

Upright in a desert gale

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Wind power ... windsurfers catch a breeze. Photo: Ben Stubbs

Ben Stubbs hoists sail and windsurfs against a backdrop of golden beaches and the old medina in Essaouira.

The wind slices like a scalpel through the waves, sending the skinny men on their windsurfers high into the air. Against the setting sun, their sails cast silhouettes in the spray as the noise begins.

Thrumming through the city, the call of the muezzin is carried by the breeze to the surfers, who take the signal to paddle back to shore, ready to break their Ramadan fasting.

I am in Essaouira on the central coast of Morocco. It is known as the windy city because of the howling gales that blow in from the Atlantic Ocean. These conditions draw Moroccans and foreigners to Essaouira's beaches to test themselves on the water with surfboards, windsurfers and kite boards.

I have answered the call of the wind and travelled west across the desert from Marrakesh to learn to windsurf in some of the best conditions on Earth.

The long, golden beaches of Essaouira branch out from its ancient medina, full of riads, restaurants and cobblestone alleys worn smooth. Inside the medina, life continues in the way it has for generations. During Ramadan, devout Muslims fast from sun-up until the call to prayer after sunset. Along the alleys, spice sellers carve piles of pungent saffron and turmeric and rug sellers stand among their colourful carpets, preying on the uninitiated in the hope of making a sale.

Outside the walls of Essaouira's medina is a view of modern Morocco. Laid-back locals wearing boardies and thongs patrol the sand and beachgoers, more worried about suntans than hijabs, recline on sunbeds at the water's edge.

I pass beneath the walls of the medina where Orson Welles filmed much of his 1952 movie *Othello*, including the famous punishment scene where Iago is suspended in a metal cage rocking above the cliffs and the roiling sea below.

On the hot sand outside Club Mistral, I'm met by Abdel Fettah, my curly-haired instructor, who will show me how to harness the wind. We load a windsurfer onto a red dinghy and putter out of the bay towards the offshore islands.

Fettah looks like an Australian surfer, with that same obsession for the waves, the wind and the weather that I've seen along the Australian coast. He is a devout Muslim and he fasts at Ramadan even when working all day during the summer. He doesn't consume even a drop of water during daylight but it doesn't bother him. "I make up for it once the sun goes down, don't worry," he tells me. Fettah reads the wind's direction from the flap of the blood-red Moroccan flags on the rampart walls and instructs me to get into the water. It's cold despite the season and I'm glad for the insulation of my wetsuit as I scramble onto my board.

Windsurfing is all about balance and Fettah follows me in the boat as I twist the board so the sail will catch the wind. I flip and spin the windsurfer as I attempt to find the "sweet spot" where my legs are spread evenly across the board. I resemble a log jumper in a river of timber as I flail about in the shallows, though Fettah doesn't crack a smile as I nosedive again and again.

I assumed that, as when surfing, standing is the hard part but it is only the beginning with a windsurfer. I grab the rope as Fettah instructs: "Slowly, slowly drag it up with one hand."

I pull the sail in and balance upright. For a moment I resemble a competent windsurfer, until a stiff gust flips me off the board and into the water and I look like a novice once again.

I shake out an earful of water and drag in the sail again, flexing my back and waking muscles that have long been dormant. I follow the ritual and pull the mast towards me, shuffling my feet with the twitches from the wind. The next gust arrives and this time I'm ready. I let the wind puff into the sail, pushing me through the water. The wind ripples across the fabric and I let the force propel me across the water. I'm not game to look up at Fettah, though I can hear him whooping from the boat.

The wind changes direction. I try to steer into it but I lose momentum and flop back into the water. My body is ruined. Fettah pulls me into the boat and I rub my swollen fingers, "You have writer's hands!" he exclaims and he grabs my windsurfer to show me how it is done.

Within 10 seconds Fettah has found the wind direction and rockets up the face of a wave, spinning the sail with one arm and twisting the board horizontal with his feet three metres into the air. He uses the force of the wind and flies into the froth, slashing through the spray with the sort of aggression I wouldn't expect from someone who is adhering so strictly to Ramadan.

The wind reaches 20 knots, though Fettah says it can get to 40 knots in the middle of the year. Despite windsurfing's reputation as "surfing's ginger-haired cousin" it is popular in northern Africa. There's the annual Dakhla Festival in Western Sahara and the Essaouira Wave Classic each May.

My energy is spent and I'm unable to get the windsurfer up again. We turn the boat and head to shore. Along the sand, camels lope through the dunes and men swathed in robes guide tourists past the castles that were made famous by one-time resident Jimi Hendrix. He wrote *Castles Made of Sand* about Essaouira and the ruined walls that lie on the beach outside the medina.

We drag the boat onto the shore, avoiding the camels that lounge in the still-hot sand around us. The sun is beginning to fade as I walk back towards the walls of the old city. There's a sense of anticipation as the call of the muezzin wafts over Essaouira. It is a relief, like the arrival of rain.

The wind picks up again as I plunge into the medina. As the Moroccans break their fast for the day I catch the smell of pungent spices mixed with roasting goat and fresh fish from the harbour that now cook on the alleyway grills.

I take a seat at a cafe on the outer edge and order a mint tea. My back and hands are aching from my introduction to windsurfing. I sip the syrupy brew and watch the surfers continue to ride the waves far out to sea. Despite the call to prayer signalling that they can head inside and break their fast, the windsurfers clearly don't want to miss the chance of catching a perfect ride in the setting sun. I'm heading out with Fettah again tomorrow and now I understand a little more about the draw of Morocco's windy city.

Ben Stubbs stayed courtesy of Madada Mogador and La Sultana.

