

Tsunami Stories: The Travelers Who Stayed

By Matthew Power

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The December 26 tsunami reached the U.S. as a wave of horrifying images. Lost in the enormity of the tragedy was the story of the divers, surfers, and vagabonds—the gypsy underclass of global tourism—who flocked to the region to help while others fled to safer shores. Writer MATTHEW POWER joined the volunteer corps in Khao Lak, Thailand, and found a sliver of redemption in disaster's wake.

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JOUR

AMERICAN WILDS



Go Fly a Kite

WHEN THE WINDS ARE HIGH AND THE WATER IS WARM, THE FLORIDA KEYS ARE THE PLACE TO GO TO DISCOVER THE KITEBOARDER WITHIN **BY TODD JATRAS**

I'm all harnessed up and ready to launch myself into Biscayne Bay, tethered by 70 feet of rope to a giant swath of ripstop polyester, the biggest kite I've ever flown, and one that's about to fly me. It's the last of a scheduled three-day, 100-mile kiteboarding safari through the Florida Keys. Twenty-five-knot winds are picking up the sand and whipping it across Key Biscayne's Crandon Beach, South Florida's kiteboarding mecca. The conditions are perfect, and the local kiter community is out in force, putting on a show that leaves no doubt as to why this is the fastest-growing water sport in the world today.

A few years ago, Biscayne Bay was ruled by windsurfers. Today, colorful

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX DI SUVERO



A WING AND A PRAYER: Launching off the beach into Biscayne Bay (left). From top: Kiteboards are part snowboard, part water ski; Christophe Ribot, center, owner of Miami Kiteboarding, guides his group to where the wild winds blow.

crescent-shaped kites cut sharply through the air like a flock of strange birds, and far below, their riders carve sheets of spray on the choppy waters, launching 20, sometimes 30 feet into the air with acrobatic maneuvers, then floating gently back down again. Not a windsurfer is in sight—way too old-school.

Although the exact origins of kiteboarding are disputed, the modern, relaunchable kite was first patented in the mid-1980s by French brothers Bruno and Dominique Lagaignoux. In 1992, Oregon native Cory Roesler founded Kiteski, Inc. and marketed the first commercial kiteboarding package. However, it really hit the radar a few years later when kiting maverick Manu Bertin and surfer Laird Hamilton publicly showcased the sport in Maui. Now, kites abound off the beaches of Brazil, Hawaii, Texas, North Carolina's Outer Banks; there's even river kiting in Oregon. But Miami is ideal for beginners, with great weather, moderate seas, and an eight-month kiteboarding season that runs from November to early June.

EARN WINGS

Compared to windsurfing, getting started can be a challenge.

Zippering along with the wind rushing past, I began to appreciate the addictive nature of the sport.

Whereas learning to get from point A to point B and back takes about two hours on a sailboard, the same stretch would require six to eight hours of practice on a kiteboard. However, after 20 hours of kite training, a newbie can start, stop, even do little jumps. A windsurfer would need much longer to reach a comparable level.

The risk of injury is low to moderate, according to instructor Miguel Clavero of Big Kite Miami. "Most accidents happen while launching and landing the kite. If you lose control, it can drag you or hit somebody." Lessons, he says, are mandatory. "Otherwise it's like jumping out of a plane and trying to learn how to parachute on your way down."

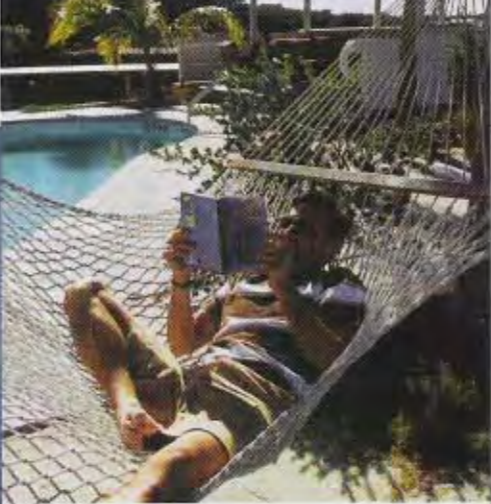
For less than \$500, I learned the basics of the board, the harness, and the handlebar during a week-long lesson with Miami Kiteboarding, another local outfitter. After inflating the kite and attaching the lines properly, I walked through sea grass to a sandbar about a hundred yards offshore, where I launched the kite and worked it in a figure-eight pattern, the lower curves of which form what's known as the "power zone."

Once I was comfortable with the kite, I began body dragging, which means lying on your stomach and letting the kite drag you through the water. The next step is to squat down and strap your feet into the board while holding the kite. Then you dip the kite into the power zone and it launches you up onto the water. From there on out it's all about boarding skills and kite control. After a few days of practice, zipping along with the wind rushing past and the water washing underneath, I began to appreciate the addictive nature of the sport.

