

Water sports

by Mike Rayner

*We'll all be planning that route
We're gonna take real soon
We're waxing down our surfboards
We can't wait for June
We'll all be gone for the summer
We're on surfari to stay
Tell the teacher we're surfin'
Surfin' U. S. A.*

(Chuck Berry, Brian Wilson)

All over the world people head for oceans, lakes, pools and rivers in search of fun, freedom and excitement. On the water, in the water or under the water, there are a huge range of sports and activities available to lovers of H₂O. Let's take a look at some of the more colourful and adventurous water sports.

Surfing

When Captain James Cook landed in the Polynesian islands of Hawaii in 1778, he was surprised to find the native men and women, both royalty and ordinary citizens, riding waves standing on wooden boards. Despite being centuries old, surfing only really took off in the rest of the world from the 1950s, starting with the southwest coast of the USA. Nowadays surfing is enjoyed by surfers wherever there are waves, in Bali, Australia, Japan, France and even Britain.

Contemporary surfers use lightweight fibreglass boards to catch waves of varying shapes and sizes as they roll in towards the beach. One of the main attractions of the sport is its simplicity – all a surfer really needs is a surfboard, a wetsuit and a way of getting to the beach.

Although there has been a fiercely competitive professional tour since the 1970s, surfing traditionally appeals to young people with a relaxed outlook on life. A whole lifestyle has built up around the sport, and movies like *Big Wednesday*, *Point Break* and *Blue Crush* have popularised surf culture. Surfing also has its own language – an excited surfer is 'stoked', a surfer who falls off their board 'wipes out', and something a surfer really likes is 'awesome'. The heroes of the surfing community are the soul surfers – surfers who live only to travel and surf.

Windsurfing and kiteboarding

Both close cousins of surfing, windsurfing and kiteboarding use the wind to propel modified surfboards at high speeds across the surface of the water.

Windsurfing is a hybrid of sailing and surfing invented by sailor Jim Drake, and surfer Hoyle Schweiter in South California in the late 1960s. Windsurfing has become a hugely popular outdoor activity, and made its first appearance at the Olympics in LA in 1984. There are many different styles of windsurfing which include 'freestyle', where windsurfers do tricks, 'bump-and-jump' in which surfers use waves to take to the air, and 'slalom'.

Kitesurfing is an even more recent development; it has only been around since the 1980s, and is only recently becoming an established watersport. As the name of the sport suggests, kitesurfers are towed along by large kites, allowing them to pull-off incredible tricks in the air. The names of the tricks give an idea of how exciting the sport is; the 'heart-attack', 'boneless' and 'slim chance' are among the most exhilarating to watch.

SCUBA diving

Just as mankind has always had a desire to fly, the human race has wanted to swim under the water since prehistoric times. Pictures of primitive devices to enable people to breathe underwater have been found dating from 3000 years ago, but our dream of moving freely beneath the ocean waves for long periods of time was only realised about 60 years ago, when French diving legend Jacques Cousteau developed the first practical Self

Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus (SCUBA). Since then the sport of SCUBA diving has gone from strength to strength.

Lovers of SCUBA diving rave about the feeling of weightlessness, the peace and quiet under the water, the ability to move in three dimensions and the sense of adventure they get while on a dive. SCUBA divers often travel to some of the most beautiful and remote places in the world in the search for rare underwater flora and fauna. Palau, The Red Sea, The Maldives and Hawaii have many of the most popular diving sites, but recreational divers often have to make do with less exotic local destinations, like the North Sea in Britain.

SCUBA diving is not without its dangers, however. The mixture of nitrogen and oxygen divers breathe underwater, combined with the pressure under the water can be deadly if a diver rises too quickly to the surface, causing a condition called 'the bends'. Divers can also get lost or trapped when diving on wrecks, and fatalities are particularly common in cave diving, where divers add to the dangers of diving by swimming through underground caves filled with water. Diving can also be harmful to the underwater environment – in the past irresponsible divers have caused a great deal of damage to coral reefs. However with proper precautions diving can open up a whole new world, far from the stresses of daily life.

So what are you waiting for? Get your wetsuit on, strap your board to the roof rack, throw your SCUBA gear in the boot and head for the beach. I'll see you there.

Glossary

contemporary (adj): existing or happening now.

coral reef (n): a bank of coral, the top of which can sometimes be seen just above the sea.

device (n): an object or machine which has been invented to fulfill a particular purpose.

establish (v) (established adj): to cause to be accepted in or familiar with a place, position, etc.

exhilarating (adj): making you feel very excited and happy.

fatality (n): a death caused by an accident or by violence, or someone who has died in either of these ways.

fibreglass UK, US fiberglass (n): a strong light material made by twisting together small fibres of glass and plastic, used especially for structures such as cars and boats.

flora and fauna (n): the flora and fauna of a place are its plants and animals.

hybrid (n): a plant or animal that has been produced from two different types of plant or animal, especially to get better characteristics, or anything that is a mixture of two very different things.

modify (v): to change something such as a plan, opinion, law or way of behaviour slightly, usually to improve it or make it more acceptable.

precaution (n): an action which is done to prevent something unpleasant or dangerous happening.

prehistoric (adj): describing the period before there were written records.

primitive (adj): relating to human society at a very early stage of development, with people living in a simple way without machines or a writing system.

propel (n): to push or move something somewhere, often with a lot of force.

rave (v): to praise something greatly.

royalty (n): the people who belong to the family of a king and queen.

slalom (n): a race for people on skis or in canoes (= long light narrow boats) in which they have to follow a route that bends in and out between poles.

tow (v): to pull a car, boat, etc. along, using a rope or a chain attached to another vehicle or boat.

wetsuit (n): a piece of clothing covering the whole body that keeps you warm and dry when you are under water.