

THE BASICS OF COASTAL WINDSURFING Part 2

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IN THIS ISSUE WE CONTINUE TO EXPLORE THE FUNDAMENTALS OF WINDSURFING ON THE UK COASTLINE – A PLACE WHICH PLAYS HOST TO A WHOLE ASSORTMENT OF WINDSURFING TYPES FROM HARDCORE SOMERSAULTING PROFESSIONALS TO FREERIDE INTERMEDIATES NUDGING THEIR WAY TOWARDS COASTAL CONFIDENCE. Last time we covered safety, choosing a tidal window and the relationship between wind and tide. If you missed that then head to www.windsurfingukmag.co.uk/windsurfing-uk-subscriptions/ to grab a copy. This time we will be looking at characteristics of high and low water, shorebreak, wind direction and changing conditions.

The effects of high and low water

Last time, whilst looking at the rule of twelfths, we discovered the benefits of windsurfing around high water (HW) or low water (LW) in terms of experiencing the smallest tidal flow. Additionally we need to factor in water depth and the possibility of shorebreak to determine if the sea is actually suitable to windsurf on at these times. The best way of checking out a new location, if possible, is to recce it at both HW and LW (to understand the physical differences in the access to the water) before committing to a session there.

Your recce at HW will tell you what the typical shorebreak pattern is. It may be small/flat and very welcoming or surging and thunderous with a high kit-snapping factor. I say 'typical' as the expected shorebreak characteristics can be magnified as a result of strong onshore winds or the arrival of swell created further out at sea.

Your LW recce should reveal how much water remains to windsurf in as well as any secrets. The muddy or sandy (potentially rock-strewn) 'lunar landscape' left behind as the sea has retreated will show you exactly where notable hazards are – if any. LW might be friendly with no shore break or it could push waves up over a sandbar in the sailing area.

Low water

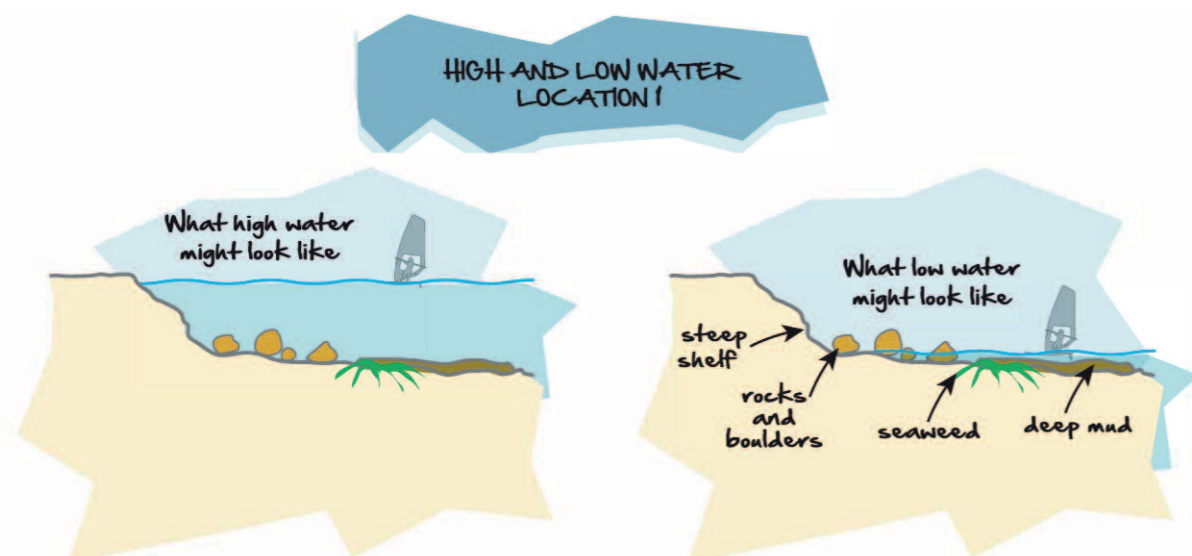
One specific hazard as the tide is reaching LW is simply running out of depth to windsurf. As time goes on, the inside gybe that you have been practicing 20 metres off the beach might now carry the risk of running aground as your fin fouls against sand, mud or rocks...and getting thrown off the board into 25cm of water is 100% guaranteed to end in tears.

