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Jasmeet Sidhu

It's the closest thing to walking on water.

But you'd better keep your balance, or your tranquil glide along Lake Ontario could end with a splash and a soaking.

Stand-up paddleboarding is quickly becoming all the rage across the Great Lakes and gaining ground as the leisure sport of choice this summer in Toronto, over the familiar canoe and kayaks characteristic of the Canadian cottage scene.

"It's getting so popular. It's an easy thing to do and easy to pick up," says Mike Sandusky, founder of Surf Ontario.

"You get the feeling you're walking on water."

Originating in Hawaii decades ago, stand-up paddleboarding was designed by surf instructors to help people who could not pick up the traditional style of surfing. The boards were made thicker and wider and would-be surfers were offered paddles while standing on the boards to help them balance along waves.

Soon however, stand-up paddleboarding emerged from its surfing subculture into the mainstream with celebrities like Pierce Brosnan, Cindy Crawford and Kate Hudson taking up the sport. Its popularity has exploded within Canada in the last four years, the boards becoming a regular sight in Muskoka and along the Toronto lakeshore.

Benson Cowan, 40, decided to take up stand-up paddleboarding this past spring after watching a couple of YouTube videos.

"When you get on the board, you get it," he remarks.

The Toronto-based lawyer, who has been canoeing and kayaking in the past, found the sport easy to pick up within an hour, and now enjoys cruising along the still waters of Cherry Beach and Ashbridges Bay with a rented stand-up paddleboard.

"It's a great workout, and you're really close to the water. It's much more accessible than surfing."

"Everyone in California is talking about it, it's becoming the next big thing," he says.

Steve Martin, owner of the Toronto Boardsports on Yonge St. near Davisville Ave. certainly agrees that this summer is quickly becoming one marked by the stand-up paddleboards in Toronto.

Martin says sales of stand-up paddleboards have doubled every single year since the store started stocking them in 2006. The store has even stopped selling kayaks due to their diminishing popularity.

"Compared to canoe and kayaks, it's way more fun. It's not replacing them yet, but it's giving people alternatives."

The boards, which can range anywhere from \$600 to \$2,000, are typically 3 ½ metres long and can handle a weight of up to 240 lbs. However, keeping your balance while floating on water is a lot easier than you think, Sandusky says

"The boards are more stable than most people think. It takes a bit more balance," Sandusky says, adding that a complete amateur could feel comfortable after an hour of practicing.

One reason for the sport's fast-growing popularity may be due to the growing number of women taking up the sport, compared to the male-dominated sport of surfing.

Sandusky, who runs a weekly group outing on his paddleboard every Sunday at Ashbridges bay, estimates that about half of all stand-up paddleboarders are women, attributing groups like the Toronto-based 'SUPGirlyz' for opening the sport up to more women.



Mike Sandusky demonstrates his stand-up paddleboard at Marie Curtis Park on Saturday, July 24, 2010. Stand-up paddleboards, a West Coast staple, have become all the rage on Lake Ontario in the past several years, and continue to grow in popularity.

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“They know a real cool sport when they see one,” he laughs.

Mike Howes, sales associate and instructor at the Complete Paddler near Islington Ave. and the Gardiner Expressway, predicts that we’ve only seen the beginning of stand-up paddleboarding in Toronto.

“I think this summer we’re just on the cusp, I expect next summer it will absolutely explode,” he says.