

LEARN TO

Fly

Kiteboarding offers an exhilarating alternative to chairlift skiing and riding >>

by Kimberly Nicoletti





When I was 20, I had a boyfriend who went through a three-month obsession with kite flying. He'd come home frustrated and dropping F-bombs about his day of flying some pricey, complicated kite. The answer to his angst seemed clear to me: Get rid of the annoying kite and find another hobby, something simpler, say, like riding a bike. But my common-sense solution never registered, and now I know why.

As it turns out, high-level kite flying is addictive. Especially when your whole body is attached to the kite, and you add skis or a snowboard to the mix. (Initially, learning on skis is easier than on a snowboard.)

After five years of watching kiteboarders gliding and catching air near Farmer's Korner on the edge of Dillon Reservoir, I finally geared up for a lesson with Anton Rainold, owner of Colorado Kiteforce. Apparently, I chose the perfect day to learn: The winds were about 15 mph — just enough to make it easy to fly the trainer kite, but not enough to blow me all over the place when I graduated to a larger kite.

Although I recognize the thrill of catching air on a snow kite — and even feel a fairly strong itch to try it — I had never flown a kite or sailed or wanted to skydive, and I was cured of my love for paragliding one year when I tried it in

Mexico, and things felt a little sketchy. Luckily, Rainold and I were on the same page during my lesson: Safety is his primary concern, so he begins with a trainer kite that has no chance of lifting students off the snow.

That said, the little kite does pack a hefty punch upon lift off. Students learn how to control the kite before strapping into a board or clicking into skis, and in higher winds, when the kite fills with air, it creates a firm tug, in which you can respond either by letting go of the bar and allowing the kite to deflate, or running toward the kite until it stabilizes.

The latter approach is much more fun and only involves running a few to several steps, but it's a bit of a rush in and of itself.

Then comes the tricky part: Getting the kite to do what you want it to do,

namely remain in the "window," which allows you to smoothly glide across the snow when you're on skis or a board.

Most people begin with what Rainold calls "truck driving" syndrome. For some reason, people attempt to control the kite by wildly moving their hands as if they're steering a semi, as opposed to gently pulling and punching, forward and backward, to manipulate each side of the kite.

Not only did I have truck driver syndrome, but also, my body insisted on flying the kite "backwards," something that

didn't become problematic until I moved onto a more advanced kite and couldn't control it to save my life. As a result, I fully understood my boyfriend's love-hate obsession with his kite. My first round of kite control involved verbally abusing the flailing object by repeatedly calling it "stupid." Then, I realized perhaps I was the "stupid" one; it was like being in a relationship and realizing there are two sides to every argument. As soon as I humbled myself, I opened up to cooperating with the kite, and, because I had somehow personified this thing, I gently conversed with it. Yes, conversed. I asked it how it wanted me to move so it would go left or right, and it consistently gave me direct answers, by either crashing to the ground or gracefully gliding in my "window."

As we dialogued kinesthetically, I suddenly felt the Zen of kite flying. I was one with the kite, not only because a harness attached us, but also because I felt in harmony with the sky, the wind and this beautifully inflated fabric mirroring my arms' movements. It was a spiritual experience — one that quickly became addictive.

"It's kinda like smoking crack," Rainold replied, laughing, when I mentioned my new obsession with wanting "more power and speed."

By the time I admitted my addiction, I had already skied with the trainer kite and experienced the smooth transitions — unlike flying the kite with boots, any "jerks" on skis simply led me to glide, rather than running with the kite to keep up. As I pulled away from the kite while skiing, I gained speed — and then I wanted more.

So onto the larger kite I went, though in kite skiing terms, the 6-meter spread was still quite small and not powerful enough to lift me off the ground in 15 mph winds. And so, I went through my entire learning curve once again (beginning in boots), since this kite had four lines, rather than just two. Fortunately, I quickly cycled through the "stupid kite" and "stupid me" phases and settled into a state I can only describe as Zen fully

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SNAPSHOT OF Anton Rainold:

Anton Rainold came to snow kiting by way of water sports. After a decade of beach living, surfing and sailing around the world as a private yacht captain, he settled in Summit County, where a friend introduced him to kiteboarding in 2000. In 2004, he opened the first kiteboarding company and school in Summit. Now, he gives lessons, rents and sells kites, spreading his addiction both far and wide. To learn how to fly, check out www.coloradokiteforce.com or contact Rainold at anton@coloradokiteforce.com or (970) 485-3300.

addicted. After I clicked into my skis, I was off and gliding.

Still, I wanted more speed, so Rainold gave me a more powerful kite. Only problem: It was very touchy, and I wasn't accomplished enough to properly control it (I wasn't the only one). After a half hour of struggling, I lost my mojo and hit a major downer that no Zen state could cure. (Did I mention kite skiing is a very physical sport, especially when you're just learning?) Rainold switched me back to the previous pink-and-black foil kite, and I was up and gliding again, but the experience taught me an important lesson: If you're going to incorporate kite skiing into your life, take the time to learn the technique and experiment with various kites by renting them through Rainold. He said within a few days, most people gain enough experience to decide on the right size and type of kite to keep them entertained for quite a while. Apparently, even my 6-meter pink-and-black foil would allow me to catch a couple feet of air in 20 mph or higher winds, and after listening to Rainold explain that landings can be feather soft or much, much more jarring than hitting a flat landing in the terrain park, I decided pinky would be enough.

Then again, there was that one guy out there with a 14-meter kite, skyrocketing himself so high that he hung in the air, doing an upside-down spread eagle, while time stood still. Seems to me any experience like that is worth a little frustration and swearing at your damn kite, before you and the sails become one. •



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