In some locations the time around LW is the safest and best time to be out there yet could result in certain challenges being faced when walking back up the beach with your kit. So, depending on the location you might get an easy walk back over solid, flat sand or any of the following:

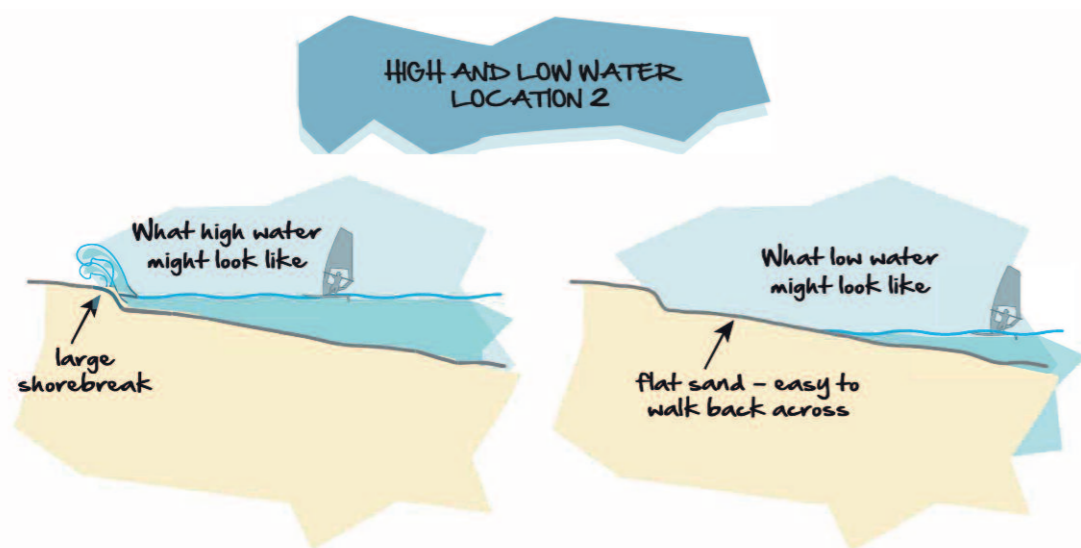
- A really long walk back carrying kit when you are already quite tired
- An comedy-style slip-and-slide over slimy rocks
- An energy-sapping struggle through knee-deep mud
- Perilous navigation of steep rock formations

High water

In some locations HW is a joy where the sea has brought itself right to the top of the beach for your convenience and the whole area is filled to the brim with enough water to satisfy a small army. The water may be flat and easy to windsurf on and, when you're done, you just land back at the top of the beach, stow your kit and lie back in the sun mollified by your achievements. Or you may find shorebreak, which could be light or heavy.



In this location HW wins - with easy access to loads of water. At LW, however, it's a very different story



In this location LW wins - with safe, accessible windsurfing. At HW, however, the shorebreak looks impassable to most

Shorebreak

Every time we go windsurfing we should be aiming, as an absolute minimum, to get onto the board in some fashion and to sail away. Getting swept back up the beach before you've got started is hardly ideal. If the water is flat when launching then obviously we can get going with ease. If there's a little bit of shorebreak then it should be ok if care is taken. Too much water dumping on the beach however and you may have to give it a miss and turn into a spectator to learn the ways.

Timing can be critical. If unsure, take a seat on the beach for five+ minutes and watch the pattern of the waves, looking for a regular let-up in the shorebreak. Like arriving at a busy road whilst carrying a stack of shopping you need to stop and take in what's going on - not just rush straight out and hope for the best. Waiting a while to observe the water's behaviour as well as the actions of others should give you a good chance of choosing the safest window to launch between the sets.

Think about how you carry your kit. Carrying it in the normal way with yourself between the board and the mast is ok to get you to the water's edge. Carrying on like this into the sea, however, carries the risk of being trapped between the board and mast as a wave washes over your kit. A worse scenario perhaps is having a wave break onto your kit with you standing on the shore side of the kit as this could knock you over and push you underwater beneath your kit. Consider switching



your grip just before you wade into the sea. Holding the board and the rig in front of you with your back to the waves means that you cannot get trapped if you slip and you always have the option of letting go of the kit, allowing it to be pushed safely away from you towards the beach. Also consider that dumped water returning to the sea can wash over your rig as well as incoming water. Sometimes when coming in its best to just lift your kit onto your head to keep it clear of the water... this is best performed on smaller kit and can be learned and practiced on the beach!

