



# HEADWIND

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## HAZARD

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**T**he first time Patrick asked if I wanted to turn our paddleboards around, it would have been smart to say yes. It was windier than we anticipated, not that either of us checked the weather. Hurricane Maria was somewhere over the Atlantic, far out of mind as we carried our boards into the water on a breezy, sunny day. We were the only ones on the Calibogue Sound in Hilton Head, South Carolina, oblivious to the wind advisory in effect.

As soon as we settled onto our boards, Patrick pointed us into the wind.

“You always want to go against the wind when you head out,” he said. “A lot of beginners get themselves in trouble because they let the wind carry them out, then use up all their energy fighting it to get back, and they get stuck.”

Paddleboarding was new to me, though I felt more skilled than a beginner after years of family canoeing trips. I tried to keep my ego in check as I listened to his warnings and instructions.

Despite my confidence, I immediately fell behind. I zigzagged across the water, struggling to angle my paddle correctly. Patrick eased ahead on his windsurfing board, stopping regularly to watch me paddle straight into the marsh grass, then stubbornly extract myself.

The wind was behind us when we reached a wide-open stretch. I set the paddle across my lap and checked my injuries; I'd fallen off my board almost as soon as I tried standing on it. My knee, shin and two toes were bloody with shallow scrapes. Only the toes worried me; I'd landed on them at an angle. Bruises were forming, and it hurt to curl them.

"Now I know to pack a first-aid kit when I take you out on the water," Patrick joked. "Probably should have brought one, anyway."

"Weren't you telling me on the way over here that I shouldn't try standing on the board in shallow water?" I asked. "And what's the first thing you have me do – stand on it in 3-foot-deep water?"

"I didn't think it was possible to fall off with me holding it!"

Once I again reassured him I was fine, and we continued across the open stretch. Then the wind started to shift. At every opening in the marsh grass, Patrick asked if I wanted to head back. I didn't. I wanted to prove I wasn't as much of a beginner as we thought, but I also loved being on the water. I didn't want the adventure to end, and I had the strength to keep going. So that's what we did.

By the time we finally turned around, the wind turned on us. Choppy waves beat the underside of my board. I could barely hear Patrick shout from far ahead, "Are you okay?" over the wind. It wasn't like the deceptively pleasant breeze we'd started with; an 8-knot headwind had risen with a challenge.

Despite the obvious danger, I didn't panic. The shoreline was never more than 30 yards to my left. I could make my way to someone's backyard and apologize for my necessary trespassing. I had food and water with me. My arms weren't tired yet. I could keep going.

I progressed by inches. If I paused for a deep breath between paddle strokes, I slid back a foot. Twenty yards ahead, Patrick steered into the marsh grass and anchored himself with a handful of reeds. Part of me was afraid

I'd drop the paddle and have no choice but to untether myself from the board and swim to shore, or anchor in the reeds and wait for help. I held on tightly. My hands ached, but I couldn't let go, and I couldn't stop.

Inch by inch, I went along until I came to a private dock covered with seagulls, pelicans and rosy spoonbills. The wind suddenly blasted harder, and I went nowhere for what felt like 15 minutes. By the time I managed to get past the dock, I decided it was time for a rest. I headed straight for the reeds and grabbed a handful. Patrick turned his board from where he'd spent the last five minutes waiting and paddled toward me.

As soon as he stopped next to me, he said he was sorry.

"I shouldn't have brought you out in this. These are the kinds of conditions that get people killed."

"I'm not worried."

He smiled, but I could tell he thought I didn't understand how serious the situation was. I pointed out what I'd observed about the distance to shore and told him I hadn't yet reached my limit.

He kept close after that. We stopped a second time in a narrow channel between two masses of marsh grass to rehydrate. He apologized repeatedly for putting me in danger. I reminded him that I all but demanded to go out this far. We both laughed that my potentially broken toe was no longer a huge concern.

I had hoped the wind might die down a little; I wanted to paddle during lulls and rest in the reeds when the wind swelled again. Of course, the weather did not cooperate. More than once, the only way I made any headway

was by dragging myself along the marsh grass – one fistful at a time.

We covered the 2-mile distance with a 4-mile effort. When we passed briefly through a sheltered area where the wind wasn't as relentless, I finally felt the sunburn on my back and legs. We'd left our sunscreen in the car, confidently thinking we wouldn't be out long enough to need to reapply.

Bit by bit, we finally made our way back to the boat ramp. Tired, hungry, sunburned and smiling, we carried the boards back to Patrick's car.

"I think, after all that, your skills are at an intermediate level," he said. "If I haven't scared you off paddleboarding forever."

"Not at all. We'll just check the weather and plan a little better next time." 🐼

