



## WINDS OF CHANGE

In consideration of winter escapes, windsurfing, Aruba's trade winds and the 1980s

By David Webb

**W**INDSURFING, TO ME, HAS A 1980S sensibility — brought on by the advent of kitesurfing, an activity so dynamic and exciting that upon first sight I was sure it signified the absolute evolution of wind-sport. Windsurfing was a hobby my father had given up in the early days of the 1990s, and kitesurfing, having entered the mainstream later that decade, appeared to be its death-knell. Kitesurfers merge the swagger of an X-Games snowboarder with the fearlessness of an ASP Top 34 surfer. Windsurfing is sure to die in the doldrums, remaining an emblem of the decade that saw its rise to popularity, as aging Baby Boomers give it up in favour of sea kayaking or, *shudder*, golf, and Gen-Y eschews the sail for the kite, right?

In combination, Aruba, a desert island and Dutch constituent 27 km off the coast of Venezuela, also dwells in the zeitgeist of the '80s. As the leadoff lyric to The Beach Boy's final number-one single, 1988's *Kokomo*, I can't say "Aruba," without following it with, "Jamaica, ooh I wanna take ya..."

However, catching wind of Aruba's active sailboard scene offered me a trip idea with an appealing obviousness; my admiration for kites overwhelmed by my desire to escape win-

ter, a need ever-amplified since seasonal cloud cover socked-in over Vancouver to starve me of vitamin D and waterlog every sub-snow-line pursuit. Bring on the '80s — this year, I will learn to windsurf in Aruba.

I'm a Canadian burdened by a simple truth: I love warm water. I discovered surfing on the choppy waves of Vancouver Island's Long Beach, but improved my skills on the temperate rollers of the Southern Hemisphere. Haunted by tropical memories, it seems cruel to squeeze my flesh into a clammy, six-millimetre wetsuit when merely a plane ride stands in the way of warm seawater where I can surf, wind or otherwise, encumbered only by boardshorts and a rashie. With its respective air and water temperatures a smidge above and below 30 degrees Celsius year-round, for this, Aruba seems ideal.

**"BUDDY! BUDDY! JUST LISTEN..."** MY WINDSURF instructor desperately hollers over the 25-km/h trade winds gusting across Aruba's Palm Beach. His Argentinian accent elongates the final word "*lees-sen*" before I haplessly blow off-course and tumble into the turquoise Caribbean Sea. Lesson one: it's hard to take notes with your head underwater. This is my

fourth wipeout, demoralizing enough to consider staying put in this tepid gulf and drifting belly-up to Bonaire.

To add insult, a nearby kitesurfer seizes this opportunity to pop by for a looksee. He careens shore-bound like an incoming cormorant then takes flight above me — five metres in the air if he was an inch — catching enough wind with his parachute for a mid-air pause, disapproving glance and directional-change before he zips out of view. I'd yet to clear the salt from my eyes. Like I said: evolution.

A moment later, however, I climb back atop my board to hear a *smack* reverberate across the water — a sound similar to a horribly botched high-dive. As I locate the source, my theory of evolution is called into question.

Nearby, a red-faced teenager learns what the Cool Kids learn — kitesurfing — alongside a duo of instructors and with a kite half-the-size of my high-flying friend's. Each time a gust catches this poor boy's kite, the force yanks him violently forward then whacks him against the surface like a beavertail slapping a stillwater pond. This, I would discover, is following a day of using an even-smaller practice unit on-shore. Two days into his lessons and this prospect hasn't even enjoyed a single

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ride. I've been windsurfing for 40 minutes and I'm already moving forward — or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

To cement a burgeoning epiphany, a world-class windsurfer picks this moment to enter with ferocity into the scene. He one-hands the mast as he passes, its schooner-sized sail harnessing the full power of the Aruban wind, and leans far enough backwards to drag his fingers in the sea — just for effect. He's faster than the kitesurfer and has every bit as much swagger, or, in local Papiamentu, *dushiness* (*dushi* being a catch-all colloquialism used to positively describe everything from the beloved island itself to one's preferred flavour of ice cream).

In a world of sails versus kites, it would seem the winds of change aren't blowing quite so hard after all.

**HERE IN ARUBA, THE WIND EXERTS A GRAND** influence over more than just its sails and kites. The island's northern coastline is weather-beaten and desolate; abused by wind and waves and with a good chunk occupied by Arikok National Park — a nature preserve comprising 18 per cent of the island's total land. On the leeward shores, however, steady breezes and coral reef sheddings mix with a relatively flat topography to create whitesand beaches well suited for recreation.

A five-hour-flight from Toronto, Aruba lies south of the hurricane belt that annually punishes much of the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. With less than 50 cm of yearly rainfall, this is an island of multi-armed candle cactus, wind-bent divi divi trees and soothing aloe vera plants — the latter particularly comforting as it is the sunniest of all regional isles. Despite being hurricane-free, the diminutive landmass — a mere 180-sq-km — enjoys constant immersion in the trade winds, which ease the burden of the arid climate and attract thousands of windsports enthusiasts each year. However, Aruba depends on the breeze for more than just recreation. Wind turbines on its eastern coastline currently provide 20 per cent of the country's electricity. Thanks to its suitability for such systems, Aruba is expanding its eco-power sector and hopes to meet all domestic demands by 2020. If successful, it will be the first of its kind — an energy-independent nation.

Historically bringing Spanish Galleons and Dutch Fleets, nowadays the trade winds bring elite athletes. The island's premier international event is Aruba Hi-Winds, a tournament

that has attracted pro windsurfers each summer since 1986 (and kitesurfers since 2002). It is also the birthplace of windsurfing superstar Sarah-Quita Offringa, who, after going pro at only 12 years old, is a four-time PWA Women's Freestyle World Champion and nominated International Sailing Federation World Sailor of the Year. Now 22 and a competition veteran, this hard-charging woman has firmly planted her homeland onto the world's sporting map.

**I COULD USE SOME OF OFFRINGA'S MOJO;** MY performance thus far has been considerably less than *dushi*. The Argentine, ever patient, wades out for some close-quarters instruction. Always with the wind at my back, I'm to push the sail forward and catch the gust, then pull the mast tight to my chest and rotate the sail slightly outward. This is how you *move with* the wind, rather than fight *against* it. With this advice clumsily put in motion, I no longer plow the water like a log boom but move with serpentine efficiency, on-course for Curacao. It also doesn't hurt that I've now remembered to fully drop the daggerboard. "Buddy! Buddy! Come back!"

I'm listening now, I just won't heed. I'm in the zone, windsurfing with the sun on my face, the breeze as my motor and an endless cerulean sea ahead. Eventually satisfied with my *dushiness*, I shuffle atop the long-board and curve shoreward for an encore dismount.

As my fins cut into the sandbottom, that kitesurf Rock Star rips past once more — and he is impressive. Experienced kitesurfers make it look as simple as sunbathing. But to reach his level requires a marriage to the sport, and since my time in Aruba is brief, I'll stick to windsurfing; it's a better casual date.

From the beach comes a broader view that moderates my proselytisms. The differences between these two sports are less in their difficulties or *dushiness* and more in their temperaments. Windsurfers: with the right conditions (and some warm water to crash into) you'll no doubt be able to enjoy your first day out, though it will take years to become proficient. Kitesurfing, in contrast, makes chum out of newbies for the first couple of weeks, but expert-level prowess should come sooner with the kite than with the sail.

So for today, in Aruba, windsurfing promises the quick gains via modest investment I'm looking for, even if I know there's likely another big crash ahead. As I said — the sport has a 1980s sensibility. 



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