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Surfer's paradise

Great surf, instructor's tricks, and a 40th birthday spent in a wetsuit. And yes, it was right here in Canada

By: Diane Selkirk



I've always wanted to learn to surf. In my sun dappled imagination I've ridden the warm turquoise waves off of Costa Rica, or maybe Hawaii, surfing toward a white sand beach dotted with palm trees.

But when my chance came to surf, it was in Tofino, B.C., a former fishing village on Vancouver Island's wet west coast. A place where the token palm tree, at the edge of town, appeared to be shivering. I was also older than I had been in my imagination. I decided to celebrate my 40th birthday squeezed into a rented wetsuit, learning something new.

Speciality spot

When I told friends I was planning to take a surfing class in Tofino, they were sceptical. "What's wrong with Hawaii?" one even asked. Although surfers have been heading to Tofino for years (even Pierre Trudeau pulled out a board and caught a bit of air, back in the day), until recently, the crew consisted of a few hardcore dudes and dudettes who hung at Cox Bay, rippin' down juicy waves and using lingo that sounds stupid coming from anyone not leashed to a board.

Then the news of Tofino's 35-kilometres of pristine beach break got out. It turns out that despite the mist and rain, Tofino has excellent year-round surfing, with waves that suit everyone from beginners to pro. Surfers and wannabes have begun making the pilgrimage to the village of 1600 (it swells to 11,000 in the summer). To accommodate them, a half-dozen surf schools have popped up; one school, Surf Sisters caters primarily to women.

The lesson

"Goofy foot or regular foot?" my instructor Dan asked. My blank look must have given away the fact that I've never done board sports before. So he pushed me. "Regular foot," he said, as I lurched forward and caught my balance with my right foot.

With the stance down, it was time to learn how to get there. The method of choice, the pop-up, is designed for someone who can levitate from their belly, up to the balanced, feet-apart-knees-bent stance in one fluid movement. Clearly I had picked the wrong 'new thing' to try for my 40th [birthday](http://www.more.ca/relationships/community/five-great-50th-birthday-party-ideas/a/29335) (<http://www.more.ca/relationships/community/five-great-50th-birthday-party-ideas/a/29335>). Then Dan showed me a novice manoeuvre – I got to hop up on my hands and knees before I attempted to stand.



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Then it was into the ocean. Bobbing in the slate grey waves I watched for the nautical equivalent of a bunny hill. As it approached, I leapt on my board and nearly slid off the other side, but with a shove from Dan, I was off. "Paddle! Paddle! Paddle!" He yelled after me. Racing toward shore, I tried to recall the steps involved in surfing. Hands under my shoulders, pop-up to kneeling... I was too far forward, or to the left, or something. My board nosed dived and I went under—for what felt like the spin cycle. I came up sputtering, but grinning. Then I paddled back out to try again.

Place to learn

Surfing turned out to be both harder and more fun than I expected. And Tofino was the ideal place to learn; with uncrowded surf and a charming village (for exploring during the non-surf hours.) I've decided to return to Tofino for my follow-up lessons. Maybe I'll even get that pop-up sorted out.

More info

In the early 1990's, Tofino was the site of "The War in the Woods" a protest against clear-cutting that saw more than 12,000 people converge in one of the largest acts of civil disobedience in Canada's history. The result was the United Nations' Environmental, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the region a "Biosphere Reserve"—a label that acknowledges the amazing ecology of the area.

Most visitors end up in Tofino because of the pristine environment and whale watching, wildlife viewing, hiking and kayaking join surfing as the primary draws to the region. The town also boasts a productive arts community with the town's galleries attracting collectors from all over the world.

If you go

Getting there

Tofino is on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. You can either catch a ferry from [Anacortes, WA](#) (<http://www.wsdot.wa.gov>) (888-808-7977) or [Tsawwassen, B.C.](#) (<http://www.bcferries.com>) (888-223-3779). You can also [fly](#) (<http://www.tofinoair.ca>) from Vancouver.

Catching a Wave

[Pacific Surf School](#) (<http://www.pacificsurfschool.com>) (888-777-9961)

[Surf Sisters](#) (<http://www.surfsister.com>) (877-724-7873)

[Westside Surf](#) (<http://www.westsidesurfschool.com>) (250-725-2404)

Warming Up

[The Long Beach Lodge](#) (<http://www.longbeachlodgeresort.com>) (877-844-7873)

[The Clayoquot Field Station](#) (<http://www.tofinobotanicalgardens.com>) (250-725-1220)

[The Days Inn](#) (<http://www.daysinn.com>) (250-725-3277)

Filling up

[SOBO](#) (<http://www.sobo.ca>) and [Shelter](#) (<http://www.shelterrestaurant.com>) are both local favourites that specialize in regional cuisine.

For more info

[Tourism Tofino](#) (<http://www.tourismtofino.com>)

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