





HAVE BOARD, WILL PADDLE

By **ANDREA MILAM**
Photography by **FERNANDO RAMOS**

TOP Noah Ramos tries his hand at paddle surfing.

ABOVE In this sport, it's just you, the paddle board, the beautiful blue waters and an occasional sea turtle or maybe even a manta ray.

LEFT Maho Bay is an ideal jumping-off point for beginning paddlers.

Imagine for a moment that you're gliding across the placid, pristine waters of Maho Bay. The only sounds entering your stream of consciousness are your paddle slicing gently through the water and your paddleboard slap-slap-slapping on each tiny ripple. And then, suddenly, you see what you've come for: a huge, sweeping black shadow drifts sideways under your board, announcing the presence of the majestic manta ray that's known to frequent the waters off this breathtakingly beautiful north shore beach.

The manta gracefully flaps its wings, piggybacking on your board's long, narrow shadow. Floating there in tandem for a brief moment in time with this remarkably elegant animal, you're overcome with joy, awe, and an overwhelming sense of amazement at the stunning beauty that surrounds you.

Surreal experiences like this have drawn more and more people to the sport of paddleboarding, a relative newcomer both to St. John, and to world of water sports. Stand up paddleboarding (or SUP, to those acquainted with the sport) is a very user-friendly activity, which has certainly helped its popularity. The instructions are simple: stand in the middle of the board, feet facing forward about shoulder-width apart,



bend your knees slightly, and paddle. It's not uncommon to see everyone from young children to seniors taking to the water on paddleboards.

Variations on the sport have also helped draw in all kinds of paddlers. Slowly zigzag along a shoreline and you're sure to see schools of brightly-colored fish, turtles, and maybe even the aforementioned manta ray. Paddle out to catch "ankle busters," or the small waves that break at Cinnamon Bay, in the part paddling/part surfing sport of paddle surfing. Or really dig your paddle in for a heart-pounding, calorie-burning upwind journey from one beach to the next.

Aside from the unique above-water view of picturesque marine life that paddleboarding affords, there can be serious health benefits as well. Longtime St. John resident Karen Jarvis, who instantly fell in love with the sport and has since started her own paddleboard rental business and competed in several SUP races, lost about 50 pounds in the year following her discovery of the sport.

"I didn't set out to lose a bunch of weight paddling, but the bug bit me so hard," says Karen. "I paddled so often, and it's an amazing total body workout. The weight loss has been an added benefit."

One of the sport's biggest cheerleaders on St. John, Karen is never shy about encouraging first-time paddleboarders and extolling its virtues.

"It's been so therapeutic to a lot of people," she says. "I can be all twisted up about any one thing in my life—kids, the job, anything—and half an hour of good, solid paddling makes everything a little more tolerable. I see so many families

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Even kids can get in on the action tagging along as riders, like Katha Majette, 8, with her father Pretlow; the manta ray that many paddle boarders have encountered at Maho and Francis Bays; Victoria Hotze, 6, takes a hand at learning the new sport; Many paddlers get a bird's eye view of marine life, like sea turtles at Maho Bay.

OPPOSITE PAGE

TOP LEFT Noah Ramos and Evan Jones paddle surf, which combines paddle boarding with surfing, at Cinnamon Bay.

BOTTOM LEFT Arawak Expeditions' Arthur Jones enjoys the thrill of paddle surfing on Johnson's Reef.

RIGHT Margaret Majette and daughter Katha, 8, take advantage of the beautiful, calm waters at Gibney beach during a recent outing.

enjoying it together. It's just such a good, healthy thing and it's taking over the planet and the Virgin Islands."

It's true that almost anyone can hop on a stand up paddleboard (SUP) and begin paddling away almost immediately. Six-year-old St. John resident Ben Thill is proof of that. He started paddling at the young age of four, and in his short career has already competed in a SUP race and has even graduated to doing tricks on his board.

"I like to spin around on the back part of the board," Ben explains. "My favorite place to paddle is Maho because it's not really rough and not windy. It's the perfect place to paddleboard."

Like many St. John paddleboard enthusiasts, Ben lists an encounter with the manta ray as one of his all-time favorite paddling experiences.

Maho and the manta ray aren't the only great reasons

to go paddling, however. Arthur Jones, owner of Arawak Expeditions—one of the first businesses on island to get into the SUP game—has several different places he likes to paddle, with a definite preference for the thrill of paddle surfing.

"If Johnson's Reef is breaking I like to go out there," says Arthur. "It's about a half mile offshore, so it's a little bit of a workout to get out there. I've paddle-surfed Fish Bay, and tried it at Reef Bay, which is pretty challenging, because it's always really choppy there."

It goes without saying that the picturesque shorelines of St. John are just begging to be explored, and whether you're young and in the best shape of your life or entering your twilight years, paddleboarding in the island's pristine waters is something you can experience. So...what are you waiting for? [SJM](#)

