



# Downwind in **Dahab**

**Gael Pawson joined the Fat Face team at Neilson's base in Dahab, Egypt, for a week of sailing, windsurfing, kitesurfing and mountain biking...**

**F**at Face's 'Downwind Dahab' sounded like just the thing to boost my va-va voom with some early season sunshine in May, and with Olympic cat sailor Hugh Styles and windsurfing legend John Hibbard on the invite list, it also looked like a good week to get some top level training.

Fat Face had teamed up with Neilson for a week's trip to the new watersports club in Dahab,

Egypt. The aim of the week was to introduce those interested to different sports available at the centre using the instructors supported by four specialist Fat Face Team Riders; John Hibbard (windsurfing), Hugh Styles (dinghy sailing), Neal Gent (kitesurfing) and James Heraty (mountain biking). With a week for everyone to learn the basics, the Team Riders would also compete against one another with teams of guests picked out of a hat, for the overall 'Downwind in Dahab' title. With sailing, windsurfing, kitesurfing and mountain biking legs, it was going to be an interesting challenge...

## **Bedouin, camels and grass**

Dahab is a five-hour flight from the UK and we didn't arrive until Monday evening. It was my first visit to Egypt, and with a spate of bombings hitting the news the fortnight before our departure, I was a little apprehensive. I needn't have worried, our welcome was all the warmer and we felt very safe all week.

Security was, understandably, tight and as our coach negotiated the 1.5-hour transfer from Sharm el Sheikh through mountainous desert, it felt very different from anywhere I had been before. I'd read that the area was home to the tent-dwelling Bedouin, and it seemed a very magical place as we passed the dim glimmer of the odd light amongst the hills.

The area is naturally dry and barren... until you





Far left The gun goes for the start of the bike race.

Left The red team also knew how to party!

Below Gael and Niki with cheerleaders Jules, Janine and Yvonne.

Above (from top) The red team (Gael, Adam, Neal, Niki); Team Riders Hugh Styles, Neal Gent, James Heraty and John Hibbard; Neal kitesurfing; the red team get a good start in the windsurfing.

PHOTOS STEVEN STRINGER/FAT FACE\*

reach the hotel. There lush lawns, trees and shrubs are carefully tended by the hotel staff. The hotel is arranged with a central restaurant, bar and reception area, and the rooms in an apartment-type arrangement amongst the grounds. The beach is just a short walk away through the gardens and my week started with a briefing by centre manager Toby who ran through the centre and sailing area as well as the format for those involved in the Fat Face event.

### Kitesurfing

While sailing and biking held no fears, I knew my windsurfing was very shaky, and as for kitesurfing... I didn't have a clue. I wasn't sure whether to be relieved when my name came out as part of the red team, with kitesurfing specialist Neal Gent as our captain. Making up the rest of the team were an intermediate windsurfer, an advanced windsurfer, and our final teammate was an experienced dinghy sailor and windsurfer. As we ran through the challenge ahead I soon realised that it was my windsurfing which looked like providing the biggest challenge. Each of us needed to sail across the bay, and it seemed that everyone else had a fair bit of experience. None of us had kited, but Neal was confident we could grasp the basics, so we took that as our first challenge.

Neilson's base is situated in the middle of the bay, with the windsurfing lagoon at the far







PHOTO STEVEN STRINGER/FAT FACE

northern end, which meant a bit of a walk with our kit; kites, helmets and harnesses. Wide and shallow, the lagoon provides a fantastic playground for learners, although it is tidal so you can't use it at all times of the day. I have to admit I had never really fancied kitesurfing, but helped by Neal's enthusiasm I began to really enjoy the power of a kite. Our first few hours were spent learning to control the kite, working in pairs we took it in turns to launch and fly what seemed like massive kites – although Neal explained we'd be soon be using bigger ones.

For our second lesson, with each of us merrily doing our figure of eight turns, we finally moved to the water. Before getting on a board you learn to body drag – basically pull yourself through the water using the kite in a controlled way. The first time I felt the kite lift me up was amazing, and as I grew in confidence I found it was a whole lot of fun. Unfortunately we were out of time, and as the competition only required up to be able to body drag, I didn't have the chance to move onto the board as there was still the question of my windsurfing to crack.

## Windsurfing heaven

This place really is a heaven for windsurfers; plenty of wind, a relatively sheltered, enclosed bay which means you can't come to too much harm, and beyond the bar, bigger breezes and waves for windsurfing die-hards. The breeze was up from day one, with my first attempt on a morning where a steady Force 7 decided to throw a tough test my way. It's pretty gusty too, so finding my feet proved hard.

I'd spent a week learning to windsurf two years ago, unfortunately I hadn't been since, I really needed to find out just how much I had forgotten. It was difficult to know which group to join – I wasn't a complete beginner, but I hadn't been for so long that I felt completely left behind in the intermediate group. I really needed someone to run through the basics with me... and who better than top pro John Hibbard!

