

haven

A magazine exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina





Me + Roy
West Beach



Adventures in Standup Paddleboarding

By Jason Frye | Photography by Millie Holloman Photography

At 8:30 a.m. the marsh is both quiet and alive. From where I'm standing on my paddleboard, I can see over and into the marsh grasses: a trio of ibises dip their beaks into a hidden mudflat, a great blue heron watches the shallows for the telltale ripple and swirl of schooling baitfish, birds too small and too fast to see dart to and from their secret nests. My paddle dips, breaks the smooth surface of the creek, and pulls me along.

Paddle, paddle, switch sides; paddle, paddle, switch sides. The rhythm of paddle, switch, repeat keeps me relaxed and balanced in the middle of Bald Head Creek.

There are four of us in the marsh on standup paddleboards this morning and we must be quite a sight to people more accustomed to seeing kayakers out here. Resembling longboards, the standup paddleboards average 12 feet in length and 30 inches in width and we're all using paddles around six feet long. From the shore, where our boards are hidden from view, it looks like we're walking on water. In a way it feels like we are.

Out here, standing above the water and under the wide morning sky, no sounds other than the quiet lap of the board and paddle and the songs of birds in the reeds, I've gotten lost in the rhythm and silence of the morning. I can tell the space and sound are affecting my friend and fellow paddleboarder Rory the same way. We decided to come out and try a new sport, something cool and novel that none of our friends have tried. We expected some

friendly competition, sore shoulders, sunburn and a well-earned beer at Eb & Flo's while we wait for the ferry, but neither of us expected to feel like John Muir or Aldo Leopold this morning. We've separated in the creek and he's behind me a bit, across the channel; he keeps stealing glimpses at the sky, the water, the reeds. And he hasn't said a word for 20 minutes. Neither of us has. Our communication, once we became accustomed to standing and moving on the paddleboards, has been reduced to glances, nods and gestures. A few minutes ago I turned back and he pointed into the marsh. A green heron took flight, silver fish flashing in its beak. We don't need to talk.

Ahead of us, Catherine and Hannah, our guides and instructors from Coastal Urge, paddle close together and talk in hushed tones. They look back to make sure we're keeping up and find us lost in our own worlds. Taking their paddles out of the water, they let the current pull them deeper into the marsh. Rory and I follow them, a little faster now, down a channel and into the early shadow of Old Baldy.

An hour earlier, Rory and I stood on the dock behind Harbourside Pavilion, surrounded by standup paddleboards and paddles, nervous about trying a new sport. Catherine showed us the parts of a paddleboard, explained the proper paddling technique and slid her board, blue with yellow stripes, into the water without so much as a splash.

“You get on like this,” she said. She steadied the board in the center with her paddle, shimmied onto it and knelt there. She pushed away from the dock and deftly sprang to her feet. The water around her stood like glass. “Any questions?”

I had questions—*How’d you jump up so fast?* and *How deep is the creek right here?*—but I didn’t ask, I only folded my arms across my chest and watched, hoping my knowing pose would be enough. Rory did the same. The collective machismo of a former club-level rugby player and a collegiate water polo player would be enough to will our boards to keep us above the water.

Catherine paddled in a tight circle and glided by.

“So, I recommend staying on your knees for a minute or two,” she said. “At least until you get used to the feel of the board under you, then you can give this a try.” She pulled her paddle from the water and transitioned into a yoga pose, hands overhead, standing on one foot, eyes closed.

Rory and I waited for 30 seconds before I gave in.

“I’ll try,” I said. I grabbed a board, surprised at its weight after watching Catherine grab hers effortlessly, and plopped it into the water, splashing myself. Already I was far less graceful than Catherine, who kept paddling by, laughing and smiling like an otter who knows a secret. Rory handed me a paddle and I stabbed it into the center of the board. I felt it move and I wondered how I would ever stay on, much less stand up on this thing. But I couldn’t let Rory see my doubt, I wanted to be the first one up, the first one on the board. After a deep breath, I flopped onto the board like a walrus, holding the dock with a white-knuckled hand.

I wobbled, adjusted my knees and wobbled a little more, filling the water with waves, not ripples.

Catherine dropped to kneeling on her board. “Like this,” she said, and sprang to her feet again. “And remember, stay on your knees and get your balance before you try to stand.”

I pushed away from the safety of the dock and skimmed, arrow straight, to the middle of the creek. The movement was faster and smoother than I had expected, almost like not moving at all. I turned to tell Rory to get started, wobbled furiously and sprawled

on the board in a desperate attempt to stay dry.

“Try paddling,” Catherine said, coasting by. “You’ll be much more balanced.”

I stuck my paddle in the water and the wobbling stopped. After a few tentative strokes my confidence was on the rise.

