

A Tale of MERMAIDS WILD HORSES AND WINE

By Dave Holton

It's probably not a stretch for you to imagine that you're on the beach right now, slathered in sunscreen, with one eye on your kids playing in the surf and the other on a book. In fact, maybe that's *exactly* where you are, right now ... nice, right?

But maybe you'd like for your vacation to be more than just nice. To be something you can remember when you are back in the day-to-day of managing the rewarding but often overwhelming challenges of life as a parent, or student, or worker or fill-in-the-blank-here.

What could take your Outer Banks vacation from nice to extraordinary and memorable? Maybe it would be an evening sampling of North Carolina's wines and a sunset on the water. A glimpse of a wild stallion and a bald eagle from a boat? It could be a healthy dose of Outer Banks history and lore from a local?

And what about the kids? What will they tell their friends when they get back to school – that they got to swim in the ocean? What if they could say they turned into mermaids? What if *you* could say that? You probably grew up on Disney like everyone else. Admit it, at some point *you* wanted to be Ariel too.

Over the last few years, Kitty Hawk Kites has been hard at work developing two experiences that will let you accomplish all that in one day ... The Mermaid School and the Vineyard Voyage.

Welcome to the Mermaid School

When he started selling "Fin Fun Mermaid Tails" in his stores, Kitty Hawk Kites founder John Harris knew he wanted to offer more than just the product. One of the core values of Kitty Hawk Kites is safety, so John asked, "Wouldn't it be great if we could teach people how to swim in the tails safely?"

"But [the Mermaid School] is not just about swimming around in the tail," says Luke Baer, Recreational Sales Manager. "In line with teaching someone to fly, we wanted to give people a real experience."

Brooke Rowe, who has an eclectic background in communications, lifeguarding, scuba diving, musical theater and production design, signed on as Head Mermaid Instructor, and the team partnered with Sanderling Resort in Duck and Beachwoods Resort in Kitty Hawk. In 2016, the Mermaid School started offering classes two days a week at Sanderling Resort and five days a week at Beachwoods, and they are now working to expand to new places and pools.

According to Brooke, "the students have a fin-tastic time!" as they learn dolphin kicks and other tricks. Group lessons are available for those 7 and older (private lessons are available for those 6 and older), and no one's ever too old to be a mermaid. Says Brooke, "Equal amounts of adults and kids take the class. And we have lots of mermen too." She laughs. "The adults find it more challenging than the kids!"

The class has a theatrical element, and everyone gets involved. "The older students help the younger students," says Brooke, "and

everyone is part of a mermaid pod." The class seems to have a confidence-building effect on the students. "Everyone comes out of their shells," says Brooke with another laugh. After the class, students leave with official certificates and can arrange to have photos and video, should they want more proof of their transformation.

With one instructor to every four students, no one is left to flounder on their own. And safety always comes first. "All instructors are lifeguard, CPR and First Aid certified," says Luke, "and all students must pass a swim test before class."

And as one customer wrote on their instructor feedback form, "They were extremely patient in helping my child who was having trouble picking up the motion. They made sure she had fun!"

For more information, be sure to check out the Mermaid School Instagram page, @KHKMermaid, or website, www.kittyhawk.com/adventures/mermaid-school.

And next up, the Vineyard Voyage

Brian Efland, a captain who worked for nearly 10 years with Sea Grant and N.C. State, first came to Kitty Hawk Kites with an idea to build a special boat to carry groups on eco tours across the Currituck Sound. They pitched him on a destination – Sanctuary Vineyards in Currituck. Together, they now offer the Vineyard Voyage: a boat ride that starts in Duck and ends with a 4x4 drive down the backroads of the vineyard on tour to the tasting room. Once there, customers sample 14 or so different wines.

