

introduction to surfing

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We have put together the following guide for people who are interested in learning to surf. This booklet is free and has been endorsed by the British Surf Association.

Surfing's great fun and a fantastic way to stay fit. There's nothing quite like catching your first wave, and one of the best things about it is that you don't have to be world champ to enjoy it. Learning can be fun itself - so long as you don't mind getting wet!

"The best surfer in the world is the one having the most fun", legendary surfer, Phil Edwards famously said.

As well as getting you out in the elements, surfing gives you a real appreciation of the great outdoors and a respect for nature. So, whether you're a seasoned surfer or looking to jump in for the first time, hopefully the following info should be of some use...



Equipment

The good news is, you don't need a great deal of equipment. Once you have a board, a leash, your wetsuit and a bit of wax you're pretty much there.

Surfboards

You first need a board! To start with it's a good idea to rent one from your local surf shop or to buy a second hand one. Chances are you're going to bang it about a bit, so don't invest all your money at the beginning. There are many boards out there, which can be a bit overwhelming for the uninitiated, but the one you should probably consider if you're an absolute first timer is the Softboard. They come in different sizes according to your height & build, usually from 6 to 9 feet in length. An average adult would get on fine with an 8ft softboard. These are good fun as they're very buoyant, easy to handle and don't hurt in a crash! They are a little limited in bigger waves, though, and don't turn as quickly when you get to more advanced levels. As always, ask around for advice. As you progress you might opt for short boards or long boards, but to start with, the easier the board is to ride, the longer you'll stay on it and the more fun you'll have!

Wetsuits

Wetsuits keep you warm by trapping a thin layer of water between the suit and your skin, which is then kept warm by your body heat. Unfortunately, if you're braving the waters of the UK, you're going to need a wetsuit! There are different thicknesses depending on how warm you need to stay out there - make sure you're in the right kind, and that it fits you properly! It shouldn't be too tight, but should fit snugly all over - except maybe on your shoulders where you'll need a bit of extra room for paddling out.

Many surfers have different wetsuits for winter and summer - if you're a beginner, you may not want to fork out on a whole new wardrobe of neoprene, so go for whatever will allow you to get in the water most often and in most comfort! You can get second hand suits, but look closely for rips, tears and patches, and if you see them, avoid buying.

Depending on where you surf and your tolerance to cold water, you may also need to get wetsuit boots and/or gloves, and possibly even a hood. In cold climates, these can be a necessity rather than a luxury. Boots can be handy in avoiding spiking your feet on reefs or on sea urchins, too. As with the suits, just make sure they are a good snug fit, or you'll end up being weighed down with water-filled feet and hands!

Rash Vests

Close fitting lycra rash vests are a handy accessory, worn either under your wetsuit to stop chaffing (wetsuit rash) or on their own as UV protection. Thicker, thermal versions are also available.

Leashes

The leash attaches to your ankle (on whichever foot naturally falls to the rear of the board) and prevents you from losing your board should you fall off. Leashes, while useful, should be used carefully – make sure your leash is the right length/thickness for your board, and the conditions you'll be surfing in, and in the event of you falling off, always cover your head, face and top of the spine with your hands. A leash can suddenly bring a board skimming back across the water at you – and usually the first thing it comes into contact with is the first thing out of the water- i.e. your head!

Wax

There are lots of different types of wax, but essentially they do one key thing - stop you from slipping off your surfboard, either when you are surfing or paddling. Surf Wax is applied to the deck of the board in the areas where your feet will be. Ensure the softness of your wax – usually signified by 'cold', 'cool', 'warm' or 'tropical' – corresponds to the temperature of the water you'll be surfing in.

Health & Safety

It's vital that, while enjoying the water, you are mindful of the dangers that are out there. The sea can be a dangerous place and it's definitely best to have your first few lessons with a qualified BSA (British Surfing Association) instructor. If you take account of the following basic tips, you will have a better understanding of how to enjoy surfing safely.

Surf Conditions

Probably the most important rule is to check that the surf is safe before you venture in the water (if you're somewhere new, especially). Get some advice from locals or lifeguards on rips - strong currents in the water. If caught in one, you should stay calm and paddle across the rip (not against it) until you have reached a safe spot. Always get advice from a local or from the local surf shop. The internationally recognised distress signal, should you need it, is a clenched fist high above your head.

Safety in Numbers

Try to surf with at least one other person. You'll have a better laugh if you're with a mate, and will have another pair of eyes nearby should you need help. Always make sure that the people you are with are also up to speed with surf safety. The last thing you want is to be relying on someone who isn't responsible in the water.

