



MAKING WAVES

SURFING MAY BE SYNONYMOUS WITH SUN-KISSED BEACHES IN EXOTIC PARTS OF THE WORLD, BUT SCOTLAND OFFERS MORE THAN ITS FAIR SHARE OF SURFING ADVENTURES, AS **ANDY ROSS** DISCOVERS

MY LOVE OF SURFING started many years ago when grey hair was something that only older people had and of no concern to me. It also started without a board and so wasn't true surfing at all, but body surfing – an activity that involves paddling furiously ahead of a wave with the aim of being picked up and then carried gracefully towards shore. The less favourable outcome sees the wave crash directly on top of you, resulting in a few slightly panicky moments of being spun around underwater before bobbing back to the surface, dazed and a little confused.

But even these body surfing backfires were more fun than they might sound; from the start I was hooked. At a stroke, beaches without waves became not that interesting at all.

mention a few trips down the east coast of Scotland. Having sampled some of the conditions close to home, I decided there was so much great surfing to be had right here in Scotland that I should make an effort to discover it more fully.

And I wasn't alone. Scottish surfing has never been more popular. With consistent swells year round, particularly in autumn and spring, Scotland offers some truly world-class waves. There are now thought to be around 3,000 surfers in Scotland with many more joining the ranks each year. Most are based in the Central Belt, which also has plenty of surf shops and schools, but facilities and surfing numbers are now also increasing on the north coast and the islands.

Drawn by the challenge, not to mention the opportunity to visit stunning locations, it seems that many more people are now

Fast forward a few years to a time when grey hair was not just something for older people and I had added to my surfing CV – this time on a board – with trips to Australia, Indonesia and Lanzarote, not to

“WE SEE A LOT OF FAMILIES AND YOUNGER PEOPLE, BUT ALSO A FEW ‘SILVER’ SURFERS”



PHOTOGRAPHY: VISITSCOTLAND OUTER HEBRIDES; WDGS; TONY MARSH; SURF SCHOOL SCOTLAND; COAST TO COAST

Taking it all in: sun, sea and mountains on Lewis (opposite page); a sport for all the family (above left); surfing off East Lothian (right); close encounters are always possible (left)

heading out with boards to explore new sites along what are literally several thousand miles of often dramatic coastline.

Of course, mention surfing in Scotland to most people and the conversation will invariably revolve around one word: cold. And there's no getting away from it: the water is pretty chilly. However, temperatures can vary considerably from a numbing 5°C off Aberdeen in the winter to an almost balmy 18°C in Dunbar towards the end of August. Crucially, wetsuit technology has improved so much in recent years that surfing has become much more of a year-round sport.

However, from my east coast excursions, I knew that such conditions could be overcome with a 5mm wetsuit, that the flask of hot coffee waiting at the end of a surf was always the best coffee you have ever tasted and that 'cold' was not as important as 'fun'.

So, after some research, my girlfriend and I decided to make two surfing trips – one to Tiree and one to Lewis and Harris. In the spir-

it of experiencing a variety of conditions, the Tiree expedition was planned for June, while the Lewis and Harris venture was scheduled as a pre-Christmas treat in late November.

Now it is true that the Australians have the undoubted charms of Bondi Beach to enrich their surfing experience, but sitting onboard a ferry en-route to one of the Hebridean islands, it is hard to feel that hard done by. On our trip to Tiree, we saw a basking shark and several porpoises. On our return from Stornoway, the snow-capped mountains of the mainland added to the drama of the journey – all the more so because earlier that day we had been in the sea. We felt pretty hardcore.

LESSONS LEARNED

Having had a couple of bad experiences with surfing instructors abroad, we weren't sure what to expect on Tiree. However, lack of ability aside, it quickly became clear we had nothing to worry about. Our instructor on the island and for the later excursion to the Western Isles was Suds from Surf School Scotland – a man whose passion for his sport is matched **D**



only by his patience when helping people get to grips with it. Suds opened the school on Tiree in 2004, having seen a growing number of enquiries from surfers wanting to experience the conditions that have long made the island a top venue for wind- and kite-surfing events. “There has been a dramatic rise in the number of visiting surfers,” he says. “We see a lot of families and younger people but also a few ‘silver surfers’. One reason is that compared to other adrenaline sports, the risk of injury is quite low.”

For Suds, the colder conditions in Scotland don’t even register. “Put on a good wetsuit and it doesn’t bother me that the water’s not tropical,” he says. “I’ve had my best surfs at home. Tiree is a great all-round spot with good surf for a range of abilities, combined with beautiful beaches and a nice atmosphere.”

And the water temperature has its other advantages, too. “People who surf here generally do so for the love of surfing rather than trying to look cool. We’ll never have the number of surfers in the water as Australia and other warmer countries, but that’s a good thing. It keeps the posers away!”

Now, I am one of these people who has to understand ‘why’ before attempting ‘do’ – a trait that must have delighted my parents

Where to start?

One of Europe’s top surfing destinations, Scotland is pounded by Atlantic and North Sea swells all year round. If you are prepared to travel and don’t mind a bit of interesting weather, then the chances are that you can find good conditions on almost any day of the year – sometimes even having a beach all to yourself. As a general rule, the west coast enjoys the most consistent surf, the north gets the best quality waves (and attracts elite surfers), while the smaller waves on the east coast are ideal for beginners.

