

Flight of fancy

WATCHING kitesurfers in mid-air looking like trapeze artists on invisible strings, I have felt like a child with my nose pressed up against the sweetshop window, wanting to try.

But something apparently more accessible always came along.

Like a drunken sailor on shore leave, snapping out of his foggy reverie, I realised I was missing out on something

The opportunity presented itself courtesy of Easyriders Kiteboarding in Poole, who said 'come down and try it'.

So I hook out my 5mm and check the weather – sunny with a fairly strong north-east wind. Not ideal, either for flying a kite or 'bodydragging' (more of which later).

This course is run by Andy Gratwick, a qualified IKO (International Kiteboarding Organisation and BKSA (British Kitesurfing Association) instructor, who takes one, two and three-day courses as well as trips abroad to tropical places.

They use the most experienced kitesurfing team in the country, including former British kitesurfing champion Mike Smith, whose views you can share as a resource on their website.

Andy, who has the easygoing manner of someone who has spent a lot of time outdoors, away from the nagging shenanigans of the office, explains the harness system.

This involves a chicken loop and 'donkey dick', a bendy tube, which folds into the loop to prevent the harness becoming detached.

The quick release is there for further protection, which is attached to the bar and helps to depower the kite on release and stops it from blowing away.

Next we drive out to Baiter Park where we are each given a foil kite, around 1.5 metres in length and we try to rediscover an instinct for the wind.

We are a 19-year-old watersports enthusiast, a septuagenarian and his windsurfer son.

The septuagenarian, in case you are wondering, plans to kitesurf across Lake Baikal in Siberia next year with his new bride, and I believe him when he tells me.

It takes half an hour but eventually I get to grips with the gusty wind, trying to visualise the 'wind window,' which is an imaginary arc of

Ceri Rees investigates kite surfing



■ British kitesurf champion Kirsty Jones

influence which the wind exerts on the kite downwind, from 12 o'clock (directly overhead) to 3 o'clock or 9 o'clock. This is within the 'power zone'.

Then the big toys come out and the harnesses are tightened. The struts are pumped with air, while the leading edge bladder remains permanently inflated.

We tie the lines on upwind using the old loop-and-hoop and wait for our co-pilot to launch our four-metre kites skyward.

In kitesurfing it's a case of four lines good two lines bad, because the extra lines provide better relaunch facilities when your kite flops like a gamebird that's been pilfered from its perch.

You can also get five-stringed kits, which are a bit more fatty but higher performance, says Andy. After a dabble with the six-metre kites, we were ready for the water test.

Which brings us to 'apparel,' or as they say in France 'appareil'. Fitted with helmets, flotation jacket, rash vest and wetsuits, we wade and wade and wade some more, seemingly into the middle of Poole Harbour to try body dragging, the final frontier before boarding can commence.

This involves allowing the kite to hover at 12 o'clock then harnessing

the wind in the power zone to swoop the kite towards 3 o'clock or 9 o'clock, depending on your preferred time of day, and then up again, allowing the kite to pull you through the water, while dragging your feet behind you.

This is actually easier than on land because your legs act as a keel, and there is no way the kite can lift you out of the water without a board.

By the end of our three-hour afternoon session, we are all getting the hang of it, a tribute to Andy's coaching.

Although the weather on day two did not permit us to go out because of a mean-spirited offshore wind, I will be hassling Andy for day-two training.

You can read about day two's kiteboarding experience next week.

factfile

Easyriders Kiteboarding runs courses for H2O Sports based in Sanbanks Road in Poole.

They are one of four schools that offer kitesurf instruction in Poole. You can book with the Easyriders team online for a one to three-day lesson from £99 for a one-day course, £189 for two days or £259 for three days.