To be honest, I was so rusty I really didn't make the most of having someone so good giving me a one-to-one on my beach start, but what made the biggest difference was John's shoreside demonstration. As with anything you haven't done for a long time, a few key points made all the difference – where my feet should be pointing, what not to do with my arms and



Top Adam swaps his windsurfing harness for a dinghy one.



Right Camel riding provided a hilarious evening's entertainment.



Right Toby briefs everyone on the beach – a very chilled place to chat or read a book if the breeze got too much.

Below John delivers some windsurfing wisdom while Hugh gives a hiking demo.



PHOTO STEVEN STRINGER/FAT FACE

backside, and where to look. All the wind stuff was second nature to me, which was what I was finding really frustrating – I knew what I wanted to do, but the breeze was so gusty I just kept losing control and going for a swim. Before I knew it I was miles downwind of the centre waving vigorously for a rescue boat to get me home. John's simple tips made all the difference to my ability to balance and stay upright and suddenly I was making a bit of progress... unfortunately we were also out of time and we needed a practice run in the cats.

**Sailing in Dahab**

I have to admit that I didn't do much sailing during the week, not only was there not time, it wasn't as simple as just dragging a dinghy down the beach: the main part of the lagoon is reserved for windsurfers, so the sailing instructors take any dinghies down to the southern end of the bay where they are rigged and anyone wishing to sail is ferried down by RIB.

Dahab isn't an ideal place for beginner sailors. Big breezes do tend to dominate, but, if you are a keen sailor who fancies learning windsurfing or building up your windsurfing skills with the odd morning or afternoon of blasting around in a dinghy, this is a great venue. Similarly, if you are a keen windsurfer and fancy trying dinghy sailing when the breeze is down then you won't be disappointed.

When I did get out, it was fantastic. Flat water and strong winds delivered some awesome sailing. We soon discovered that we had a pretty strong team; Niki was happy on the trapeze, and after a trip out with Hugh in a Laser Vago, Adam happily traded his windsurfing harness for a sailing one, while the rest of us had plenty of experience between us. In fact we were disappointed that we only needed one helmsman.

**Social preparation**

It doesn't pay to train too hard, so we took some time out to discover what other entertainment Dahab had to offer. The town was quiet and, being reliant on tourism, gave us a very warm welcome whether we were rug shopping or dancing the night away. Taxis were pretty cheap, although some take the form of an open truck which proved interesting at 0200hrs!

A highlight of the week was our evening camel trip for a Bedouin meal under the stars. The laughter started as we met our camels. After a rather bumpy ride, we dismounted and walked up higher to look down over the bay. Half-dozing on rugs we listened to tales of the area and the Bedouin culture before enjoying a traditional meal, picnic-style, followed by another very bumpy camel ride back downhill.

**Competition time**

The day of the competition arrived rather quickly, and just as a number of competitors started to suffer from stomach infections. It all started well with a fantastic reception; Niki's friends had decided to add some extra support and the red team had its own cheerleading team, complete with belly-dancing skirts and pom-poms!

Our first challenge was the kitesurfing, or body dragging (which generally proved the fastest way downwind for all but the really experienced

kitesurfers). Having enjoyed our training immensely I was disappointed that only two of our team got to compete due to lack of time, but Adam put on a particularly spectacular display, which left us second on the leaderboard and almost lost his shorts in the process! Next up, windsurfing...

Fortified with a sandwich, we worked out our strategy; myself and Niki felt we were the weakest, and Neal and Adam, as our strongest windsurfers, decided to help us get started, which meant as a team we had one of the fastest getaways. All week I had gone from feeling fairly confident on the board, to falling off and not being able to settle again in the gusty conditions. Adam followed me the whole way across, shouting encouragement the whole way while I just kept thinking 'feet, shoulders, backside IN!' It worked and I even negotiated the gybe, growing in confidence as we approached

**Further information**

*Neilson's base in Dahab, Egypt is open all year round and offers sailing, windsurfing, kitesurfing and mountain biking. You can even take a day trip to see the pyramids or the Nile. A week in May next year starts at around £535 per person, see [www.neilson.co.uk](http://www.neilson.co.uk) for more details.*

**“One highlight was our camel trip for a Bedouin meal under the stars – a very bumpy ride!”**

the beach I began to lean back and go for it as a gust hit, finishing with a rather spectacular crash-landing as I grew over-confident and tried a fast second gybe. No matter, there was just a short run to the finish flag. We were still lying second behind John Hibbard's blue team.

The bike race was to be done relay-style, a simple circular track looked easy, but in the baking heat it proved quite a challenge. A man down, as Neal was suffering from tummy problems, we went for a simple one lap each, but that wasn't enough against teams with top cyclists who put in two high speed laps. We had to settle for third place, leaving us a bit to do in the sailing.

The format for the sailing was also to be a relay, but just involved two laps of a course. It was close, but we just couldn't catch Hugh's team, while the poor yellow team, who were severely lacking in sailing knowledge, found completing the course a challenge in itself! This gave Hugh's team overall victory to take the Downwind in Dahab title, but the biggest satisfaction for everyone was completing the four courses despite the dodgy tummies! ■

**Below Expect big breezes if you come to Dahab: exciting conditions for the Vagos.**



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