com

MY FIRST LESSON TAKES PLACE AT Napeague State Park, near Montauk, N.Y. I trudge through a half-mile of dunes to a smooth-water beach, where I find Brock readying a small red kite attached to a black bar. Before I'm allowed to touch the equipment, Brock lectures me on how to avoid kitemares—accidents that can involve impaling a swimmer or bystander with your kite. Beginners should never go out when the wind is blowing at more than 20 mph. Kiting in a wind blowing at an angle toward the beach is best, because it lessens the likelihood of being carried out to sea or getting slammed onto the beach. And always surf with a friend—not only for safety but also for help in relaunching the kite after it crashes.

For the next two hours I stand in ankle-deep water, learning to maneuver the four-foot-long training kite. Brock shows me how to move the kite right or left by pulling the edges of the bar in and out from the stomach. It isn't anything like flying a regular kite—it feels more like trying to manage a manic, tireless cocker spaniel. My arm muscles ache after half an hour, but Brock allows me no rest. When I've mastered the trainer, I try body-dragging—no board, just

me and a monstrous 13-square-meter kite that trolls me around the bay.

Brock helps me control the kite for a few minutes, but it's so powerful that it pulls the left side of my body into the air whenever it dives to the right. "Think of it as driving," says Brock. "Don't let the car control you!" He lets go. For about 200 feet I'm dragged through the water, my thighs creating their own wake. Tears from the wind blur my vision, and I have to keep my neck craned, concentrating on the kite to make it stay up. When the kite crashes into the water, I'm laughing so hard from exhilaration that I end up with a mouthful of saltwater. I want to go again, but the wind has died.

One lesson is not enough to get the hang of kiteboarding, and I leave feeling dissatisfied. Earlier that day I had watched as a 12-year-old boy bounced around the water, performing jumps beneath a kite that he controlled with perfect precision. I long to feel the wind over my face the way he did, and I feel a newfound respect for the middle-aged jocks who have already mastered this young sport. □

To give feedback, please write to us at fsb_mail@timeinc.com



ASSUME THE POSITION

Brock demonstrates how to find balance while keeping the kite aloft.

STORMBOARDING: NEW WIND KITEBOARDING