

Stand up paddle boarding booming; Hawaii the perfect spot to try new sport

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Byline: **Suzanne Morphet**

I feel like I'm paddling a canoe, but all the rules are reversed. Instead of "don't stand up," it's "don't sit down," Instead of "don't move around," I see my instructor shifting his feet to help manoeuvre his craft.

I've just discovered stand up paddle boarding and it's not just breaking many of the old rules of paddling, it's breaking new ground -or rather water -while soaring in popularity on oceans, lakes and rivers around the world. There's even an annual stand up world tour devoted to the surfing side of the sport, culminating with the Hawaii island finals every December.

"Business is booming," says Kaweko Duncan, an instructor with Kona Boys in Kailua-Kona on the Big Island. "We run out of boards all the time."

Hawaii is where the sport began and where I've come to be introduced to it. Besides surfing, stand up paddle boarding has another facet -touring. Since I'm not much of a surfer, I'm going to try touring. The Big Island's clear aquamarine waters and colourful fish and coral reefs make it an enticing place to play Huck Finn.

My husband and 16-yearold daughter are game to try this relatively new sport, too. Our lesson begins in the small protected bay right outside King Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel in Kailua-Kona, where we're staying.

Duncan tells us the most important thing is to choose a proper paddle, one that's long enough -hold an arm straight above your head and your paddle should stand another handlength higher -and with a bent shaft.

Once we're sized up for paddles, we check out our boards. They're big; more than three metres long and at least 15 centimetres wider than an average-sized long board.

For anyone who's struggled to stand up and catch a wave while being pushed relentlessly toward shore, stand up paddle boarding is a welcome

switch. You begin standing up, not lying down, so there's no tricky transition from stomach to feet.

Our legs are shaky at first, but as we paddle around the quiet bay, switching our paddles from one side to the other with every few strokes, I have my "aha" moment when I realize it's just like solo canoeing, only I'm standing up.

When Duncan thinks we have the hang of it, we head out the narrow channel, dodging a few people snorkelling, passing the rebuilt heiau or temple that King Kamehameha had built when he ruled Hawaii from this spot at the beginning of the 19th century, and enter into the wide open waters of Kamakahonu Bay.

As we paddle, Duncan explains that after King Kamehameha conquered the neighbouring islands, he took his war tiki -a wooden idol -and stuffed it into a near-by lava tube. We're going to see it.

Out in the bay, the water is much rougher and the wind pushes into our faces. Duncan moves along with what seems like little effort. My husband manages to keep up, but Alanna and I lag behind, trying to find the right rhythm and make the most of every stroke. At one point, I push too hard, lose my balance and topple forward onto my knees.

The shoreline here is rough black lava edged by foaming white water as waves crash against it. With green palm trees waving in the background, it's a stunning contrast. When Duncan points to an opening in the lava rock, we can't actually see the war tiki, but it doesn't matter. We're exploring, having fun, learning about the local culture and using the same mode of transport that ancient Hawaiians would have used, although today's boards and paddles are a lot more sophisticated.

Paddle boarding is still evolving. I learn this a few days later when my daughter and I join fitness and surfing instructor Donica Shouse for a class she's dubbed flo yo. Yes -floating yoga! We're at the soft sandy beachfront at the Fairmont Orchid Hotel at daybreak and Shouse is leading us through a variety of yoga poses. Our boards are anchored with light weights in the shallow water, but we drift gently, making the poses more challenging.

For Shouse, using a paddle board to practise yoga came naturally.

"It's so intuitive . . . they have the mat glued right on them," she says chuckling, referring to the soft top that allows users to grip the board with their toes. "Especially here on the Big Island, there are a lot of days when

you might only get a wave every 15 or 20 minutes, so you have time to be creative and stretch."

After our yoga class, we grab paddles and head into deeper water. A school of silvery blue fish darts under our boards, glistening in the sun. Standing up makes it easy to see them. Shouse says paddle boarders have an advantage when they're surfing too because they're higher up. "You're more aware of your surroundings. You can see the outline of the reef better," she says.

"And sharks?" I ask, laughing. "Yes" she replies "and your legs aren't dangling in the water!"

That's it, I'm sold.

If You Go

- Kona Boys Beach Shack is directly in front of King Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel and offers stand up paddle boarding lessons and rentals. It's open every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (www.konaboys.com)
- King Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel has just had a \$35-million facelift and won an award of honour by the American Society of Interior Designers. The 452-room hotel stands on a 5.2-hectare parcel of ocean front where Hawaii's most famous king, Kamehameha the Great, once resided. (www.konabeachhotel.com)
- Fairmont Orchid Hotel offers an hour-long flo yo class on Mondays and Fridays at 7 a.m. You need not be a guest of the hotel. \$20 per class. It also offers stand up paddle boarding lessons. (www.fairmont.com/orchid or call (808) 885-2000)
- Ready to buy your own board and paddle? Imagine Surf originally of Montreal, "is coming up with the most innovative shapes" and environmentally friendly boards, says Donica Shouse, one of the company's sponsored athletes. (imaginesurfboards.com) Shouse also loves the lightweight and ergonomic bamboo paddles her husband makes. (www.paddlehi.com)
- Calgary paddlers can get in on the action at this year's second annual Red Nik Rippin Down The Bow standup paddle board race on Aug. 7.