“It’s a little strange at first, but really cool,” I shouted to Rory. I heard his board splash into the water and the sounds of him climbing on. “But you’ll probably fall in,” I added.

With Rory on the water, the pressure built. I wanted to be the first to stand but not the first to fall. Zero hour. I moved myself into what I thought was the right position.

“No time like the present,” I muttered.

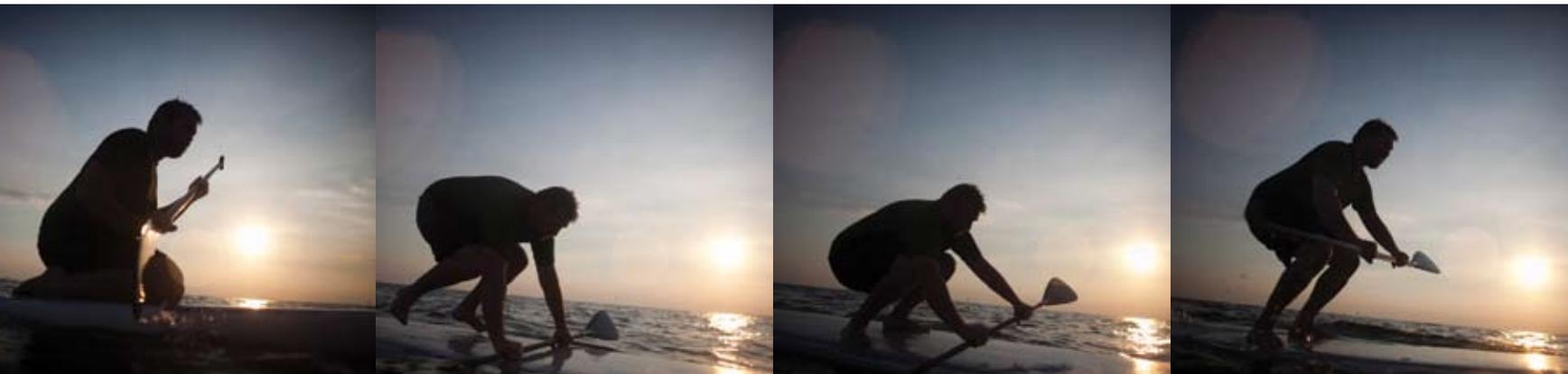
“What?” Rory said as he wobbled into the middle of the creek. “Oh, you’re getting up. Want me to hold your sunglasses?”

Ignoring him, I stared at my board. “Just jump to your feet, that’s all,” I said to myself. And that was the only thing left to do—jump.

Standup paddleboarding, also known by its acronym SUP and the verb SUPing, is a water sport gaining new converts daily. The history of the sport is murky, with some saying it dates back to pre-“discovery” Hawai’i where royalty would ride long surfboards called *olo* on waves and flat water. Others say it dates to the 1950s when an entrepreneurial-minded Waikiki beachboy decided to take photographs of tourists as they surfed in the shadow of Diamond Head. Wanting to be right beside them on the waves, but not wanting to get his camera wet, the beachboy hung his camera around his neck, grabbed his longboard, borrowed a paddle from an outrigger canoe and headed into the surf, standing all the way. Or at least that’s how the story goes.

Jeffrey Nathan, owner of Coastal Urge, an adventure outfitter and clothier new to Bald Head Island, sums it up perfectly: “There’s conflicting information about the sport’s beginnings, but one thing is clear: SUP is the fastest growing water sport in the world.”

Jeffrey and his wife Catherine (our instructor) tried SUPing at a trade show in Utah in 2008 and loved it. “We thought it would



This is harder than it looks! ↗

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be a perfect fit for an active coastal lifestyle,” he said. As it turns out, they were right. As soon as they introduced SUP at Coastal Urge’s Wrightsville Beach location, they were flooded with interest. Lessons and board rentals, board and paddle sales, races and even a SUP fishing tournament were evidence of their success.

Expansion to Bald Head Island was the next step as both Jeffrey and Catherine saw the unspoiled marsh creeks and the ocean expanses as the perfect environment for SUP. According to Jeffrey, it’s been very well received. Several island residents have their own boards and now a SUP Race Club meets every Thursday at the Coastal Urge Boardroom on Keelson Row.

I leapt.

My feet hit the board at the same time and I stood there for a moment, like a toddler not wanting to break the spell of standing, surprised I was still dry. I was thrilled; it felt like I was the number one pick in the SUP draft. But it was too early for that—all I had done was stand. Moving was going to be another thing.

I dipped my paddle in the water and glided forward. Then again. And again. It was easy. Looking down, I saw myself looking back from the glassy water and wearing a doubtful expression; a quick paddle and I’d left my double behind.

I turned my head to grin at Rory and started to tip. Squatting quickly I regained my balance in time to see Rory leap, wobble and stand.

“That wasn’t as hard as I thought,” he said. “This should be pretty easy, no waves here.”