Here is a brief guide to some of the top spots:

SOUTHEAST AND FIFE

Home to the biggest surfing population in Scotland, the area offers a range of beginner and intermediate beach breaks. Coldingham Bay, Pease Bay, Belhaven, Tantallon and St Andrews East Sands are ideal places to begin your surfing adventures (although they can be crowded).

NORTHEAST

Blessed with hundreds of miles of uncrowded sandy beaches, the area is home to Scotland’s longest running surf club – the Broch at Fraserburgh. Other good spots include Lunan Bay, Sinclairs Bay and Aberdeen beach (although the water can be a bit murky close to the city).

NORTH COAST

Known for wonderful reefs and magnificent beaches, the north coast offers isolated surfing with very powerful swells and so must be treated with respect. Thurso town is home to one of the best breaks in Europe (Thurso East) and hosts an annual World Qualifying Series 6-star event. Elsewhere, Dunnet beach, Thurso harbour, Brims Ness and Melvich all offer a good challenge to more advanced surfers.

WEST COAST

With a small swell window between Ireland and Islay, the Kintyre coastline around lovely Machrihanish provides the best surfing on the west coast mainland. A popular spot for Glasgow-based surfers, Machrihanish is perhaps best for beginners and intermediates.

WEST COAST ISLANDS

Of all the islands, Lewis and Tiree are perhaps the real stand outs. Home to some of Europe’s most consistent and powerful beach and reef breaks, Lewis enjoys a good swell year round and is perfect for intermediate to advanced surfers. Try Europie and Cliff. On Tiree, head for Maze and Balevullin beaches.

With special thanks to Sam Christopherson, C2C Surfing and Jamie Blair, Clan Surf

“I DON'T THINK SURFING IS A SPORT YOU CAN EVER FEEL LIKE YOU'VE FULLY MASTERED, SO IT NEVER REALLY GETS BORING”



when I was growing up. Happily, the surf education from Suds met this need in spades. Previously, my surfing lingo didn’t stretch much beyond ‘gnarly’ and possibly ‘phat’ and I knew that to even say these phrases in public would only invite ridicule.

After a few days on Tiree and a week on Lewis and Harris, however, I began to understand the concept of onshore and offshore winds and their impact on waves. Essentially, the latter is good and the former usually bad. I also became relatively unfazed by terms such as ‘wave period’, ‘fetch’, ‘peak’ and ‘peel’ – progress indeed.

Apart from learning to be a better surfer and that surfing ability isn’t particularly related to the brightness of your shirt, I learned that it is an infinitely-changing sport – no two surfs are the same.

That’s one of the beauties of it, agrees Suds. “I don’t think surfing is a sport you can ever feel like you’ve fully mastered, so it never gets boring. Each session, wave and manoeuvre is different.”

So, having kicked a few *Point Break* clichés into the machair, what is it actually like to surf Scottish-style? Well, it’s challenging, demanding, rewarding, exciting, thrilling and adrenaline-inducing. It’s also uplifting and occasionally – don’t laugh – even spiritual. **D**

Board stupid: surf school lessons on the east coast (top left); Suds teaching on Tiree (below left)



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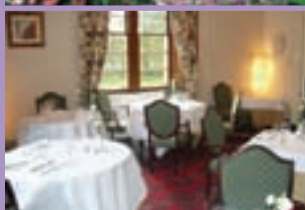


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Before I began surfing, I thought of it simply as being about standing on a board and cruising down a wave. But it's much more than that. The feeling of catching and then riding an unbroken wave as it peels off along the beach is full of pleasure, excitement and – when you get it right – real pride.

And such emotions are equally applicable during the more mundane aspects of surfing. I suppose that paddling out to the area where you can catch the best waves and the bobbing around waiting for them to come along could be seen as commuting and queuing. But for me just sitting on the board, taking a break before going for the next wave is an opportunity to see the Scottish coastline from a unique perspective.

So often we go to the coast to look out to sea, but there I am, almost part of the water, looking back at the shore wrapping itself around



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me with its crescent of white sand. The water is violently green, the land supremely rugged and the whole environment distinctly Scottish.

Just being there makes me feel part of nature in a way that no other sport has ever managed to do. This is where uplifting and spiritual come in to complement feelings of excitement and pride. And when you notice that a seal is also bobbing around no more than 30 feet away, it becomes an experience you will remember for the rest of your life.

So, what did I take away from my Hebridean surf adventures? I learnt that Scotland offers a huge range of surfing opportunities to suit all abilities and that there are great teachers available to show you the ropes. I also learnt that I look like Spiderman when I surf (and that apparently isn't a good thing) and that surfing when it is snowing can be a wonderful experience. And the cold? To be honest, I was having too much fun to notice. ■

Far from the madding crowd: a typically empty beach on Lewis (top); Suds turns on the style (above)

Essentials

SAFETY FIRST

It should be said, of course, that surfing anywhere is not without its dangers. Powerful swells, strong rips and hidden rocks can all cause harm to body and board. Typically, Scottish beaches do not have lifeguards, so know your level and never surf isolated breaks alone.

SURF SHOPS

Many of Scotland's more popular surf sites have facilities nearby for board and equipment hire. www.tinyurl.com/r8ok8p

BACK TO SCHOOL

A variety of surf schools provide excellent tuition as well as surf tours to top spots around the country.

SURF SCHOOL SCOTLAND, TIRRE:
www.surfschoolscotland.co.uk

CLAN SURF, GLASGOW:
www.clanskates.co.uk

COAST TO COAST, DUNBAR:
www.c2surfschool.com