

SAILING THE SANDS

With over 12,000 miles of coastline, who could possibly be opposed to a sport that gets you closer to the sand and the sea?





For centuries New Zealanders have been coastal creatures, creating ways to harness the wind in their dependence on the ocean for food and trade. As technology has developed, the opportunity to turn the focus from essential needs to social interest has launched a new era of discovery –

finding ways to harness the wind for sport.

Now when you head to one of the thousands of bays that line New Zealand's coast, you won't find hardened seamen and women pushing their outrigger canoes out to sea, but sportsmen and women paddling out on surfboards, blowing up kites, balancing on paddleboards and rowing surf skis.

And – ever so rarely – blasting past you in a land yacht.

You can probably pull up an image when someone mentions a surfboard, a kiteboard or a stand-up paddleboard. But what about a land yacht?

If you've never heard of one, you are not alone. My first observation of one was only a few years ago when I watched a father teach his son how to control a sail on a breezy day on Muriwai Beach. Having had a father walk me through the same sailing principles in a two-metre Optimist sailing boat, I was intrigued to see the same lessons applied on land to a small vehicle with an attached sail.

The child, around age eight, held onto the lead sheet as he reclined in a three-wheeled cart. "Hold on!" the father yelled as the boy sheeted in and the cart gained momentum.



INSET The writer tries out a Blokart at Ardmore Airport.

RIGHT A spectacular beach provides the setting for exciting club racing.

feature

Blokarting

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PHOTOGRAPHY
SUPPLIED



In a split second the cart catapulted his son down the beach with such speed that it made my own adrenaline spike.

“Let out your sheet! Point up into the wind!” the man cried, and a split-second later the wind overpowered the cart and flipped it sideways onto the sand. It brought back old memories of times on the water with my father as he taught me to sail... but here we were, sailing down the beach on dry land. What is this wheeled sail-rigged contraption – and how do I get one one?

Let me introduce you to the world of land yachts, better known in New Zealand as ‘Blokarts’ after the Kiwi design name. Today’s slick little contraptions may look brand new, but travelling overland propelled by the wind is an age-old concept. Paintings of wind-propelled land carts have been found in the tombs of ancient Egyptian pharaohs and they are described in some of the earliest Chinese literature.