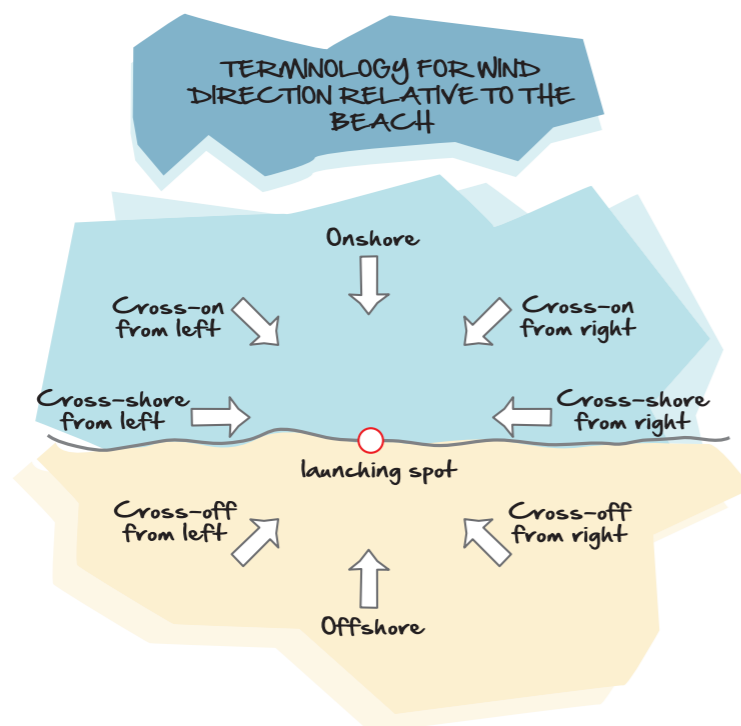
Again, some locations might not be affected too much in this way but it's always a good starting point. HW might be fine in one location yet in another (like the south east coastline around Brighton, for example) it usually brings astonishingly harsh shorebreak, which is best avoided.

Wind Direction

The way the wind is blowing relative to the shoreline you are launching from can make a considerable difference to your session. Let's have a look at the possibilities.

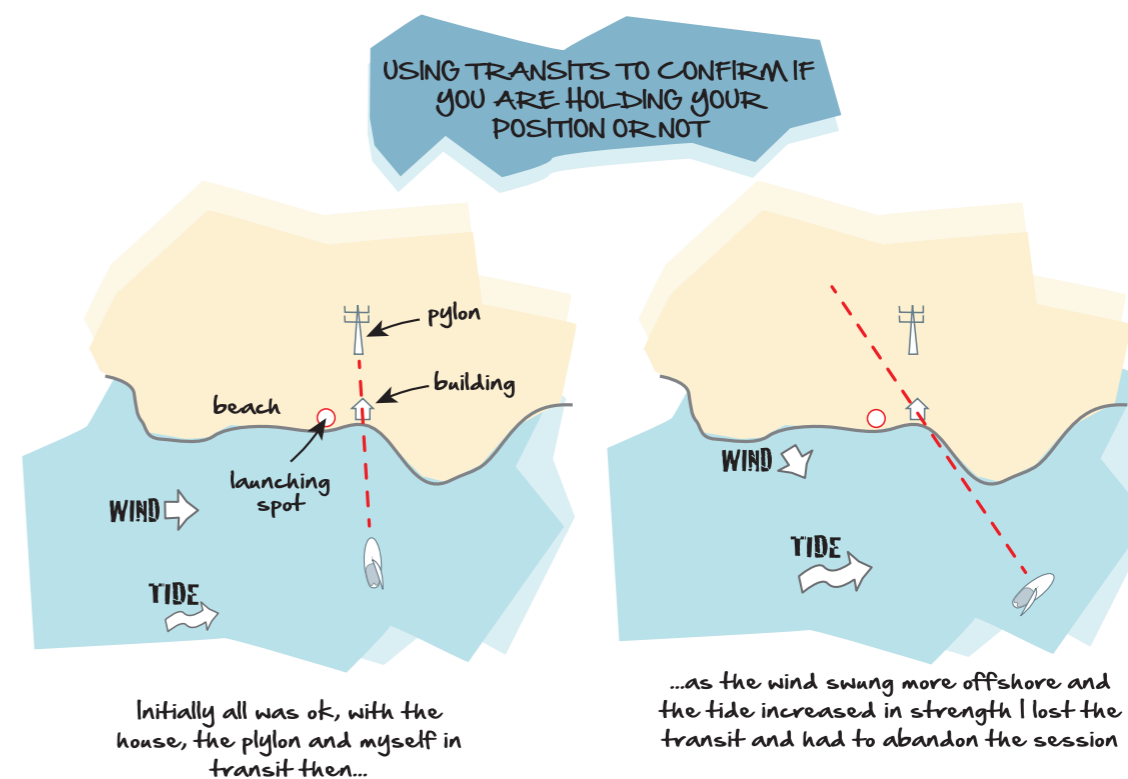
- **Cross-shore:** an ideal direction for your orientation where the wind blows along the beach either directly from the right or the left. Here you can windsurf straight out at 90 degrees to the beach, which is perfect for keeping track of where you are. It should be flatter water than when it's onshore

