

WIND- SURF- ING HAS BEEN CAN- CELED

So say Matt Nuzzo and Trip Forman, the founders of Real Kiteboarding, who are channeling Jake Burton and trying to turn their breezy passion into the next action-sport phenomenon. **MICHAEL BEHAR** joins the believers on a rum-soaked Caribbean cruise and tries to find out: IS KITEBOARDING THE NEW SNOWBOARDING?

Wrapping it up after
a day of riding.



I'M ABOUT TO GO FOR THE RIDE OF MY LIFE.

It's February, and I've been in the British Virgin Islands for five days with Trip Forman and Matt Nuzzo, founders of the Cape Hatteras, North Carolina-based Real Kiteboarding. The duo has recently teamed up with charter-yacht juggernaut the Moorings to offer a weeklong kiteboarding cruise in the BVIs. Their first official trip will be in December, but I'm on their shakedown sail, an informal preview that's part scouting mission, part Faustian flotilla. Within these hundreds of miles of Caribbean perfection—where warm and consistent trade winds swirl across deserted beaches and secluded bays—our aim is simple: Eat like royalty, drink like rock stars, and kite our asses off.

We've just dropped anchor near Eustatia, a small island opposite Necker, the private enclave of British billionaire Sir Richard Branson. The two sleek 50-foot sloops and one spacious 47-foot catamaran we've chartered are hauling kiteboarding equipment, surfboards, snorkeling gear, a barbecue grill, several pounds of bacon (Forman's favorite dish), and enough Mount Gay Rum to drown a whale. Last night, Forman, 38, plied me with far too many Manatinis, his homespun concoction of four parts rum, one part Cointreau, and a splash of lime. "Drink more than two," he warned, "and you'll be canceled." I did, and I'm still shaking off a hangover as we bounce across an aquamarine lagoon in our dinghy to Eustatia's southern shore. On a pearly-white beach, Forman helps me rig a 20-square-meter kite.

I'm a little nervous about holding down a mighty 20-meter. The largest kite in my quiver of four is only 17 meters, so the 20 seems like a monster, spanning 23 feet from wingtip to wingtip. But Nuzzo, 31, Real's teaching guru, assures me it's all a matter of technique. My problem, I tell him, is riding upwind—the single defining skill that, when mastered, graduates a beginner to intermediate. Nuzzo's upwind tip: "Just imagine you have a piece of coal between your butt cheeks and you have to squeeze it hard enough to turn it into a diamond."

Nice visualization. But if that's what it takes for me to get into the zone—when I become a perfectly balanced fulcrum, flying between water and sky—my butt cheeks are ready. Dialing in the right stance means a magical ride, which is what fuels my passion for the sport, drains my bank account, invades my sleep, and obsesses me by day. I keep a browser window open on my computer 24/7 to a Web site that tracks the wind at my local beach, New Road, in Delaware. If it breaks 12 knots, I'm there. My wife, Ashley—also an addict—and I have amassed a basementful of kites and boards and have road-tripped thousands of miles in search of the perfect breeze.

We're not alone. By some estimates, there are already 250,000 kiteboarders worldwide—and the sport is only eight years old. That may sound unimpressive next to the estimated 2.4 million global windsurfers, but the latter has had four decades to mature, and its popularity has been in a steady decline since the mid-nineties. (A fact that Forman and Nuzzo have heralded

with their trademark bumper sticker: WINDSURFING HAS BEEN CANCELED.) Kitebeaches.com lists more than 2,000 kite launches around the world—from Argentina to Cambodia. A half-dozen magazines cater to the sport. A thriving gear industry churns out 80,000 kites annually, and, with the exception of Antarctica, there are kiteboarding schools on every continent.

On TV, you might see the pros whipping across the water at speeds surpassing 25 knots and launching wildly complex tricks 30 feet in the air, but kiteboarders are not just extreme-sport nutjobs. A swift learning curve—most beginners catch rides their first day on the water—and new, virtually foolproof safety systems are luring everyone from preteens to baby boomers. I regularly kite with a 73-year-old retired Air Force pilot who struts down the beach wearing a T-shirt that reads, OLD GUYS RULE. Senator John Kerry famously gets his summer fix on a kiteboard. Bruce Willis has reportedly been spotted shredding flatwater near his compound in the Turks and Caicos. Today, Richard Branson's twenty-something son, Sam, radios our boat from his dad's island. He wants to ride with us.

