



The Kite's the Limit

Story by Elise Meleisea

Kiteboarding has taken Asia by storm, with well-organised training set up in Thailand's Hua Hin and Koh Samui. However, the too-cool-for-school extreme sport will likely maintain its niche status, as the skill's required to wakeboard through the waves while controlling a huge kite are simply beyond most.

I am being dragged through the shallow surf of the beach at what feels like the speed of sound. I am sunburnt, my left contact lens is a distant memory and I have kissed a sad farewell to the skin on my knees. I cast around for someone to blame for my sad and painful predicament and can only come up with one name - my own.

It was my birthday and after months of unsubtle campaigning, my partner finally gave in and bought me a three-day course in the latest extreme sport craze to take the world by storm: kiteboarding.



My shoulders and arms were in agony, my nose was peeling and I could barely pull my T-shirt over my head.

Kiteboarding, also known as kite-surfing, involves a rider steering a small board, approximately the size of a wakeboard or snowboard, across the surface of the water with their feet and legs, powered by a large arc-shaped kite which flies at around 30 metres above their head. The kite is controlled by four lines to a control bar, which can be hooked into the rider's harness for stability. Modern kites use an inflatable 'leading edge' (the edge that faces the wind) and five inflatable struts to give it a permanent crescent-moon shape. This permanent 'intrusive' shape (designed to enable the kite to be re-launched from the water) means that the kite is always 'powered up,' or able to catch the wind.

Albeit a beguilingly simple-sounding sport - and experienced kiteboarders make it look effortless - its very simplicity is what makes it so challenging. The rider's body is the only connection between the kite and the board, and you have to learn to control them at the same time: piloting the kite in the sky and steering the board on the water. It is a little bit like learning to rub your head and pat your stomach simultaneously, only a lot harder.

The concept of using kites to power water vessels has actually been around since the 13th century, when the Chinese used them to harness the momentum of the wind and mobilise canoes. Since then, kites have been also used as a sail to glide vehicles across the ground, snow, ice and water. However, there was always one major drawback to using kites on water: if they 'de-powered' or crashed they were almost impossible to re-launch.

It wasn't until the mid 1980s that kite developers like Bruno and Dominique Legaignoux refined kite design and created devices that could be sailed again after falling short of wind. Then, in the late 90s off the Hawaiian coast of Maui, kiteboarding pioneers displayed the extreme sport opportunities to radical surfers and wakeboarders, and it has since become one of the fastest growing water sports in the world.

The major appeal of the sport is the opportunities it offers for brilliant freestyle riding. A kiteboarder can tack and jibe into the wind like a windsurfer, but with the small board and a nimble and agile kite, they can pull off acrobatic jumps, flips and lifts that leave traditional windsurfers looking sadly earthbound and clumsy.

I signed up for the three-day course with the International Kiteboarding Organisation-licensed company, Kite-boarding Asia (KBA) at their Hua Hin branch. Certification is important; the sport is still in its infancy, and as such the protocols governing teaching standards and safety are still in development. Horror stories about kiteboarding victims abound: boarders losing fingers that became tangled in the kite-strings, boarders being dragged inland over rocks, or being slammed into cliff faces. My instructor explained that most accidents are caused by people doing stupid things: going out in winds that are far too rough for them to handle; not laying out their kite-lines properly so that you can't control the kite; not understanding how to read wind conditions; boarding on unsafe beaches; or just not knowing how to safely de-power their kites when they get out of control. Apparently, some courses just teach you that 'this is the kite, this is the board - off you go.'

The complete beginner package promises to take you step by step through the theory and practice of kiteboarding up to or completing IKO Kiteboarder Level 2 (being able to safely control and fly the kite and stand up on the board).

Day One teaches you how to safely fly your kite. Our little group dutifully learnt how to set up the kite before being allowed to finally try flying them. Unfortunately, the conditions proved to be a little too strong for my kite. Our instructor kept telling me to relax my arms when holding the kite bar control, until I pointed out that I would if I could, but that I was being pulled so hard that my arms were being dragged out of their sockets. He had obviously overestimated my weight (do I look fatter than I really am, I worried?) and had to go back and get me a smaller, training kite.

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Kiteboarders usually own a selection of two or three different sized kites, called a 'quiver' of kites, and the same number of boards. Being that kites retail at around USD 1,000 each, this puts kiteboarding squarely in the 'reassuringly expensive' bracket of extreme sports.

On the second day, we focused on learning to pilot the kite through the surf to take the rider in different directions. Some people say that this is the best part of the course; it's called 'body dragging' and involves letting the kite drag you through the water while you learn control by piloting it through the 'wind window' in and out of the 'power zone' (the area directly into the wind and lowest to the horizon where the kite receives the maximum amount of power).

It is hard to overstate how exhausting this can be. Until the instructor is satisfied that you can manually control the kite, you are not allowed to slip the kite bar into the harness hook. This hook holds the bar level for you and means that you only have to apply the slightest amount of pressure to control the kite. Imagine if someone made you learn brush calligraphy before they let you use a ballpoint pen!

On the third and final day of the course, we were due to coordinate everything we'd been learning and mount our boards. My shoulders and arms were in agony, my nose was peeling and I could barely pull my T-shirt over my head. I watched in grim foreboding as the rest of my classmates teetered for a fraction of a second on their boards before being splattered face first back into the water.

Finally it was my turn - I got my feet into the board, powered up my kite... my legs went one way and my body went another. This happened again and again, so often in fact that I could see my instructor mentally counting my spectacular wipe-outs for the 'world's most incompetent student' awards.

I was a kite-string width away from throwing up my arms in despair and walking away, but I didn't; quite frankly my arms were too tired to lift above waist level.

Then it happened; for ten airy seconds I was waterborne, skimming across the surface like a skipping stone. Forget walking on water, I was gliding on it.

Then a crash of epic proportions consigned me forcefully to the beach. I no longer cared; I just sat there and plotted how to return the following weekend, wondering what body parts would be best to sell to afford a full quiver of kites and boards. With one hit I was tragically and hopelessly addicted, a true kiteboarding victim. 🌐

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Kite Boarding Asia

Hua Hin

143/8 Soi Na Ranong, Phetkasem Rd.
Tel: + 66 (0) 15 914 592-4

Koh Samui

Samui Orchid Resort,
Tiger Zoo and Aquarium, 33/2 Moo 2, T. Maret, Surat Thani,
Tel: + 66 (0) 15 914 592-4

info@kiteboardingasia.com
www.kiteboardingasia.com

KBA's site lists most of the IKO certified teaching schools around the region, plus information on beaches and weather conditions.

When to Go: The best time to head for Hua Hin is between January and May. After May, the winds begin to die down and the action improves in Koh Samui.

Pricing

3-Day Beginner Package: USD 275

Covers all you need to know to get you up and at 'em on the board, up to or completing IKO kite boarder Level 2.

1-Day Kite Boarding Discovery: USD 100

Gives the would-be kiteboarder all the information they need to determine if kiteboarding is for you.

Private Lesson - Full Day: USD 200

Intermediate Skill Specific: USD 100

All images courtesy of Kite Boarding Asia

