OUT & ABOUT from the Resident and Fellow Affairs Committee

Where members of the Resident and Fellow Affairs Committee recommend their favorite scenes outside UCSF.

Windsurfing in the San Francisco Bay

Juan Vargas, MD is an Associate Clinical Professor of OBGYN and Radiology at UCSF, and Director of Obstetrics at San Francisco General Hospital. He is a nationally ranked freestyle windsurfer.

I learned how to windsurf thanks to residency training at UCSF. Thirteen years ago, my family and I moved to the Bay Area in order to start OBGYN residency (my second since the first one in my native Chile did not count) at UCSF. We settled in Alameda, a small island town across the bay, given that for a family of five and a dog, the cost of living in San Francisco was outside of our possibilities. Soon after our arrival I saw a big sign posted four blocks away from our rental unit that offered “windsurfing lessons.” Until then I had windsurfed only a few times in the early eighties in Vichuquen, a small lake near the coast in the south of Chile. I said to myself this was a grand chance I would never have again in my life and made a point of learning this elusive sport. Residency of course put a damper on my plans until I started my first night float rotation in early May. It turned out that I was unable to sleep during the day time, and after trying countless strategies suggested by well-intentioned peers and friends, and realizing that nothing would help, I decided to try windsurfing instead of tossing and turning in bed all day.

It turns out that the San Francisco Bay is world renowned for its strong, consistent winds, essential requirements for the sport of windsurfing. In fact, Hood River, Oregon (population of 7,000), Maui’s north shore, and the San Francisco Bay are the only places in the 50 states where you can practice this sport with any regularity. Learning how to windsurf is difficult and somewhat of a slow process. But for those who stick to it, the rewards are immense. Just talk to any windsurfer about windsurfing and notice the grin on their faces; I have not seen this this type of reaction among any other sport enthusiasts. The good news is that the sport of windsurfing has become so much better, fun, exciting, and easier to learn than when it was first introduced in the late 70’s due to dramatic technological advances. It is ironic that windsurfing was so popular in the U.S. in the mid 80’s and early 90’s and now is only practiced by relatively few people when it is SO much better than in its early days.

If you want to learn how to windsurf in the Bay you have several options depending on where you live and your wallet. If you live or work in the East Bay, the Cal Sailing Club in the Berkeley Marina is without question the best option. For a mere $65 dollars membership you have unlimited use of top notch windsurfing equipment suitable for all levels. If you stick to it, you’ll rapidly graduate to more advanced equipment so it doesn’t make sense generally to buy entry level equipment (and certainly does not make sense to buy advanced equipment that you’ll grow into it because you won’t). You’ll also find free lessons and a spirited crew that will keep you motivated and help you along the way to increase the slope of your learning curve. Alameda has a windsurfing school run by BoardSports (www.boardsportsschool.com) and it might be a good option for the early stages of your windsurfing progression (Alameda is not in the wind path during most of the windy season so you’ll soon need to venture out to windier places). On the Peninsula you have a great venue in Coyote Point,
also run by BoardSports. Coyote Point enjoys many days of excellent wind quality and safe shore conducive to progression at all levels. There are also private instructors that can accelerate the process quite a bit. Equipment is typically included in all beginner packages.

San Francisco has several groups of dedicated, highly competitive teams of formula and slalom course racing that regularly sail, train, and compete in local and national events. There are even junior racing and freestyle teams for kids 17 and under, that are run by volunteer sailors. These are well run, non-profit organizations that are free of charge for participants (www.teamberkeleywindsurf.com).

If you are a windsurfer and new to the Bay, well my friend, you hit the jackpot. There are amazing sailing venues for all abilities and taste. If you are into freestyle (think of air and spinning moves while hydroplaning, similar to skate or snowboarding but on the water), then head to Candlestick (five minute drive from SFGH parking lot) or Haskins. Swell rider? Then hit 3rd Avenue on an ebb tide or Treasure Island and you are in for a treat. Crissy Field can have it all on the right day, steep port ramps for big air, huge tanker ramps for insane air, flat water on a flood tide for speed or freestyle, smooth large swell, and even wave sailing down the line at the South Tower (please watch out for the surfers!). Crissy (ten minute drive from UCSF Medical Center) is absolutely gorgeous and has great facilities but it is an advance to expert only site due to the strong currents, heavy boat traffic, and rapidly shifting wind conditions. Do sail there with a friend who is familiar with Crissy before you embark on your own. During the summer when the Bay is blanketed by a thick layer of fog, head to Sherman Island (45 minute drive from SF) and enjoy the sun and 90 degree weather, strong steady wind and nicely shaped starboard ramps. Finally, we have world class wave sailing within one hour away at Wadell Creek, Davenport and Tubamanche, that offer many great days of good wind and waves in the spring and fall.

Windsurfing is an amazing sport that requires a bit of patience but once you have surpassed the initial awkward stage and you are in the harness and locked on your footstraps, you are in for an unforgettable experience. The San Francisco Bay is probably one of the best places on earth to go windsurfing, with an unmatched number of windy days, and astonishing beauty. What are you waiting for?