I glance toward Necker, wondering if the Bransons will show. But when it's windy, Forman doesn't like waiting around, so he launches my kite, and it charges full-throttle. I have five minutes before I'm too far out to return to the beach. OK: Coal ... butt cheeks ... squeeze ... *whoa, it works!* The ass-clenching trick forces my hips forward and throws weight onto my heels,



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allowing me to lock in my board's edge and carve upwind. I slice through the chop while holding an arrow-straight tack across the lagoon. I'm in the zone.

SNOWBOARDING HAD JAKE BURTON and Tom Sims, tenacious innovators and rivals who took their sport from extreme to mainstream in the mid-eighties. Kiteboarding has Forman and Nuzzo, best buddies whose mission is to aggressively pollinate the planet with legions of new riders and seed a global Real diaspora. Founded in 2001 and based in Buxton, a clapboard fish-



Real's head coach, Colin Gowland, during a sunset session off Cape Hatteras; opposite, from left, Matt Nuzzo and Trip Forman.

ing village on the Outer Banks, Real employs 18 full-time instructors who churn out more than 7,000 new riders each year. Real dominates the industry: It teaches more students and sells more gear than any other school in the world and has so much cred that when it suggests improvements to manufacturers, they listen, altering kite and board designs and rigging setups.

In May, after my BVI adventure, I make my first trip of the season to the Outer Banks and hook up with Forman and Nuzzo to ride a legendary "downwinder" into an intricate maze of waterways that weave through wetlands, reeds, and low-lying islets. In howling 25-knot southwesterly winds, we rig up on a narrow beach. "Whatever happens, don't let your kite crash," Nuzzo warns me. "If you go down, it's a three-mile slog through a swamp to reach the highway." The trouble isn't necessarily that I might crash the kite but, rather, that a line could tangle or equipment could fail, preventing me from riding.

Later, in the granite-and-hardwood-trimmed kitchen of Forman's newly renovated four-bedroom house, Nuzzo commends me for surviving the ride intact, while Forman—a chronic multitasker—preps steaks for the grill, mixes three Manatinis, and breathlessly recounts his life story.

"I went to college and majored in economics, but I wanted to take windsurfing sessions, not internships," says the native of Babylon, New York, who, at six foot two, has a booming game-show-host voice and is an architect of mayhem renowned for such stunts as stacking 20 picnic tables in Pamlico Sound, setting them ablaze with gasoline, then goading kiteboarders to jump over the inferno. Nuzzo is Forman's counterbalance. Born in Cheshire, Connecticut, he embodies

the laid-back surfer-dude persona and works mostly behind the scenes to ensure that the Real coqs remain sufficiently greased. When I ask them about their operations, Nuzzo begins a sentence—"Everything we do is a product of our ..."—and Forman finishes it for him: "check-and-balance system."

Not long after Forman, then a total windsurfing junkie, graduated from Massachusetts's Tufts University in 1990, he moved to the Outer Banks to live the life. In April 1998, he was working as a sales rep for Columbia River Gorge-based North Sails Windsurfing when he discovered kiteboarding. About a year earlier, a company called Wipika had started selling the first consumer kites, licensing the patent from French windsurfers Bruno and Dominique Legaignoux. "The first time I launched the kite, its pull felt like being shot out of a cannon," he says. "I had no idea if I was ever going to stop."

It didn't take Forman long to pick up the sport. Whereas windsurfing can take years to master, the learning curve for kiteboarding is akin to that of snowboarding. The first three or four days, you get the crap kicked out of you, and then, suddenly, something clicks and you're riding. Once you learn to safely control the kite and hone your board skills, it's just a matter of putting the two elements together.

Forman introduced Nuzzo to kiteboarding in 1999, when his sales job brought him to the Middletown, Rhode Island, shop where Nuzzo was teaching windsurfing. "I told Matt to check out kiteboarding," says Forman. "He did, teaching himself to kite while wearing a fat wetsuit over the winter in New England, which was absolute insanity." Forman and Nuzzo became fanatics, kiteboarding whenever they could. Neither expected

to give up windsurfing, and both hoped it would make a comeback. But kiteboarding changed all that. "It was clearly a superior sport," says Nuzzo.