It’s two hours after either of us set foot on a standup paddleboard and we still haven’t fallen in. We’ve watched countless birds and had a fish jump shoulder-high out of the water between us, but we haven’t fallen. Our guides saw we had the hang of it and left us half an hour ago. If you’d ask us, we’d say we could SUP around the world.

“My dad goes SUPing,” Rory says. “Ocean SUPing. Pacific Ocean SUPing.” Rory’s family lives in southern California, and that means much colder water and much bigger waves than we have here on Bald Head Island. “I can’t wait to tell him I did it. Maybe I’ll bring him down here when he comes east.”

“Maybe we should try it on the ocean before you go show your dad your SUP skills,” I say. “How about we take a break and try the ocean this afternoon?”

“Ab-so-lutely,” he says. “I could go for lunch.” He turns his board and I check my watch—10:30, not lunchtime by anyone’s



Hannah + Catherine, our instructors ↗



Aidan + Addie, budding paddlers, out with mom + dad.



standards except a pair of hungry and tired paddleboarders.

Our two-hour paddle into the marsh turns into an hour back as we ride the falling current to the dock, fairly flying over the water and earning some surprised looks from fishermen and kayakers.

Once back at the dock, we pull our boards onto the planking and strut back to our cart, ready for an early lunch and looking forward to an afternoon on the ocean.

In the relatively protected bay at what some locals refer to as North Beach, where the creek mouth meets the river, we find a cart loaded with beach paraphernalia, a grill set up and ready to go and a pile of shoes. Will Morris, island resident and SUP enthusiast, his wife Megan and their two kids Aidan and Addie are already on the water. With toddlers sitting between their feet, they make it look easy. Will waves to us and paddles to shore.

“I heard you got the hang of things pretty quickly this morning,” he says.

“We did,” I say, “but this looks a little different than the creek.”

“It’s not too bad, I mean, we do it with the kids, so how hard can it be?” he asks. He paddles off, his son laughing between his feet. “Then again, we do this two or three times a week.”

Will’s year of SUP experience and his ease on the board lull us into a false sense of confidence. We look out and all we see is the glassy water of the creek from this morning.

“It doesn’t look that hard out here,” I say to Rory.

I was wrong.

The ocean and river are as different from the marsh as they can be. Waves and currents and wind conspire against you. Nose into the wind, you work to make headway. Tail into the wind and you’re a human sail, pushing the board along with little effort. Nose or tail into the waves and it’s suddenly Olympic moguls. Turn sideways into the waves and you fall off. We learned all of this the hard way.

Within five minutes of launching, a knee-high set of waves comes rolling in and Rory and I go flying off the boards.

This is how it happens: Your board rocks and you shift to correct it. It rocks too far and you shift again, now looking like you’re doing The Twist. You’ve overcorrected so you shift again and now you’re hula hooping. You wave your paddle in one hand, twirl the other in tight circles and say things like “Oh! Whoa! Ouahh...” and then you’re underwater.

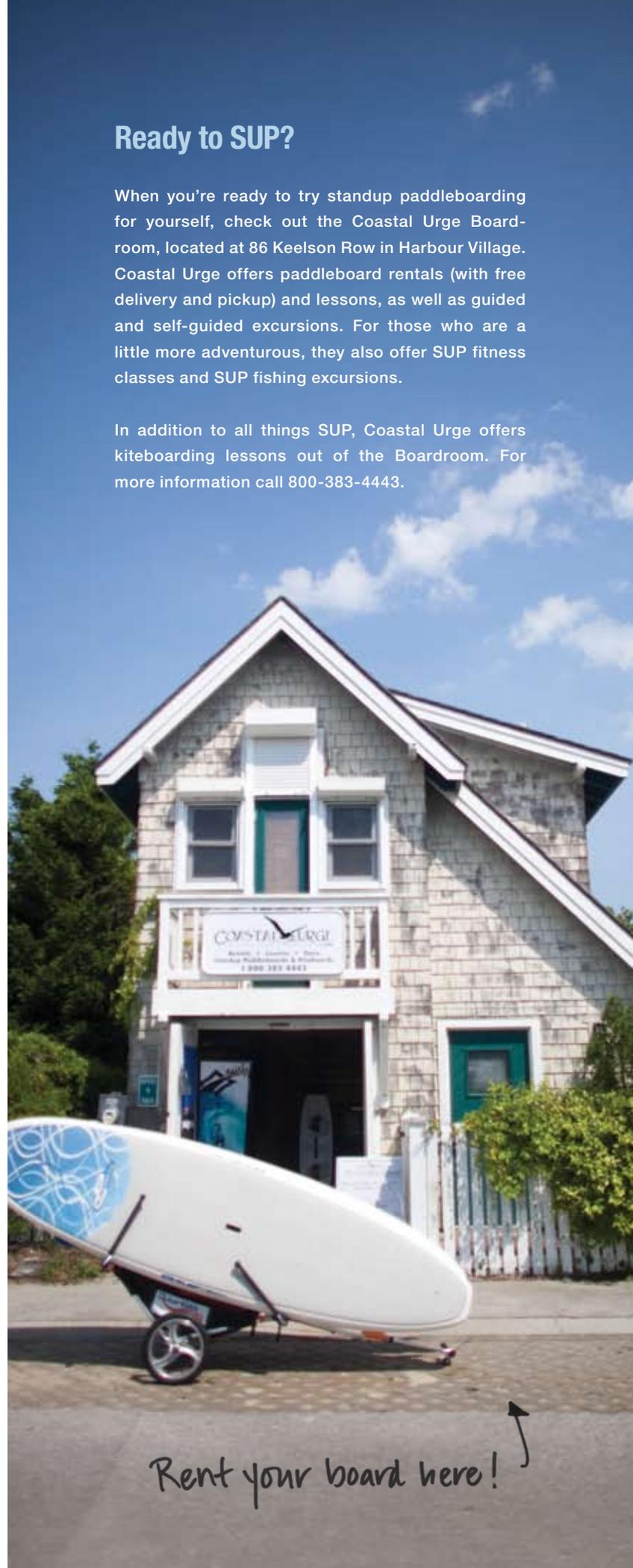
If you’re lucky, you can fall off without all the machinations, letting your splash be the only noise of your fall. Otherwise everyone around you laughs and you feel foolish for a minute, realizing how funny you must have looked.

