

New wave

Think duck dives and tube riding are the sole preserve of those sporting a Californian accent? Not so. The surf community is very much alive and well... in Wales

From chart songs to movies, hairstyles to clothing, surfing has been a mainstay of popular culture for a generation. Think of a surfboard and it's the Beach Boys, California and huge scary waves. At least it used to be...

These days the UK is slowly transforming itself into one of Europe's hottest surfing destinations. And there is nowhere better on these shores to get in the water than Wales. With hundreds of miles of gorgeous coastline, Blue Flag beaches, National Parks and a genuinely relaxed surfing community, Wales is where the cognoscenti head.

"I've been surfing along the Pembrokeshire Coast for 6 years," says

Paul Ellis, a surfing coach with Pembrokeshire based adventure sports specialist, Preseli Venture. "We've got some awesome beaches here with a fantastic array of waves and conditions," he says. "I've surfed all over the world but this part of Wales equals any of them."

The big blue

So what is the attraction of surfing? For many, caught up in the strain of modern, urban living, surfing provides an opportunity to push themselves in an environment that would test almost anybody — the high seas. "Most of the people who come to us wanting to learn to surf live in the cities," says Claire Carlile, manager of Preseli Venture. "They seem to want to connect with nature again and leave themselves and their stressed out jobs behind," she says.

Much has been made of the spiritual aspect of surfing. "You just feel so insignificant out there surrounded by this massive natural

force," says Claire. "But then you also have to build a bond with it — you have to work with and harness the force of the sea in order to ride the wave." Some surfers treat the pursuit as though on a devotional quest. In his recent book, *Riding the Magic Carpet* (www.summersdale.com), Tom Anderson, a surfer from Porthcawl, South Wales, explored the planet looking for the elusive perfect wave. "Part of its lure, besides the pleasure of actually riding a wave, was the wait — the excitement of reading weather conditions and tidal charts, the devotion of always keeping an eye on the ocean so as to be ready to drop everything and paddle out as soon as the right swell turned up; a series of life sacrifices that made the reward even sweeter."

All rise please

With the full force of the sea as your playground, for beginners, surfing can seem a little daunting — but, with the right guidance, you should be catching your first wave in no time. "First we'll get you paddling on the board

lying down," says Claire. "From this position you can really begin to get a sense of the power of the waves. When your first whitewater wave picks you up and propels you it's unforgettable — they can carry you for hundreds of feet." And what's the tricky part? "The most difficult part is learning to stand up — what surfers call the 'pop-up,'" says Claire. "It can take a while to learn to pop-up and stay stable but once you've mastered it you can really begin to ride the waves."

Scene stealer

Many surfers in Pembrokeshire talk not only of the natural beauty on offer — "This is such a stunning part of the country," says Paul — but also how friendly and relaxed the whole surf scene is in this part of Wales. "There's few of the poseurs you'll see in Cornwall," continues Paul, "Everybody down here, even including the experienced people, is very open to beginners. It is always such a social gathering — I even go down to the beach

after work and hang out, catching a wave, catching up with friends."

And, as any surfer will tell you, it's the waves that really count. "You can surf in remote spots down on the Gower, near Swansea or along the Pembrokeshire coast in places such as Newgale and Whitesands and you'll always find such a variety of waves," says Paul. "We've got beach breaks, reef breaks and point breaks, some good for beginners, some which require quite a bit of experience. My favourite spot is down near Tenby at a place called Monkstone Point. There are these incredible winter swells that just give you the longest rides. Sometimes when I'm out there dolphins and seals will swim along beside me," says Paul. "There really are some truly breathtaking moments."



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Clockwise: chilling out at the end of a day's surfing; getting the hang of it in Newgale; one of Wales' best surfing spots, the Pembrokeshire coast; impressive breakers at Abermawr