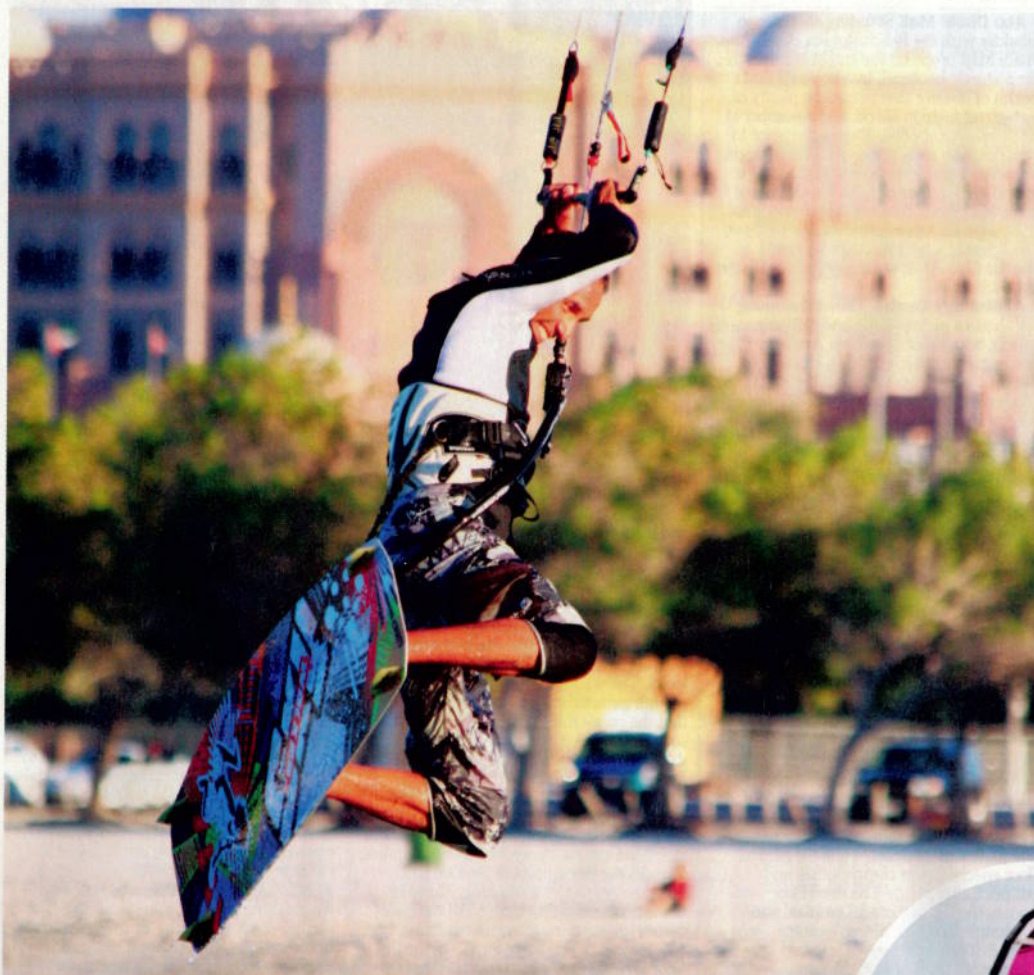


Getting some air



Helen Elfer throws caution to the wind and braves the art of **kitesurfing**

If you've driven along Sheikh Khalifa Highway towards Yas Island on a breezy day, you might have spotted a number of kites to your left, flying

to and fro along the coast. These are bound to belong to the capital's kitesurfers, as whenever there's a good wind, they all start frantically booking days off work, jumping into their 4x4s and heading to Yas Island in time to catch some wind and waves.

Kitesurfing is a tricky skill to master. Classed as an extreme sport, the rider uses wind to pull themselves across the surface of the water on a surfboard or kiteboard. We booked in for a lesson with pro Sameh Elsaghir to learn the ropes – considering he's been teaching for nine years in Greece, Italy, Egypt and now in Abu Dhabi, we knew we'd be in safe hands.

Our lesson started with some basics about how to work with the

direction of the wind, which Sameh illustrated by scratching diagrams in the sand. After pumping up the inflatable kite, and feeling more than a little excited, we stepped into the attaching harness and prepared to hit the waves. After all, we were pretty confident we'd already mastered the art of kite flying at the age of seven. Sameh, however, soon convinced us otherwise. It turns out that just learning to control the kite with any degree of finesse is no mean feat. In fact, you need about five hours of training before you can safely take your kite and board out on the water on your own.

So we spent the rest of the lesson just learning how to work with the wind and balance the kite correctly. Since the kite is a powerful piece of equipment, it feels at first as though it should take a lot of strength and effort to keep it in control, but, in fact, delicate gentle movements are all that is needed – meaning anyone can do it even if they don't have much upper body strength. We found it hard to resist the temptation to yank the string too hard, but this caused the kite to gain so much momentum that

'There's so much to learn, kitesurfing is like its own science'

we kept getting lifted clean off our feet. Fortunately, Sameh was clinging on to the back of our harness as though we were a wayward toddler, and was able to bring us back down to the ground. We'd probably be halfway through a doing a Phileas Fogg-style trip otherwise.

The only equipment you need to go kitesurfing is a board that weights about 2kg, and the kite, which packs up into a small

rucksack. Kitesurfing enthusiast Julia Vetter, who has been practicing for about a year, says this is one of the many reasons she got hooked on the sport. 'You don't need an engine or any heavy equipment – just the wind, your kite and your board.'

And I also love that you're challenging your brain while you're out there. To steer the kite and keep your balance takes a lot of skill and strategy. There are so many components to kitesurfing, it's like a science of its own! So for me, and I think for many of the guys who come out here, it's the perfect combination.'

We couldn't agree more, so here's hoping the wind picks up again soon. *Dhs1,400 for a package of five lessons, including equipment rental. Call Sameh on 050 544 1494 for lessons at various locations. www.kitepro.ae*