While still at North Sails, Forman began moonlighting as a kiteboarding instructor, but he soon had more students than he could handle. Nuzzo was his pinch hitter, regularly making the 13-hour drive from Rhode Island to help with lessons. Since there was plenty of work for both, Nuzzo moved to the Outer Banks in March 2001 and began conspiring with Forman about how to turn their newfound passion into something that could pay the bills. "At the time, there was a surplus of gear and a surplus of people who wanted to try the sport," recalls Forman.

"But there was nothing connecting the two," Nuzzo continues. "Kiteboarding was about to do exactly what we just saw happen in windsurfing—it was getting too technical, too high-end, and there was nowhere you could easily learn the sport. We knew that if there were no consumers, there would be no industry."

Neither had entrepreneurial experience, but in July 2001 they opened a joint checking account, each plunking down \$100, and convened in Forman's basement to brainstorm a name for the company. "Real" was born from the notion that its exclusive focus would be "real kiteboarding," says Forman, "rather than just some guy at a windsurfing shop who teaches a few days a month." The following weekend they created a Web site and set up an 800 number. They started running three-day Zero to Hero kite camps and offering private lessons. They also sold kites, boards, and harnesses—maxing out their credit cards to pay for inventory. "My dad thought we'd gone off the deep end," says Forman.

It would be another year before they earned enough to

pay themselves a salary. "But we were growing fast," says Forman. They leased a 1,400-square-foot former bait-and-tackle shop in Buxton and converted it to a retail store and business office. "We also needed housing for our employees, so I convinced the landlord to rent us the apartment upstairs. Seven people lived pig-piled into that apartment for five months."

Contrary to what you may think, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 127

LAUNCH PARTY

The wind warrior's guide to getting schooled, buying the right gear, and going with the flow

WHERE TO LEARN

REAL KITEBOARDING // CAPE HATTERAS, NORTH CAROLINA

It may be the largest school in the world, but Real is no assembly line. The three-day Zero to Hero program's methodical, safety-first approach features a two-to-one student-coach ratio and prime Outer Banks conditions. \$995; 866-732-5548, www.realkiteboarding.com

NEW WIND KITE SCHOOLS // HOOD RIVER, OREGON

Held on the Columbia River Gorge in the summer and at Baja's La Ventana in the winter, New Wind's two-day Fast Track program boosts the learning curve by teaching you to adopt the same skills advanced riders use. \$549; 541-387-2440, www.kiteschool.com

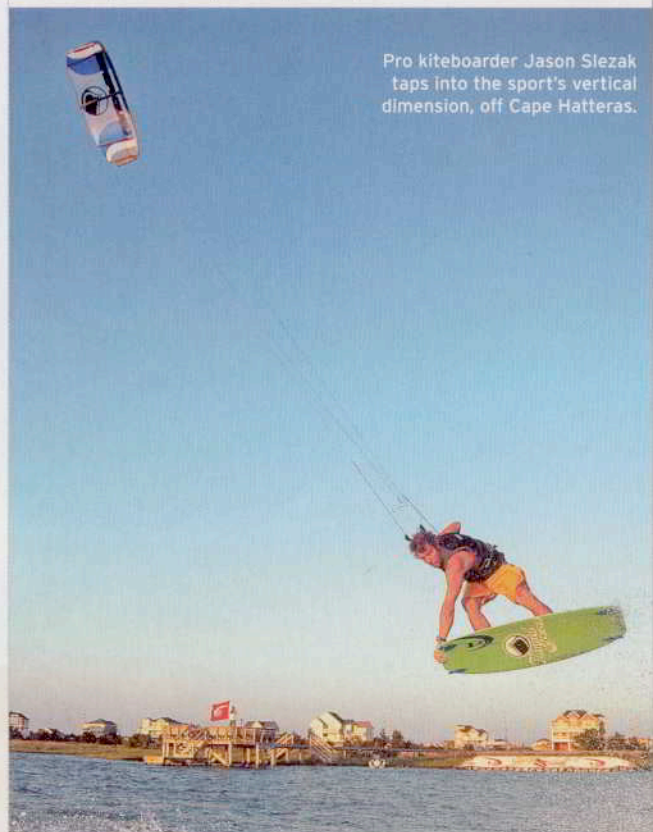
BRONEAH // TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN