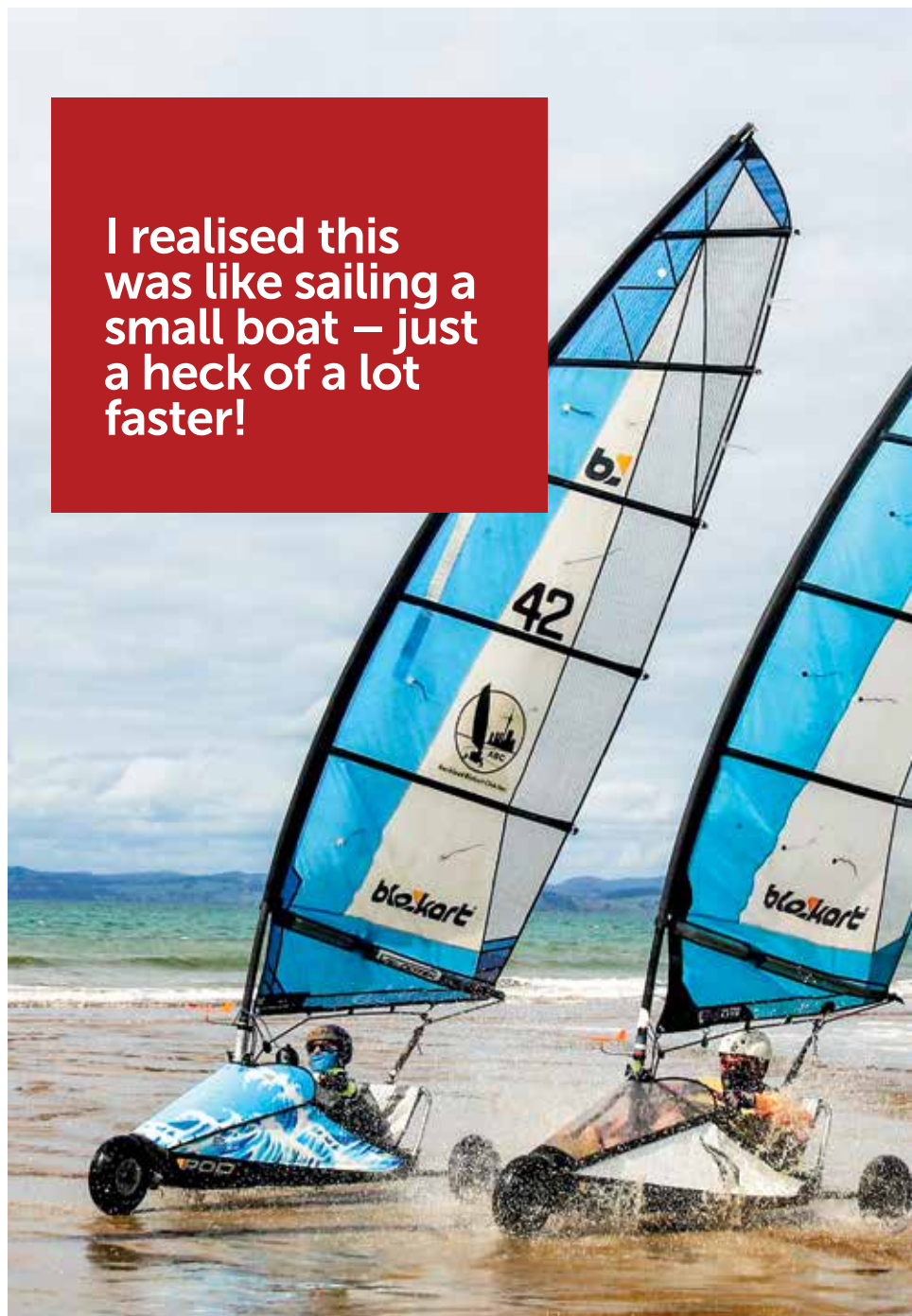
However, we’ve come a long way from harnessing the wind as a means of transportation, turning it instead into a popular sport.

The present-day ‘wind-wagon’ is often described as a sailboat with wheels, but for those unfamiliar with the sport, this definition will probably bring up the wrong image. Think instead of a hybrid between a windsurfer and a dune buggy.

The modern design is typically a three-wheeled cart with an attached sail. The cart is driven on a hard surface, typically on packed sand or dirt. The vehicle usually has a metal and fibreglass frame cradling a single driver who sits in a reclined seat. A small steering wheel attached to a pulley system controls the front wheel.

I recently had the opportunity to sit in one and as I pulled on my crash helmet and racing gloves, a sailboat was the furthest thing from my mind. As my pit boss rolled me out onto the runway, I tucked myself into a braced position and white-knuckled the steering wheel. My pulse sped up and fear started to seep from the darkest corners of my sub-consciousness. I readied myself for a high-speed charge into a horizontal crash two metres down the runway.

I realised this was like sailing a small boat – just a heck of a lot faster!





WHAT IS A BLOKART?

A land yacht, or sand yacht, is the universal term used to describe both cart and sport. Blokart is a type of compact land yacht designed by Paul Beckett in 1999. The first Blokarts were manufactured in Papamoa in 2000 and dominate the local market.

The compact, hand-steered design has gained international popularity with half the sales coming in from overseas. The kart is a one-design, but sail and mast material and size options are available. The cost for a standard setup is around \$5,500, excluding upgrade options. For those interested in getting into the racing aspect of the sport, \$7,000 would cover the recommended extras.

As I rolled into position, I was given my first set of instructions. I was handed the mainsheet and told to pull in as I turned into the wind and ease the sheet as I turned away. There was no reverse and no brakes, so I'd be stopping either by means of a fast, sideways dunk onto a hard surface, or by turning into the wind and releasing the sheet.

