

The Miami Herald



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# WEEKEND

TROPICAL LIFE

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The fast-growing sport of kiteboarding is taking off in South Florida.

# kite now

PHOTOS BY PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD ST

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It's a blazingly bright Wednesday afternoon. As I step from the soft sand beach of Key Biscayne's Crandon Park into Biscayne Bay, it occurs to me that I am in seriously hot water. Not because I am kicking around on the beach on a work day (not only does my boss know where I am — it was her idea), but because I'm in *actual* hot water.

The sun has heated the shallow water to bath-like temps, but it's crystal clear and cools as I make my way out to the sand bar. I feel a slight pang of sympathy for all the downtown desk jockeys as I gaze across the bay at the high-rise office buildings.

"This is a pretty good place to work," says Christophe Ribot, owner of Miami Kiteboarding, as he wades out with me.

Ribot is a former pro rugby player (in France), former wind surfing and sailing instructor (in the Caribbean) and current Hobie Cat rental operator and kiteboard instructor (in Key Biscayne). And, of course, he is absolutely right.

"If we had consistent 20-25 knot

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winds, Miami would be the Mecca of kitesurfing," he says.

We don't have consistent winds, so Cabarete, Dominican Republic (where the 2006 Kiteboarding World Cup was held) holds that title. What we do have is decent wind and, especially around Key Biscayne, miles of shallow water, waist-deep sandbars that Ribot — who got into the sport about six years ago after a friend brought equipment from France — says enable a "much faster learning curve."

And that's exactly what I'm hoping for.

I've been watching kiteboarders over the past year or two, surfing across the offshore shallows of the Key, using wind and kite to launch themselves 20 feet in the air, twisting body and board, then landing and charging again across the water for more.

"Kiteboarding is all about free-

dom," says Ribot. "It's an extreme mix of skimming on the water and flying — challenging gravity — when you pull on the kite."

Ribot says you need at least 10 knots of wind to learn; 12-15 is ideal. He says his school stops teaching at 25 knots; experts can go out in up to 40 knots of wind, "but that's the extreme," he says.

While gear is getting more specialized as the sport evolves, the typical setup looks like this: a control bar, connected to a 10-16 foot kite by four 100-foot lines, is attached to the rider by waist, chest or seat harness. The rider positions the kite into the wind, creating "traction" or drag.

The rider's feet are attached to what resembles a wakeboard (typically made from wood or foam). When the kite catches wind, it is "powered" and pulls the rider forward, or downwind. With practice, riders learn to tack side to side to return upwind and to use the kite to launch themselves into the air.

Ribot says it's even more fun than it

**FREQUENT FLIER:** Instructor Christophe Ribot takes flight off Key Biscayne. Experienced boarders can launch themselves as much as 40 feet out of the water.

looks (as well as difficult and dangerous).

As a typical, frustrated South Florida surfer who waits for the oh-so-occasional rideable (and overcrowded storm-generated wind chop, the idea that there may be a better way to spend my time on the water has occurred to me on more than one occasion.

Apparently, I'm not alone. Ribot — who says kiteboard instruction and gear rentals now make up nearly 5 percent of his business — has seen the sport grow rapidly over the past few years, estimating there are as many as a thousand kiteboarders in Miami.

"The sport in Miami is growing 10 percent per year," he says. "When w

## COVER STORY



started there were 10 of us. Now on a windy day there can be as many as 500 people out."

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Civilizations have been trying to harness the power of the wind for centuries. For our purposes, however, we jump all the way to 1985 when accomplished watermen Bruno and Dominique Legaignoux filed a patent for an inflatable gore-shaped kite.

The genius of the inflatable kite — rather than the rigid-frame foil kites that, with water skis, were being experimented with to move across the water — is that the kite not only floats when it hits water, but it's

also relaunchable. This made things way more fun, seeing as you could stop and go as you pleased.

It took the brothers nearly 10 years before they got the funding and market interest to get a kiteboard company up and running. Now, there are myriad kiteboard companies, experimenting with designs, pushing the possibilities of the sport.

"At the beginning, there was no way to depower the kite. If you fell — it dragged you," says Ribot. "But manufactures have created quick releases and devices, similar

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**RAISING THE BAR:** Kiteboarding equipment isn't cheap — a new set will run you nearly \$2,000. The kite is connected to the rider by four 100-foot lines that attach to a harness, worn by the rider at either the seat, chest or waist — shown at top on reporter Brett O'Bourke, with Ribot. This particular kite spans 12-feet, though sizes vary from 10-16 feet. You don't need a wetsuit or any other special clothing except for a helmet, which should be worn for safety, and is mandatory when riding off Crandon Park.