

A woman with a long ponytail, wearing a blue shirt and patterned shorts, is water skiing on a wave. She is holding the tow rope handles and is being pulled across the water. The water is splashing around her, and the wave is breaking behind her. The background shows the ocean and the sky.

the bagasbas challenge

Text and Photos by Nyx Martinez

guts, gusts, and glory!

It's 9:30 on a windy morning.

Overcast skies hang unpredictably over a vast ocean. At the airport, a talkative staff wanders by the runway, waiting expectantly for that lone plane whose arrival will signal the start of the week's excitement.

Within minutes, the passengers arrive in their beach shorts and sandals, lugging sports gear off the craft. It's a tucked-away province, but here, where the ocean meets a sand-swept shore with crashing foam, lie some of the best surf spots, the wildest waves, and the promise of adventure. Straight from the island of Boracay, the party has flown to these shores, their lively presence and shouts of hellos awakening a sleepy fishing village. ...Welcome to Daet, Camarines Norte!

Situated on the Northern coast of the Bicol Peninsula, Camarines Norte is part of Luzon, roughly 300 kilometers South of Manila. It is a province known for its gold in Paracle, its pineapples in Vinzons, and its white sand islands of Calaguas. Daet is best known to surfers for its waves. But recently, the world of kiting has leaked out another little secret: Here, in this little-known province, lie some of the prime spots for kiteboarding. It's because Daet offers not just the ocean, but a variety of lagoons in different sizes, tropical weather, and the chance to get away from everything else to chase the wind. Riding the flat water lagoons enables beginner kites to practice without the distract-



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tion of waves, and for professional kites to hone their freestyle skills. There are also the islands, with their un-matched beauty and tranquility, for travelers needing to get away from busy tourist hubs.

Mike Gambrell, an American, started the IKO certified Kiteboarding School with John Bley, a German kite instructor who previously taught students in Egypt. After his stint in North Africa, John traced the wind conditions back to the Philippines and landed in Bagasbas Beach to enjoy his hobby of kiteboarding while training students from around the world to properly challenge the wind.

Two years later, the kite school managed to catch the attention of the local community who decided to assist in raising awareness



of the kite spot by organizing the first Kiteboarding competition here in Daet. Mayor Tito Sarion rounded up his office to assist in bringing attention to the beauty of Camarines Norte as a travel destination. For indeed, much of the paradise islands within this province are hardly known of.

I'm here in Daet to catch up with the competitors, athletes from all over the world. I find a variety of French, Italians, Turks, Belgians, Germans, Spanish, Lithuanians, Dutch, and of course, Filipinos—all kiteboarders. With wonder, I walk the sandy shore, enjoying the ocean's backdrop. I appreciate the absence of commercial buildings, the quiet, simple life in this province, and am amused by the many karaoke pubs which provide shrill entertainment all day, and yes, all night.

For lunch, we meet in *Kusina Ni Angel's*, a restaurant just foot-steps from the beach which serves up Asian dishes with a taste that seems to satisfy even a foreigner's palate. Spirits are high, though all are hungry. Conversation around the table centers around introductions and getting to know each other.

Kiting is all about the wind. The strong gusts of Daet, sometimes plowing up to 30 knots, especially during the *Habagat* season, are a rare find elsewhere in the world. Just go to any of the wind-finder sites available on the Internet, although it's hard to say which one is the most predictable. Now, in mid-February, the forecast has been positive. But as we sit in the restaurant discussing the upcoming event, everyone's fingers are crossed, for without wind, there's no point in trying to fly.

Day 1: Waiting for Wind

Ceremonies begin and the beach has filled with excited onlookers who come to witness the event. But the wind conditions are less than perfect for the kites, so they spend the day instead testing the ocean in full gear, some practicing for the Freestyle Category tomorrow and others, just having fun.

