

ANNAPOLIS

Ready to take a stand?

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

From the first stroke, I was stoked.

Since I first saw one, I've admired stand-up paddlers from afar — their grace, their strength, their seemingly unflappable balance — and after 15 years of ballet and five of Pilates, I figured I might have the balance to keep myself upright on a board that's a longer, wider, thicker surfboard. So when I heard about a stand-up paddle clinic on the Potomac River in Washington a few months ago, I decided my time had come.

I knelt on the board, pushed off the dock, rose to my feet and confidently put my paddle in the water. I immediately understood the appeal of stand-up paddling: It feels like walking on water. My first thought was that I wanted to do this every day for the rest of my life. My second thought, as I noticed people on the waterfront staring and pointing, was whether to let on how easy it was.

Stand-up paddling, or SUP, was popularized by surfing legends such as Laird Hamilton, who do crazy things like paddle between Hawaiian islands. But in the past year, the sport has captured the attention of mainstream surfers, kayakers and pretty much anyone who likes playing in the water. It's peaceful, yet it's a good workout (core, legs), and it rates as one of the easiest water sports to pursue. All you need is a board, a paddle, a life jacket or other flotation device and a body of water — ocean, lake, river, creek or canal.

"It's something you can do on a board when the wind isn't big enough for windsurfing, and when the waves aren't big enough to surf," said Mark Bandy, co-owner of East of Maui, a board shop in Annapolis that has been around since the 1970s. Bandy was one of the first in the region to carry paddleboards, and he said that this year, there has been a tremendous increase in interest.

Once SUP was on my radar, I found it everywhere: There's a racing circuit, including a paddle around Manhattan (28 miles); an SUP magazine; and a forthcoming SUP movie ("The Endless Glide"). You can buy standard fiberglass boards with foam cores, inflatable boards, pull-apart boards (easier to throw in the trunk when it's two pieces) and build-your-own wooden board kits. Even Costco sells boards.

I ventured out to Annapolis several times this summer, testing out various rentals. I learned that shorter boards are more maneuverable and better for surfing; longer boards, better gliders, are good for flatwater touring. The lighter and



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Ben Butterwei leads a stand-up paddling tour around Annapolis, where the calm waters are perfect for people who are new to the sport.

faster a board, the more expensive it is. Most boards are 10½ to 12½ feet long and range in price from \$900 to \$1,700. Rentals tend to be the longer, wider boards — more stable for beginners.

Annapolis, with many easy access points and generally calm waters, is ideal for beginners, not to mention that it offers endless visual stimulation, from wildlife to the Naval Academy. Plus, I was feeling smug about my new skills. So what better place to paddle than downtown Annapolis's City Dock, otherwise known as "Ego Alley," because it tends to be a parade of yachts on summer weekends.

I joined Bandy for a few Tuesday night group paddles, which left from Horn Point Park in Eastport, just across the Spa Creek Bridge from downtown. We paddled around the point and toward the Naval Academy, once catching the start of a Navy band concert.

On a Saturday morning, I took a two-hour tour with Ben Butterwei, who started SUP Annapolis last year. He sells boards out of his garage and offers lessons and weeknight fitness classes (imagine calisthenics on a floating yoga mat). We put in at Amos Garrett Park on Spa Creek, in the Murray Hill section of Annapolis.

Butterwei said fall is the perfect time to pad-

dle around town because many of the pleasure boats are out of the water for the season, so there are fewer wakes to throw paddlers off balance. While the water stays warm for a few months into the fall, the air gets chilly, so SUPers wear a rash guard or a wetsuit (and even neoprene booties) as temperatures dip. Die-hards (and some outfitters) paddle year-round, but I'll pack it up by Halloween.

We paddled past a patio-full of ogling diners at the Marriott's waterfront restaurant and into Ego Alley. A few times I had to stop and stretch my feet — cramping is an occasional problem for beginners. But mostly, I was torn between wanting to show off my skills and wanting to tell everyone that, despite its appearance, SUP is really a cinch.

The pros had told me it's a sport that takes seconds to learn and a lifetime to master. And the more beginners I watched go vertical on boards, the more I believed that my balance wasn't anything special.

On the way back, Butterwei showed me different stances for racing. As soon as I tried to change my position, my board wobbled. For a split second, I thought I would experience my first SUP swim. But I steadied myself and scooted my feet back to the basic stance.

We passed a few more boaters who looked impressed. One asked, "Is it hard?" Now humbled by my near-spill, I decided not to tell him that it takes many years of ballet training to achieve my extraordinary balance. "Nah," I said. "You definitely could do it."

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IF YOU GO

STAYING THERE

The Inn at Spa Creek
417 Severn Ave.
410-263-5405
www.innatspacreek.com
Three rooms with rates from \$150 to \$200, including breakfast.

Scotlaur Inn

165 Main St.
410-268-5665
www.scotlaurinn.com
Ten rooms above Chick & Ruth's Delly, where breakfast (included) is served. Weekend rates \$110 to \$140.

EATING THERE

Boatyard Bar & Grill

400 Fourth St.
410-216-6206
www.boatyardbarandgrill.com
Breakfast pizza (\$8.95) served until 11 a.m.

The Rockfish

400 Sixth St.
410-267-1800
www.rockfishmd.com
Seasonal menu, entrees \$17-\$33.

PADDLING THERE

East of Maui

2303 Forest Dr., Suite E
410-573-WIND
www.eastofmauiboardshop.com

A short drive from the water, so you must have a roof rack to rent a board. Two-hour private guided tour \$90 first person, \$75 each additional person, through October. Rentals: \$40 for same-day return, \$50 for 24 hours. Tuesday night group paddles at 5:30 as long into fall as daylight permits.

Stand Up Paddle

Annapolis

443-829-2266
www.supannapolis.com
Full-day board rental or two-hour lesson \$40, through October. Will meet customers at local boat ramps.

Springriver Annapolis Canoe and Kayak

311 Third St.
410-263-2303
www.annapoliscanoeandkayak.com
Year-round rentals: \$15 an hour, \$45 a day. Wetsuits required for water below 60 degrees, drysuits below 50.