In an unfamiliar location a top tip with cross-shore, cross-on or cross-off winds is to remember to look back to shore after you have been sailing away from the beach every 20 seconds or so to see what the beach looks like. If you go blasting out for a minute or two before turning, then the view you get of the shore may look confusing as all the dunes, huts or groynes can merge into one distant image. Knowing where you came from and staying on that line however means that every time you turn and head back towards the shore you are reassured that you could land back where you started if you wanted to.



- **Onshore:** the safest direction for getting back to the shore if something goes wrong. Getting out can be tricky as you are sailing upwind and the water state could be quite rough or 'mushy.' You may need to sail a bit further along the beach than you think to clear any shorebreak so don't be in a rush to change direction on the first reach... no one wants to get taken down close to groynes or the shore whilst trying to tack in breaking water
- **Cross-on:** (a.k.a. 'the French direction!') – a great combination of cross-shore (for ease of getting out) and onshore (for safety)
- **Offshore:** AVOID! This can lure unsuspecting windsurfers into the sea thanks to the flat water state and seemingly manageable winds. Once out a few hundred metres the previously fragmented wind can pull together and strengthen and the sea state can become unmanageable. Additionally, if something goes wrong you will get pushed away from the safe haven of the beach
- **Cross-off:** Despite being the dream direction of wavesailors (as it holds up the waves and makes them smoother) it's not great for improvers as the off-shore element adds that risk factor

Recently, towards the end of a crossshore wind-with-tide session, I experienced an increase in the tidal flow at the same time as the wind weakened and swung more offshore. This meant that I could get planing very far out yet I always dropped off the plane as I reached a line about 300m off the beach. I kept heading further out to get enough wind to get planing (so I could plane upwind) yet that was putting me deeper into the tide which was much stronger there and was pushing me away from safety. Transits confirmed that I was being taken steadily downwind and down tide away from my launching spot – not good. So, on a low volume board, I had to commit to a tedious 25 minutes making loads of short non-planing zig zags upwind very close into the shore (out of the strengthening tide) to get back to my starting point – and all in the knowledge that there were still great planing conditions out there yet they had become too far off shore for comfort. I could have landed further down the coastline, which would have brought me to safety yet that would have left me with the logistical challenge of getting myself and my kit back to the original beach. Taking such decisions to stop the fun and to head in, keeping closer to shore, is hard yet necessary.



When the game changes

As per the example above, whilst you are enjoying the great pleasures of windsurfing on the sea it is essential to stay vigilant towards any significant environmental or other factors that may change the game. Head to shore as quickly as possible if any of the following occur as it's far safer to reassess your options on the beach than it is whilst bobbing around on the big blue.

- The horizon is turning dark and/or the sea is turning white, signifying a localized storm or brief squall
- The wind is significantly increasing or decreasing
- The wind is starting to swing offshore
- The tide is starting to get stronger
- The water state is getting rougher, signifying a change in wind direction or tidal height
- The shorebreak is starting to look a lot bigger than when you set off
- The sun is close to setting
- You can sense early signs of cramp
- You are getting tired
- You start to see bull sharks or the Kraken

It's all good!

Whilst there are lots of ideas here that might sound a bit scary, it's important to be aware of all aspects of coastal windsurfing in order to enjoy the sport safely. Interpreting the forecast, sailing with others on the right kit, understanding any dangers and using local knowledge are the four cornerstones of a safe session. So plan your session well and remember that any tidal effects will be more pronounced on springs than neaps. If things do start to change you need to be ready to adapt.

Windsurfing blends physical and mental fitness with skills progression and, in a super-dynamic environment like the coast, great sessions are enormously rewarding. Maybe it's time to grab a mate and get out there with some kit to feel the energy of the sea. Have a plan, be safe and have fun. Just keep one eye out for those giant squids...

Simon Winkley is a RYA Advanced Windsurfing Instructor and a RYA Windsurfing Trainer running instructor courses across the UK and overseas.

Sponsors: Starboard, Severne, Bray Lake Watersports, Spinlock and Flymount.

2018 dates: Vass Coaching Weeks at Ocean Elements 17 June (places) & 24 June (SOLD OUT); Weymouth Coaching Weekends at the OTC 28/29 April, 28/29 July; Queen Mary Foiling Sessions email for details.

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