The two-day Northern Exposure camp uses exclusive teaching zones at the base of a 20-mile finger peninsula separating two bays on Lake Michigan, so no matter which way the frontal wind is blowing, there's a beginner-friendly beach nearby. \$499; 231-392-2212, www.broneah.com

WHAT TO BUY

KITE: BEST WAROO PRO // The Pro's revolutionary hybrid design allows you to harness the wind's power in increments and completely depower by simply pushing out the bar. \$1,149; 866-700-2378, www.bestkiteboarding.com

HARNESS: DAKINE FUSION // Don't be put off by the harness's diaper design. It supports your lower back and legs for launching and riding, and it's durable enough to have you surfing 20-foot waves by the time you need a replacement. \$135; 541-386-3166, www.dakine.com



Pro kiteboarder Jason Slezak taps into the sport's vertical dimension, off Cape Hatteras.

BOARD: JIMMY LEWIS MODEL III // A lot of beginner boards are so "floaty" that you graduate almost as soon as you can get up. The twin-tip Model III's short but wide physique provides stability for early on and power so it stays in your quiver for light-wind days. \$799; 866-732-5548, www.realkiteboarding.com

WHERE TO RIP

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS // With steady trade winds and no hard-to-reach beach-access points, Real Kiteboarding's new boat-based BVI trips remove every potential hassle from your kiting vacation. You'll whip along a glassy bay, recharging on ripe mango while a 50-foot yacht doubles as your personal water taxi to the next idyllic island. Call for price; 866-732-5548, www.realkiteboarding.com

CABARETE, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC // Kite Beach, on the DR's northern shore, has become one of the world's most famous kiting spots, for good reason: The year-round side-onshore winds rally between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., so riders can sleep late, play in the afternoon, then ease into happy hour. Check out the newly renovated Kite Beach Hotel. Doubles from \$50; 809-571-0878, www.kitebeachhotel.com

PAROS, GREECE // This summer the pro tour came to Pounda Beach, on the southwestern coast of Paros, where the brilliant blue Aegean Sea is whipped into a malevolent froth by the powerful side-shore wind. But the shallows and wide golden-sand beach also make it a great place to learn. Paros Kite Pro Center offers weeklong lessons and rentals, packaged together with stays at the beachfront Holiday Sun Hotel. From \$797; www.paroskite-procenter.com

—RYAN BRANDT

these guys aren't just beach bums with lucky timing. Everything about their business is the result of an anal-retentive attention to detail and a relentless branding crusade. In the BVIs, I'd barely stumble out of bed and Forman and Nuzzo would already be circling our three yachts in a dinghy, holding their daily planning meeting. A few minutes later, Forman would be back aboard, barking orders to load up the dinghies for day trips to Anegada, kiting expeditions to remote beaches, surf sessions on local breaks, or snorkel excursions to nearby reefs. Real was also using the trip as the backdrop for its latest instructional DVDs and conducting a photo shoot for its Web site and brochures. And field-testing the latest gear. As for branding, it's all about Real's trademark hue: in-your-face fire-engine red. It's the color of its offices, lesson center, staff uniforms, Forman's Nissan pickup, and Real's fleet of 12 jet skis.

Perhaps the most clever marketing tool of all has been Forman and Nuzzo's use of jet skis, which help funnel a huge number of students through the school by allowing coaches to stay out on the water to help relaunch kites and shuttle students upwind to maximize riding time. "Those guys pioneered the use of jet skis as a utilitarian device," says Jeff Logosz, president of Slingshot, a leading kite manufacturer. "If you wanted to learn to snowboard without a chairlift, it would take you a long time. Real has invented the chairlift of kiteboarding."

KITEBOARDING IS growing fast, but it would grow a lot faster if it weren't for the "kitemares"—those times your kite gets unruly and turns you into a helpless marionette of the wind gods, with sometimes lethal results. I've lost count of the number of times complete strangers have lectured me on the dangers of the sport. But the statistics don't justify the panic. Last year there were only three kiteboarding deaths in the U.S. out of an estimated 25,000 to 40,000 riders. That's not many, contends *SBC Kiteboard* magazine columnist Rick Iossi, who also runs a Web forum on kiteboarding safety where he posts detailed recaps of kiteboarding injuries and deaths worldwide. According to Iossi, if you calculate the number of fatalities per 100,000 people, paragliding ranks number one, at 88, motor-vehicle deaths come in at 15, and kiteboarding lands somewhere between eight

KITEBOARDING

and 12. "Kiteboarding is safer than driving in the U.S.," Iossi says, "and statistically only slightly more dangerous than scuba diving."