The rain starts falling but doesn't deter most of the kites, who are already wet in the ocean, anyway. John is out riding up and down the enormous waves, those bodies of water that Bagasbas Beach is particularly known for, entertaining a crowd which is growing thicker by the minute. I take the opportunity to chat up more riders.



left: Taner Aykurt from Turkey, and Ken Nacor, the local favorite. At the end of their final round, there is slight confusion as the judges huddle. Both riders have shown extreme skill with their freestyling jumps. It's hard to say which of the two would exceed the other to win the trophy, so it's decided that they have tied the competition and must compete again.

Tired, but each determined to secure that prize, Taner and Ken take to the waves again, soaring and pushing their own limits. After the seven minutes are up, it's a close call, but finally we have a winner: It's Ken Nacor who comes out on top.

Day 3: The Bordercross Challenge

It's 11:00 a.m., a perfectly sunny day at the beach, but you need just the right amount of nature's elements to produce today's outcome. Calls come from the lagoon in Vinzons where the kites have gone to start the race, and we are informed shortly that they will head our way soon. The judges calculate that the fastest rider may finish the course in a mere 10 minutes, so this will be one swift adrenaline rush!

From the second they are off, it is a mad race through the swirling ocean, participants assisted only by a harness and a kite blown with the wind. Fierce waves threaten to slow each rider down. But soon, three kites appear on the horizon, plowing through those waves with determined speed.

After his Freestyle win in yesterday's competition, the crowd recognizes Ken on his board, leading the way. Spectators cheer



Thibault Gomez is a Belgian who started learning kiting in Boracay but came to Daet to continue his lessons in a quieter place. Here he has the vast beach and lagoons all to himself with space enough to enjoy the ride without worrying about crashing into anyone. "People can't believe I'm here just for kiting," he smiles. "Everyone asks if I'm here to find a girlfriend, they can't believe I'm travelling alone! But really, I'm just here for the kiting!"

It's near 6:00 p.m. when the last kiter wraps up his gear and deflates his kite. The crowd has thickened along the sea wall, and although they didn't see a competition today, they will come back tomorrow when it resumes, because the excitement here hasn't died down. In fact, it's only just begun.

Day 2: The Freestyle Category

Back at the beach, kite fever is in the air. I count over 20 competitors, readying their gear. Men outnumber the women by far, but the female riders are just as serious about their craft. Loud music plays over speakers, pumping up everyone's excitement. As each of the riders inflate their kites, the beach again looks like a busy, colorful playground. The judges mark colored flag poles in sand trenches to signal the start and ending of the countdown to the competition.

The kites are paired by twos and are each given seven minutes to perform their best. Pair by pair, the riders are either eliminated, or can move up to the next round. In the end, only two are



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him on, and in a matter of seconds, he has reached the shore. Not in faster time than Andy, though, who has beat the clock to finish up first. The judges have had to calculate with the preciseness of evidence from a digital video camera to determine that indeed, Andy has won the championship, in less than ten minutes!

Following Andy and Ken in third place is Fredrick, who makes a splash as he comes in seconds later, persevering all the way to the lighthouse which marks an invisible finish line. Ken has, once again, proven to the locals that this sport is achievable for anyone here. His new fans cheer him on as he walks through the beach. Boys greet him with a high-five and young men ask to pose for a picture. He's an instant celebrity.

The waves have borne the winners to their place on the podium where they joyfully receive their prizes and trophies. The wind has blown those competitors from all over the world to this tiny province they stand today, to make history. Andy, who bagged the top prize of US\$1,000 for his winning streak in the Bordercross, confides in me later that winning the competition wasn't as easy as it looked.

"The hardest part of the border cross was to deal with the waves at full speed," Andy says. "The pain in my legs that day was so strong. The concern of cramps, tiredness, or a full speed crush that would have kicked me out from the podium was pumping in my mind toward the end of the race. The only solution I found to overcome those feelings was to watch what was around, enjoy the vision of the open sea, and disconnect my brain from my fears."

Asked what's next on his itinerary, double-time winner Ken Nacor answers plainly: "There are 7,700 islands in the Philippines. There must be more places to kite. I want to travel around the Philippines to find the perfect spot."