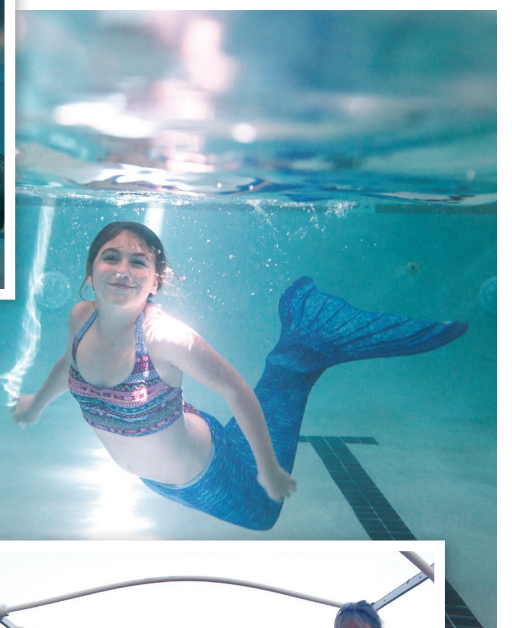
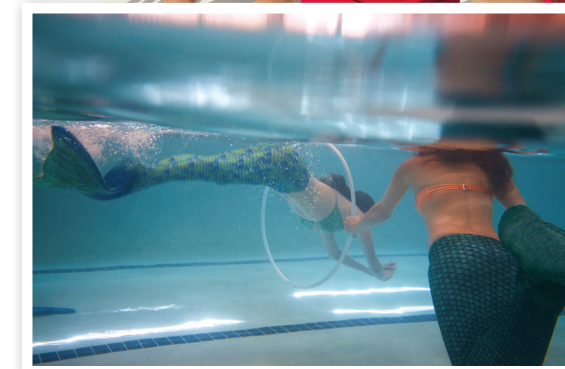
In 2015, Brian worked with Jones Brothers Marine in Morehead City, N.C., to develop the *Backwater*, a one-of-its-kind boat in North Carolina. Certified by the Coast Guard, the *Backwater* now takes up to 23 passengers on a journey across 4 miles of shallow Currituck Sound. "People are amazed to discover the sound is only 5 feet deep," says Brian. "We can do things other boats can't. And if you rent a pontoon or a Jet ski you have to navigate the shoals and avoid crab pots. People can come with me on a journey, avoid stress and just relax."

At first, Brian started the tour carrying only six passengers due to restrictions. But he worked closely with the Coast Guard to pass all certifications and tests required to carry up to 23 people. It was tough, but completing the rigorous qualifications allowed Brian to now offer a truly unique journey.

Starting May 15 and running through late September, the *Backwater* will make three to four trips per day on average from Monday to Friday every week. There are several different cruises to choose from, all offered through Kitty Hawk Kites – the Vineyard Voyage, the Eco Cruise and the Sunset Cruise. And the Thursday night Vineyard Voyage also includes an additional acoustic performance at the Cotton Gin, a sister store to Sanctuary Vineyards, with a beautiful sunset view on the return journey.

The tours pass by the historic Dews Island Hunting Lodge, where a dozen horses were relocated from Corolla. "They are truly wild now," says Brian, "since you need a boat just to see them." And passengers are treated to other wildlife as well. Says

And give Kitty Hawk Kites a call. Then, when you get back home, don't just tell everyone about the nice vacation you had. Tell them about the mermaids you transformed into, the wild horses you witnessed and the delicious wines you sampled with your new friends on the Outer Banks.



one customer, "Viewing Currituck Sound by boat was the highlight of our trip to the Outer Banks. We saw an osprey and its nest, blue herons lifting gracefully from the marsh with giant wings and wild ponies nibbling along the banks. Captain Brian's skills and knowledge of the history of the area make you feel at ease. This trip is a delight for all ages."

Brian says that he loves the diversity of the groups, from bachelorettes to retirees. "By the way back, everyone becomes friends with everyone else," he says. "And I just try to keep people happy, no matter what it takes."

For more information, head to Brian's Instagram page, @outerbanksboattours, or the website, www.kittyhawk.com/adventures/duck-boat-tours.