

Up the (Gulf) Str

World-famous surfer Laird Hamilton, regarded as a genius in crossover board sports, is credited with a resurgence of interest around the world in standup paddling, also called SUP or paddle surfing, popularizing the sport among boarders virtually everywhere.

Paddle surfing originated with the ancient Hawaiians, who paddled their outrigger canoes through the surf while standing up. During the 1960s, “beach boys” were known to perch on top of big boards to snap photos for tourists.

The sport has exploded in popularity and is attracting enthusiasts and newbies alike to the Florida Keys to try it.

When the winds are too much (or simply nonexistent) for kiteboarding, standup paddling is a perfect stand-in sport for fun and a core physical workout.

Standing on the board, typically 12 to 14 feet in length, doesn't just allow paddlers a better view of their

surroundings. They also can paddle longer and more easily while standing than in the sitting position required for kayaking.

Standup paddling appeals to many different people because it's a relatively simple, straightforward yet diverse activity. It's possible to use the board for surfing, traversing on a “downwinder” (riding the board backed by tradewinds to cover long distances), as a fishing or diving platform, or just quietly enjoying secluded eco-tours through the mangroves, along the beaches or in the backcountry flats in an environmentally friendly way.

Two regions in the Keys are riding the wave of SUP interest. Lessons, day tours and equipment rentals are available through Islamorada's Otherside Boardsports and Seven Sports, the board sports division of Islamorada Watersports Company, as well as the kiteboarding mavericks at Key West's The Kitehouse.

— Julie Botteri

ream With a Paddle



Paul Menta of The Kitehouse paddles his board off Key West.

othersideboardsports.com
sevensports.com
thekitehouse.com