



From the cable to the sea

IMAGINE SNOWBOARDING ON WATER AND WAKEBOARDING IS THE RESULT. WHETHER BEHIND A BOAT OR ON A MOTOR-DRAWN CABLE, THIS EXHILARATING SPORT IS GAINING POPULARITY IN THE UAE'S CAPITAL

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

My friend Bakr gives me a dubious glance as we stand near the launch area at the cable park at Abu Dhabi's Al Forsan International Sports Resort. We are both trying to exude a bravado we don't feel, but my confidence rapidly evaporates as a young rider flies through the air in a perfect arc, landing with barely a splash.

This is my first time at a cable park and Al Forsan is the first in the Middle East. The overhead cables ring the banks of the purpose-built "pro" and "beginner" lakes, travelling up to 38 kilometres per hour, dragging participants behind on their kneeboards, wakeboards or skis. The sun is beaming and there's a relaxed vibe, with small groups congregating at picnic tables.

"You're starting on the knee-boards, right?" asks our instructor, Noventy. He gives a few quick tips that might help us stay on the board. "The corners are tricky," he admits. "Especially that one," he adds, pointing to the final section of the circuit, as if we'll make it that far.

I indicate for Bakr to go first. He gives a nod of resignation and kneels on the board, securing the Velcro strap across his thighs. Noventy gently pushes his shoulders down so he's crouching as he launches, skidding across

the water. After a few speed wobbles he makes it all the way to the killer corner, which throws him off balance, dunking him into the pool.

It's my turn. I grip the handle tightly as the cable yanks me off the platform. My weight is too far forward and the nose of the board dips, spraying me with a face-load of water as I skip across the surface like a skimming stone. I push my knees to one side and make it around the first corner, but a rail appears in front of me. I panic, veering sharply and the board tips, tumbling me inelegantly into the water.

After a shaky start, we graduate onto wakeboards, joining a group of visitors who are clearly beginners. Not one of them lasts more than a few seconds standing, their acrobatic antics providing pool-side entertainment as they crash into the lake, laughing uproariously.

Slipping my feet into boot-bindings I sit at the edge of the lake. The instructor gives me the thumbs up, and the cable pulls me neatly onto the water. The straight lines are smooth, the board slicing across the flat surface. It's the corners that are difficult as the rope slackens then pulls tight, jerking unsuspecting riders off balance. After four continuous circuits, my muscles are

screaming. We call it a day – we need all the energy we can muster for our boat session tomorrow.

The next day at Watercooled water sports centre within the Hilton Abu Dhabi's Hiltonia Beach Club, instructor Olivia gives pointers on the hardest part of wakeboarding – the water start. Sitting on the floor, knees tucked into his chest, Bakr grips a handle with a short section of rope attached. "It's that easy," Olivia says encouragingly, gently pulling him to his feet.

In the water, it's not that easy. On the first few tries Bakr breathes more sea-water than air, but his determination is admirable as he takes in the tips Olivia calls out between tries. On the fifth attempt, it comes together. Bakr's up and flying across the water, sporting an expression of sheer joy. It doesn't last long as he hits a wave and slides off balance, landing face first, but he's ebullient as he wearily drags himself onto the boat.

As I fly in the wake, garnering the courage to attempt the tricks I used to know, I feel a smirk creep onto my face. I come to a realisation: it doesn't matter if I fall – it's this feeling that is so much fun. With that, I take a deep breath, bend my knees, and launch off the wake. ☺