As I listened my nerves calmed – this was all very familiar. I might be sitting in something that reminded me of a miniature Formula One race car, but I was going to drive it like a sailboat. I knew this stuff... I could do this!

And therein lies the sailing aspect of the land yacht. Just like a sailboat, there is a single mast with a battened sail providing the propulsion. Just like a sailboat, all its power comes from the wind. Just like a sailboat, there are two ways of changing direction, either a tack or a gybe. Does this sound like Sailing Basics 101? It does! Learning to drive a land yacht is



ABOVE
Blokarters can enjoy close racing with speeds sometimes exceeding four times the wind speed.

LEFT Blokarts are fast and exciting to sail, but easy enough for a beginner to master.

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essentially an education in the fundamentals of sailing.

Unlike other sports where the learning curve is steep, land yachting is easy for a beginner and the skills develop as understanding and competence builds. The investment in kit is small and driving the kart can be learnt on dry land. It doesn't demand a level of physical fitness and it can be enjoyed by all ages. Children as young as nine or ten can get in the driver's seat and start to learn the mechanics of both steering a car and sailing a boat, and adults of all skill levels can enjoy a spin down the runway.

The community surrounding the sport is a tight one and weekend regattas bring families and enthusiasts together, offering a social outlet everyone can enjoy.

But be warned – land yachting offers more than a light-hearted gander down the runway followed by a few beers, a family picnic and the distribution of a few trophies. It is classified as an extreme sport and is one of the fastest wind-driven sports out there.

That little kart breezing down the beach? Oh yes. A land yacht can reach speeds of over four times the wind speed, which exceeds the abilities of multimillion-dollar race yachts. For sailing enthusiasts, isn't that a record to impress?

Fact: The fastest recorded speed at the 35th America's Cup race in a 50-foot state-of-the-art catamaran was 87 kilometres per hour. The fastest recorded speed at the 2016 Blokart World Championship in a five-foot, off-the-shelf land yacht was 126 kilometres per hour.



That crash helmet? Yeah, there's a reason for it.

My spin around the track didn't get me near those speeds. As a novice, I was given a flexible mast and a smaller sail so that I wasn't blown over with the first gust of wind.

I was given the thumbs-up to proceed down the runway. I tentatively pulled in the sheet and the kart surged forward. Before I knew it, I was blasting down the track with only inches between me and the unforgiving ground. The only sound was silence, the slap of tread on tarmac and my pounding heart.

Suddenly, I caught my first gust of wind and the right wheel



INTERESTED IN BLO-KARTING?

For those interested in sailing a Blokart, the best way to get into the seat is by contacting a local club for an introductory ride. The first trial ride is free, with a small fee charged for subsequent sessions.

To find a club near you, go to <https://bai.nz/blokart-sailing/clubs>

lifted off the ground, giving me a sideways view of the track. A competitor whizzed past and yelled, "It's harder to flip than you think!"

Taking this in good faith, I tightened my grip on the sheet and pulled in hard. The kart bolted forward like a crazed stallion with me clutching her sides – we were off, racing the wind.

From my initial concentration on damage control, my focus quickly shifted to accelerating my speed and making tighter turns. My speed built with each circuit around the track and my initial trepidation turned to confidence as I realised this was like sailing a small boat – just a heck of a lot faster. My eyes were glued to the Windex to maximise my speed over ground and with every gust I'd hold hard on the sheet and ride the wave on an angle, back wheel spinning mid-air and me whooping like a mad woman.

Finally – and very reluctantly – I pulled the kart over and clambered out of the seat. My host walked up, and with one look at my face said, "I see you have the Blokart grin!" I think it will stay on my face for weeks. **BNZ**



TOP Adults of all skill levels can enjoy a sail down the beach or runway.

LEFT Weekend regattas bring families and enthusiasts together.

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