After a half-hour close to North Beach getting our sea legs, Rory and I venture a little farther from shore. Clearing the point

Ready to SUP?

When you’re ready to try standup paddleboarding for yourself, check out the Coastal Urge Boardroom, located at 86 Keelson Row in Harbour Village. Coastal Urge offers paddleboard rentals (with free delivery and pickup) and lessons, as well as guided and self-guided excursions. For those who are a little more adventurous, they also offer SUP fitness classes and SUP fishing excursions.

In addition to all things SUP, Coastal Urge offers kiteboarding lessons out of the Boardroom. For more information call 800-383-4443.



Rent your board here! ↗



↙ Falling - not as hard as it looks!

and looking down the length of West Beach, I get an idea.

“Rory,” I say, “wanna go down to the other end of West Beach?”

He paddles over and we examine the mile of water we need to cover to get to West Beach. We’ll have to stay offshore a little ways so we don’t get tossed off by any waves. And we don’t want to hit the 5-foot wake the ferry throws out behind it or encounter any boats on the way, but these are all chances we’re willing to take.

“Let’s do it,” he says.

The current on West Beach is different than on North Beach. It pulls you toward the ocean, then tries to take you to the center of the channel, then pushes you back towards Southport. The farther we go, the choppier the waves get. They stop coming in regular sets and lose their long shape. Pyramids of water pop up and try to toss us from our boards; the occasional large wave spills over our decks, but we’ve gotten better and we stand there like we know what we’re doing. We make it to the end of West Beach without a single fall.

The closer we come to shore, the more regular the waves become. With a few waist-high sets coming in, we decide to try our hand at paddle surfing. Neither of us has had much success with surfing in the past, but we’re experienced watermen now and it’s our duty to try. We fall, the boards wash ashore and we retrieve them and try again. We fall again, try again and finally ride one in. The feeling of being picked up and carried on the front edge of even a small wave is exhilarating. Like children, we rush out for more.

We try again, fall again and find success a few more times before our day starts to catch up with us. Tired, thirsty and hungry again, we paddle out just beyond the pull of the breakers and sit on our boards, not wanting to leave the water.

Silent for a few minutes, we start talking about writing, the poetry of the day, *Moby Dick*, our favorite songwriters. Eventually we move on to more serious topics—marriage, kids, the future of two writers who only want to paddleboard now. Soon enough the silence takes over again and we sit there, legs in the water, heads in the clouds, hearts and souls and minds lost in the moment.

During our conversation, the ferry has passed twice, crowded with passengers coming, almost empty as it returned to the mainland. The sun has dipped in the sky and glimmers off the glass windows topping Old Baldy like someone lit the lighthouse’s flame for the first time in a century. Behind us, the Oak Island lighthouse burns in the sunset. A line of pelicans crosses the channel, wingtips inches from the water, and it’s as perfect a moment as we had on the marsh this morning. I vow silently to make the time to do this more often, to make the time to find that moment of peace in nature, that moment of respite from my busy life, that moment of sitting and not talking with a friend after a day like this one. 🌸

Jason Frye is a freelance writer living in Wilmington, N.C., with his wife Lauren. He holds his MFA in creative writing and loves any writing assignment that allows him to pursue a new adventure.

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