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5 Summer Water Sports You Can Master the Easy Way

Don't sit on the shore while others have a splashing good time. This game-changing gear makes kayaking, sailing, skimboarding, surfing and even swimming a heck of a lot easier—even for total beginners

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FOR MANY OF US, aquatic education ceases somewhere around age 10—about the time we're proficient enough to pass the deep-end swim test. Sure, a few eventually go on to approximate the always-showy butterfly stroke or execute a swannish dive, but most Americans are stuck with the aquatic aptitude of a grade schooler.

Unfortunately, that arrested development holds a lot of us back, convincing us that the full breadth of summer water sports is beyond our reach. We'll drift aimlessly in a stable-feeling paddle boat from time to time, but when it comes to undertaking more adventurous activities in a lake or ocean, we quietly hang back, resigned to let the confident water jocks hog all the joy.

The good news is you don't need to be a human otter to get in on the action. From kayaks that are nearly capsized-proof to surfboards that make getting up and gliding a lot less challenging, a slew of new game-changing gear and techniques is lowering the barrier to entry. Here, a guide to the equipment every merely average swimmer needs to know about. All that's required is a willingness to dive right in.

Set Sail Without Getting Scuttled

Don't let sailing's notoriously steep learning curve keep you landlocked. Last year, Austria-based X-Cat released the Multi-Sport Catamaran (pictured above), which offers exceptional stability (its two hulls are more stable than one), but unlike many easy-to-manage small boats, it doesn't compromise speed or excitement.

Thanks to its near-indestructible hulls, which are filled with buoyant closed-cell polypropylene foam, and a diminutive 14-foot-9-inch mast (short, even for a beginner boat), the X-Cat is very forgiving, easy to maneuver and difficult to capsize. And if the wind dies down (or if you're simply not yet adept enough to harness it), you can just

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furl the sails and start rowing, using X-Cat's double-jointed oars. If even that sounds too taxing, simply engage the lithium battery-powered motor (a \$2,265 upgrade).

The X-Cat also eliminates the need for a boat trailer or launch ramp: Weighing just 120 pounds, the cat can be transported atop your car, assembled in 10 minutes and launched from the shore. \$7,700, *plus \$2,700 for the rowing system*, x-cat.com

— Brigid Mander

Can't Surf? Maybe Your Board Is to Blame

Photo: Boardworks Froth

Watching an experienced surfer glide effortlessly across the face of a wave can be as intimidating as it is inspiring. If you've tried surfing only to quickly admit defeat, the issue might not be your lack of balance but your surfboard. Unless beginners have the right kind, they're basically setting themselves up for a big ol' wipeout.

Among the most common newbie mistakes is opting for a short, pointy, hard-fiberglass surfboard, the kind favored by experienced riders. What you need is a buoyant soft-top longboard. After years of testing, we favor the Boardworks Froth! 9-foot softboard. At 3¼ inches thick and 23½ inches wide, the Froth! provides a very stable, confidence-inspiring platform.

While a cheaper softboard from a big box store (like the ubiquitous \$150 Wavestorm sold at Costco) might tempt you, the superior Froth! makes learning to surf easier and more fun. Cheaper "foamies" tend to be too flexible and can absorb water over time, making them heavy and floppy.

The Froth! does things right. Its solid EPS foam core is covered in epoxy resin and buttressed with wood stringers for stiffness. Durable rubber that's soft yet grippy encases the rails and top deck. And unlike other softboards, this model's deck allows for traction without the need for sticky surf wax, which gets messy and can irritate bare skin on your thighs, stomach and chest—especially when it's caked with sand (think: 80-grit sandpaper).

A slick skin on the bottom of the board ensures decent speed, while three rubberized fins provide good maneuverability without being sharp and hard, like those found on conventional surfboards. Those flexible fins, along with the board's soft, rubbery exterior, mean you're less likely to get injured by the board as you learn to shred the waves. *From \$225*, boardworkssurf.com

— Mark Anders



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Skimboarding: For Those Too Chicken to Surf

As far as crazy-fun summer sports go, skimboarding is about as beginner-friendly as it gets. While it might lack surfing's thrills and glamour, you need little more than an inexpensive board and a pair of passably stylish shorts to give it a try. Getting the hang of it takes an afternoon or two.

Unlike surfing, which requires you to venture out into the ocean, skimboarding goes down on shore, in shallow water. There's not a lot to the sport. Just toss your board in front of you and jump on.