Nearly all kiteboarding injuries and fatalities occur during the launch or landing of the kite. That's when a rider is on or near land and a gust from a fast-moving squall can loft him into a solid object. Getting lofted is every kiteboarder's biggest fear. Buildings are hard. Slam into one and you might die. Once on the water, your risk of colliding with something like a Dairy Queen is greatly reduced. I've had a few minor lofting incidents that have left me with scrapes and bruises, but no face plants into fast-food joints. Not so for Iossi. "I had my first lofting in 2000." On that seemingly peaceful morning, a gust slammed him into a deck railing, leaving him with severe head injuries and a mangled foot. One of the highest loftings known happened in the Dominican Republic in 2000. "A guy got blown 100 feet high and 800 feet downwind from a gust that spiked to 52 knots," says Iossi.

To tackle the lofting problem, kite manufacturers have developed innovative kites and rigging technologies that let a rider depower in a gust. Many kites now wear helmets and also carry hook knives to cut themselves from tangled lines in emergencies. Or, when things get really dire, there's the "Oh, shit" handle—something you might want to pull, for instance, if lofted toward a six-lane interstate. Yank it and the entire kite breaks loose from its rigging and flies away. You'll likely lose your kite, but at least you're not going to get smashed by an 18-wheeler.

RIGHT NOW, the sport is at the same point on its curve that snowboarding was when Burton and Sims took it from the backcountry to the big resorts. "The demographic is changing," says Christopher Nygard, a chairman for the Professional Air Sports Association, which has developed a certification system, similar to scuba diving's, to accredit both kiteboarding instructors and riders. "The period of only extreme-sports enthusiasts taking up kiteboarding is coming to an end." For their part, Forman and Nuzzo's latest strategy is an all-girls kite camp, taught by and for females. And there are grand plans to replace the existing lesson center with a 14,000-square-foot facility that will house classrooms, a retail shop, new

business offices, a deli, and a massage area. The project, scheduled to be completed by next summer, also adds a private kite launch and a 14-unit condo complex. To fund the venture, Forman has taken out yet another lien on his home (on top of seven already). "We want to step it up a level," he says, "and growth requires cash." Forman and Nuzzo won't disclose how much they're actually raking in from Real, but they must be doing OK, with new homes, new cars, and a jet-setting lifestyle.

The project could very well be the world's first kiteboarding resort, a bacchanalia for water warriors where nothing is left to chance: When the wind doesn't blow, there will be surfing and wakeboarding lessons, sailing and deep-sea-fishing charters, sunset cruises, dune hiking, and kayaking tours. With Forman and Nuzzo, there's always a contingency plan.

"It's been our goal that while learning to kiteboard, you have the best time you've had all year," says Forman. In the BVIs, I experience that firsthand. During one particularly outrageous 24-hour period, I snorkel across a reef teeming with fish, kite off three different islands, go for a midnight swim under a full moon, take my first surfing lesson, dine on fresh tuna, indulge in far too many local libations, nap on a deserted beach, get in a food fight, race sailboats, and summit a peak.

But the best moment by far is on my board. One afternoon just before we head in for the day, Nuzzo is trailing me in a dinghy while I kite across a sapphire lagoon along the western shore of Anegada, a ten-mile-long coral atoll. He circles closer and stops, jumps into the water and grabs my bar, then does a demo to show me how to tap into kiteboarding's vertical dimension. I've yet to get the nerve up to jump, but Nuzzo makes it look easy. The technique is called "boosting." While edging hard, you briefly steer the kite opposite the direction you're riding and it'll catapult you into the stratosphere. I'm not ready for big air, so I only twitch my control bar a couple of inches. Suddenly I'm airborne, hovering four feet above the water, and silently gliding downwind. It's a heart-stopping rush. After a few seconds, the kite, now acting like a parachute, brings me in for a gentle landing. **O**

MICHAEL BEHAR, a former editor at *National Geographic*, wrote about Fabien Cousteau in December 2005.