THE BEST-LAID PLANS

With basic training complete, I joined six other kiteboarders at Key Biscayne's Rickenbacker Marina early on a Saturday morning for the start of an island-hopping down-winder from Biscayne Bay south through the Florida Keys to Bahia Honda led by Christophe Ribot, the French-born owner of Miami Kiteboarding. Two vans would tail us down the Keys with supplies. Beach camping is a popular option on these trips, but lodging ranges from boutique hotels to five-star resorts along the route.

Our three-day safari was to begin with a five-mile arc down the east side of the bay, past the lighthouse at the southern point of Key



LIFE'S A BREEZE: Careful to keep clear of each other's lines, kites enjoy perfect conditions off Key Biscayne's Crandon Beach (left). Above: The author, poolside at the Casa Morada hotel, studies up on his kiteboarding and waits for the winds.

Biscayne, then on another mile to Stiltsville, a group of 1930s houses built on pilings above the tide line, with a colorful history as bait shops, speakeasies, and gambling dens. After exploring these dilapidated relics, we would head eight miles due south until we hit Elliott Key, then glide another 12 miles down to Old Rhodes Key, where we'd rest up before breezing another 17 miles to the town of Key Largo.

That was the idea. But with kiteboarding it's always wise to have alternate plans, because the winds can and will be fickle. Our itinerary was dashed right out of the box. The winds were blowing straight out toward the Bahamas instead of down through the Keys. A major change of plan was in order, so we kiteboarded between the houses at Stiltsville for a while, then drove to Azul Del Mar Hotel in Key Largo for the night.

The next morning dawned with stiff northerly winds, an unseasonable chill, and a deserted marina. We drove 20 miles south to Islamorada, chartered ourselves a support boat, and were able to get in a couple of solid hours offshore. But by noon Bruno Perez, one of four Frenchmen in our group, kept whipping out his wind gauge and counting off the readings: "Seven knots . . . six knots . . . five knots . . ." his voice growing more and more hopeless as the wind died out to a mere breeze. On a sunny day at one of the Keys' most beautiful locations, we experienced kiteboarding's equivalent of getting rained out.

But the inconsistency of the wind is no surprise to kiteboarders. We cruised to the other side of Islamorada and spent the afternoon exploring the lush mangroves and sea grasses of Florida Bay and wakeboarding behind the

boat. Everyone was in good spirits by the time we docked back at Islamorada, which hosts Florida's largest professional kiteboarding tournament every March. After de-rigging and stowing the equipment, we made straight for Rumrunner's Island Bar to recuperate.

BIDING TIME

Back in Key Biscayne, only a mile from Ribot's base camp, the Sonesta Beach Resort's massage treatments and Olympic-size swimming pool provided some consolation for our aborted safari. I went to sleep cursing the winds. But from my balcony the next morning, I could see a horde of brightly colored kites flying high over Crandon Beach.

The prayers of Florida kiteboarders had been answered: Side-shore winds were ripping in from the northeast, and Miami's vibrant, international kitesurfing community, from beginners to top pros, had turned out en masse to celebrate a perfect kiting day.

"And the crowds will keep coming," says Neil Hutchinson, the mad-dog Brit who set a Guinness World Record in 2001 for kiteboarding 8 hours and 38 minutes on an 88-mile continuous ride from Key West to Cuba. "Six years ago, when I started, I had to fly to Hawaii just to see another kiteboarder, now it's everywhere. People are kiting in Alaska and the North Pole. It amazes me every day."

The fluky Florida winds and our failed 100-miler were all but forgotten. Ribot came ashore grinning like a fiend and in his booming voice began outlining plans for another safari attempt through the Keys for the following weekend. Sadly, I won't be there, but with luck, the winds will.

ADVENTURE GUIDE: KITEBOARDING FLORIDA

If you want to embark on your own kiteboarding safari, make sure you go between November and June, before the winds drop and the temperatures heat up in Miami. From Miami International Airport, hop a shuttle to **Sonesta Beach Resort Key Biscayne** (\$179; www.sonesta.com/keybiscayne). Book a lesson with **Miami Kiteboarding** (\$280 a day, \$450 for the weekend; www.miamikiteboarding.com) or, if you've got the skills (a \$790 week-long lesson will hone them) sign on for a longer safari (\$490 and up). As an alternative, **Big Kite Miami** offers two-hour introductory lessons (\$160; www.bigkiteiami.com). Drive or boat down to Key Largo and lounge in the tropical garden at **Azul del Mar Hotel** (\$149; 866-613-9330). On Islamorada, drink to the steady winds under the thatched roof at **Rumrunner's Island Bar** (800-327-7070) at Holiday Isle, then bunk for the night at **Casa Morada** (\$229; www.casamorada.com), a beachfront hotel with its own sandy island. On your way back through Miami, be sure to hit **Space** (www.clubspace.com) for some see-and-be-seen nightlife. —**Jeff Gangemi**



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