Fitness & Warm-up

You should have a good level of general fitness before you venture in the water – this means you need to be able to swim at least fifty metres in open water. Exercises which help stamina & flexibility are good for surfing - like Yoga, Swimming, Cycling or Running. Have a quick stretch and warm-up before you go in the water; it'll reduce the chance of muscle cramp or injury.

Sun Block

You should always wear a good waterproof sunblock. It is possible to get burnt even when it looks cloudy & overcast and when you're surfing in cold water. Use the right sunblock factor for your skin. If sunblock makes your skin sore, choose a hypoallergenic sunblock product to use while surfing. If you forget your sunblock and start to burn, ask for help at the nearest first aid station - most popular surfing beaches should have one. It may sound obvious, but it's easy to forget the simple stuff, so take note!! Sunburn's definitely not a good look.

Patrolled Beaches

Pay attention to where you are – you can drift pretty far in a current without realising it. If you're on a patrolled beach, keep within the designated surfing area. Make a mental note of where you should be surfing before you go out, and make regular checks that you are still there.

Priority

It's good to have a basic understanding of surf etiquette. Key pointers are:

1. When paddling out, avoid other surfers who are riding waves
2. If a collision is about to happen stop paddling allowing the rider to avoid you – there is no excuse for running someone over
3. Always make sure that you are not taking anyone else's wave. Remember, the surfer who is closest to the breaking wave has priority. If you see someone already on a wave then the wave is taken and you'll have to wait for the next one
4. Keep control of your board at all times

You will learn a lot quicker and have more fun by taking part in a surfing lesson by a BSA qualified instructor. For your own peace of mind (and others) you may want to get yourself covered by public liability insurance (included with BSA membership).

FUN!

Finally, have fun! It's what surfing was invented for! Provided you do it safely, you'll be hard pushed to find anything as exciting and fun as surfing – even if you are a complete beginner.

Getting into the Water

As mentioned, we would always recommend starting off with a lesson or two with a qualified BSA instructor, so you know you're getting advice from the best possible source. It's easy to fail to understand basic safety information, or to pick up bad habits on your own -if someone can teach you the right way to do it, the quicker you will progress and the more fun you'll have.

Look for small surf to start with – you're better off playing in the white water, and riding a few broken waves in on your belly to get a feel of the board and mastering positioning yourself on it.

Riding waves on your Belly

Wait until a broken wave approaches you, and when it's about 2 metres away, push off the bottom with your feet and lie on your board while holding a rail (the side of the board) in each hand. After you have done this a few times, try paddling for the approaching wave.

Standing Up

This is the hardest hurdle to overcome in learning to surf, but once you have mastered it, the rest will follow! Your instructor will take you through the basic steps of positioning yourself on the board, timing your stand-up, and ensuring it's a fluid, balanced motion – after a while (and after you have fallen off a lot) it will come naturally! Don't worry about falling off – it's all part of the fun!

Good Places to Surf

The good thing about living on an island is that you're never too far away from the water. Whether or not there are waves is another story! Some places on our coastline are much better than others. The south-west gets really good surf – Cornwall & Devon especially – and areas in Wales, the East Coast and parts of Scotland can be great too. If you're looking for warm water and sunny skies, you don't need to spend your life savings going to Hawaii. France, Spain, Portugal & the Canary Islands are closer, cheaper and have great waves.

Enjoy!

So get out there and enjoy yourself – and let us know how you get on!!

Links

Environment

The campaign for cleaner waters is a hot topic in the surf world – and for good reason – surfers, wildlife or anyone enjoying the beach can become ill from sewage polluted seas. One thing to ensure is that you take your rubbish home with you and leave the beach exactly as you found it. As members and supporters of SAS (Surfers Against Sewage) I would urge anyone to check out their site to learn more about their campaigning. www.sas.org.uk

Wave & Weather Checker

In order to surf, you're going to need waves! Before you head out, it's a good idea to check the waves and weather. You can find lots of information online, but a good starting point is the BBC weather site which allows you to key in where you need to know information about. Another useful site is the Met Office which has forecasts and weather warnings.

Met Office www.metoffice.gov.uk

BBC Weather www.bbc.co.uk/weather/coast/surf

British Surfing Association

The British Surfing Association (BSA) promotes the sport of surfing and represents the interests of all surfers in Great Britain and the Channel Islands. Take a look at their site for everything you could possibly need to know about surfing in Britain including industry news, events calendars, beginners info and competitions. www.britsurf.co.uk

This guide is provided for information only and we do not accept any duty of care to you or responsibility for its contents. For your safety, you should always obtain professional surfing tuition.