There's no need to spend a small fortune on your board, either. Tom Grenfell, a longtime employee of Cleanline Surf shops in Cannon Beach and Seaside, Ore., recommends the DB Standard Proto (dbskimboards.com, \$190), which has foam on the surface to provide traction, so you never have to wax it. Waxing, he explained, is a huge hassle. "If you get any sand on that wax, it's gonna stick to that wax and you're gonna have to clean it up a lot."

Once you master skimboarding, you'll be able to glide gracefully along the shore for hours. As a kid, I used to go up and down the Oregon Coast, spending a good part of the day trying to skim my way to Haystack Rock.

To be sure, there's no glory in being a skilled skimboarder—especially as an adult. It's kind of like an adult riding a scooter. At one time in my life, I was more self-conscious about hopping on a skimboard than I was revealing the gut I'd acquired fighting in the Craft-Beer Revolution.

But all that changed a few years ago when I interviewed Jack Johnson—the Hawaii-raised surfer turned Grammy-nominated songwriter. I couldn't help asking: Should adults be ashamed to skim? "I skimboard to this day," he told me. "The more you can be in the ocean the better. Skimming is cool. I don't care what they say."

Look, if Jack Johnson says it's cool for me to ride my skimboard with pride, that's good enough for me. And I hope it's enough to get you on the water, too.

—Chris Kornelis

Total Immersion workshop

Swim Without the Struggle

Despite being a member of the swim team when I was young, I've never found the act of swimming itself much fun. Frolicking in the surf is one thing, but having to get from point A to point B usually entailed inefficiently windmilling my arms, gasping for breath, wondering why swimming had to be so damn hard.



Well, it doesn't—as I discovered a few years ago when I learned a technique called Total Immersion (TI). Developed in the 1970s by American swimming coach Terry Laughlin (who teaches it with his wife, Alice, at a swim studio in New Paltz, N.Y.), TI has something of a cult following among amateur triathletes because it allows you to swim long distances with relative ease. The method is equally helpful if you just want to reach the floating dock where all the fun seems to be happening without your lungs burning.

I'd always thought that the key to becoming a better swimmer was simply to work harder: Kick faster, reach farther with each stroke, breathe with more precision. But unlike traditional freestyle techniques, TI looks downright lazy. The kicks are super-slow, and the arm movements feel so relaxed it's as though you're just dropping your hand into the water. The body roll gives you as much time as you want to breathe. The approach feels weird at first, but it's also highly efficient. Once I got the hang of it, I could bang out lap after lap.

You can teach yourself Total Immersion with books and online videos, but you'll grasp it faster if you attend a weekend workshop. Offered by certified instructors around the country, these classes can transform the way you swim in a couple of days. The lessons are a worthwhile investment for those who haven't taken a swim class since they were 12—or who suspect that swimming is tougher than it needs to be. DVD, \$25; see totalimmersion.net to find a workshop near you.

—Sara Clemence



Perception Kayaks

Paddle Like a Pro

If you're new to recreational boating, a kayak makes for a sensible starter vessel. It's relatively affordable, easy to paddle and sufficiently light and compact that one person can carry and stow it himself. Yet for many beginners, a kayak can feel disconcertingly wobbly.

You have to work pretty hard, though, to flip Perception's recently released Hi Life. Seriously. Whether you're buffeted by a wave or you decide to lean all the way over to one side to view the fishes, the Hi Life will keep you upright.

The stability results from the kayak's broad, long shape (roughly 11-by-3 feet) as well as all the empty volume inside its shell, which provides exceptional buoyancy. A small rudderlike fin—an unusual feature for a kayak—helps the vessel track forward smoothly as you paddle.

The Hi Life has an open-deck design: The padded seat, with a back that flips down flat, keeps you elevated well above the waterline (most kayaks sit you below it). Although this positioning may leave you with wet feet, the open deck means you can also use the Hi-Life as a stand-up paddle board.

Despite its compactness, the Hi-Life crams in amenities, like a spot under the seat to stash drinks, and a long, narrow compartment that runs down the center of the vessel to hold your fishing pole or camera mount. A small rear platform can serve as a swim deck kids can use to pull themselves out of the water—or as a perch for a water-loving but capsize-phobic pooch. \$799, perceptionkayaks.com

—B.M.