

# Taking Flight

Kites and business sense sustain a globetrotting athlete in the Dominican Republic

BY BROOKE MORTON

LAUREL EASTMAN NEVER PLANNED ON SETTLING DOWN AND STARTING A BUSINESS. IN fact, she always felt most at home when she was on the road. After graduating from college in Montana, Laurel, 33, cartwheeled across the globe in pursuit of new adventures: extreme skiing in the Alps, teaching in West Africa and filming dolphins in New Zealand. But when she stopped on a Caribbean island, everything changed. We talked with Laurel to find out how her obsession with kiteboarding — and a surprisingly easy-to-start business — finally landed her in the Dominican Republic.

**Q: Where were you when you realized you wanted to settle down on a tropical island?**

**A:** New Zealand. After watching a kiteboarding competition, I knew instantly: I had to become a kiteboarder. Winter was fast approaching, and I only had enough money for a wetsuit or a plane ticket to Oahu, which was then the center of kiting. So I headed to Hawaii.

**Q: How did you wind up in the Dominican Republic?**

**A:** Well, in Hawaii, I started training with the World Cup athletes and was invited to the tour. We traveled the world — to Spain, Venezuela, Puerto Rico. It was the most fun imaginable, but tough financially. When the tour ended, I was in debt for the first time. Even worse, I'd just injured my shoulder, which meant the end of competition life for me. I was feeling down, wondering what to do. Then I got a call from my manager. Boom! There came the silver lining. He had organized a sponsorship with a hotel in Cabarete in the Dominican Republic. They wanted me to live here so they could promote me in their marketing materials and attract more kiteboarders.

**Q: And now you own a business, right?**

**A:** Yes, I opened Laurel Eastman Kiteboarding here on Kite Beach even though at the time I had no business-



For adrenaline junkie Laurel Eastman, boardshorts, beaches and a kiteboarding business make for a happy life in the Dominican Republic.

management experience and zero capital. But I had a really good relationship with the kite company and with my sponsor, the hotel. I was able to start with basically nothing and grow it slowly.

**Q: Was it difficult to start a business in a foreign country?**

**A:** The Dominican Republic is one of the most investor-friendly environments I've seen. Most countries don't allow you just to show up and start a business — they make you jump through many hoops. The local government was really helpful and supportive from the beginning. You don't have to do any paperwork. You hire an attorney and a bookkeeper, and they do everything for you at a fraction of what it would cost in the United States. In the States, when you're starting a business, you end up doing it all by yourself — taxes, employee reporting, workers' comp. Here, your Dominican team does it all for you. It's the best in outsourcing.

**Q: After so much time on the road, what is it about Cabarete that feels like home?**

**A:** There are two main types of personalities: thinking and feeling. I make a decision based on a feeling. And Cabarete just feels good. When I come to the beach and look at the ocean, I see my neighbors who I have known for seven years and have grown to love so much. It feels right. The atmosphere here is unlike anywhere else — walk the beach at night and you find people dancing. Most of the bars are open-air and right on the beach. I especially like the parties at Voyvoy

bar, which shares a tiki roof with Vela Windsurf school. There's always a crowd of young, energetic people that gives the place such a great, international vibe.

**Q: What was the hardest thing to adjust to when you moved to Cabarete?**

**A:** Things don't work quite as systematically and orderly here as in the United States. There are irregularities in things like the delivery of products. If you see something in the supermarket, it doesn't mean that it will be there next time. You learn that when you see something you want, buy four. But we still can't get everything that's available back home. For one, grocery stores here don't sell health food. I have to ask friends to bring me things like Good Earth tea and quinoa when they visit.

**Q: So what kind of life lessons can kiting in Cabarete teach people?**

**A:** Reprioritizing what is important! People work too hard. Kiteboarding is so highly addictive that people tend to put work to the side. They start to recognize that right now it's windy and later it's going to be dark and not windy. We all know that activity and fitness are keys to a healthy life. We live in civilization, inside with our computers and cell phones. When you go kiting, you're totally disconnected from all that. You're in nature, so you're able to reconnect to that source of energy — God, as some call it — and take time for the big picture in life.

**Q: Why has kiteboarding in Cabarete held your interest for so long?**

**A:** If it were only a cool sport, I'd probably be getting out of it. But because I see how much kiteboarding improves people's lives, I'm going to stay with it. It incorporates my core values, including healthy lifestyle, green living and community because we help each other a lot in kiting. You don't just go out by yourself even though it is an independent sport. When you are on the beach, people help you launch and land your kite. And you see that sense of community everywhere in Cabarete. People here are very generous in a way that you don't often find stateside. ■ [ISLANDS.COM/livethelife](http://ISLANDS.COM/livethelife)