

Surf Like a Local

Santa Cruz brings out the surfer in everyone

By Tara Leonard
Photos by Dan Coyro

There's no denying the mystique of surfing. Who can resist the cool gear, the gung-ho attitude and the insider slang that makes it clear who's ripping hard in the green room (good) while others are kissing the reef (bad). It's a world of endless sun and fearless friends, buffed to a golden Hollywood sheen by movies from "Blue Hawaii" to "Step into Liquid." It's no surprise that each year thousands of eager beginners learn to surf in Santa Cruz.

We're not talking about little groms lucky enough to grow up on the front of dad or mom's board, for whom surfing is a lifestyle and a legacy. No, these beginners are children and adults, locals and visitors, who long to experience Santa Cruz surfing magic, even if just for a day.

"You can't live in one of the best surf spots in the world and not try it," says Tamara Meyer, who as a 30-something mother of two, took a group class at Club Ed Surf School. "I thought it would be years before I got up on the board," she recalls. "It was so encouraging to stand up the first time out. Of course, I had a lot of assistance, and those big soft-top boards really help!"

That's music to the ears of Ed Guzman, owner of Club Ed, who feels that with the right instruction, equipment and water conditions, almost anyone can have success in the waves. Local instruction options include private, semi-private or group lessons, as well as weeklong surf camps that cater to children, adults, gender-specific groups, or families.

What can you do to increase your chances of surfing success?

First, get yourself into good physical shape. "People who have a sport they are consistent and passionate about tend to do well because they have body-motion awareness," Guzman says. "With surfing you're learning how the ocean moves and how you need to move in it. If you work at a desk and don't have a

regular fitness routine, surfing can be a bit of a shock."

Dylan Greiner, owner of Santa Cruz Surf School, recommends that beginners start with a two-hour group lesson rather than a private. "People don't realize how hard surfing is," he warns. "Just paddling is a work-out. We never take out more than 3 or 4 people to an instructor, and that gives them a chance to rest and recharge between rides."

At Richard Schmidt Surf School, classes begin with a wetsuit fitting to make the 50 to 60 degree water more tolerable. "The warmer you are, the more fun you'll have," Schmidt says. Then it's a quick lesson in surfing mechanics, safety and etiquette, all before you hit the waves.

Once you're in the water, try to have reasonable expectations. "This is not a Hollywood movie!" Guzman says with a laugh. "People see movies like 'Blue Crush' and picture themselves in those situations. But there's a lot more to it than just standing there and riding a wave."

"It's harder than I thought," admits Sheryl Cowen, who learned to surf so she can spend time in the water with her husband, Barry, and sons, Adam and Justin. "I can't just pop up like the kids do. I'm getting better, but it's going to take time."

Kurt Almendras was willing to make the time. Growing up in the San Fernando Valley, Almendras always wanted to try surfing, but never had the opportunity. Three weeks after moving to

Santa Cruz, at the age of 28, he bought a used board.

"If I didn't want to do it so badly, I never would have gotten past that beginning point," he recalls. "Paddling was the hardest thing and then the balance. But the first time I stood up, it was so exhilarating to feel the power of the ocean under my feet. It was more than I ever thought it would be. The consistency of going out every day built up both the skills and the muscles."

Not everyone has Almendras' tenacity or positive attitude.

"Sometimes people try too hard," Greiner warns. "Especially men who snowboard or skateboard, want to get out there and start ripping. Others are totally chill and have an easy time. People need to relax and slow down a little bit, out there and in life in general. There's a place for aggressive surfing, but not at the beginner level and certainly not at Cowell's."

"Everyone at Cowell's is super friendly" confirms Cowen, who heads to the local beginner break at Cowell Beach with her family about once a week. "We enjoy hanging out together between sets. It's pretty cool if I can catch the same wave as one of my kids!"

Schmidt urges parents, especially those who are keen to share their love of surfing, to respect each child's comfort zone.

"Every kid is different," he counsels. "You might have a 5-year-old that is totally into it. But take kids out there when they're not ready, scare them, and it can really turn them off."

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—Ed Guzman



Wetsuit 101

Why buy a wetsuit? Have you been in the ocean lately? "I always tell people who are just getting into surfing to spend more money on a suit than a board," says Brandon Bencomo, an experienced sales associate at O'Neill's Surf Shop on 41st Avenue. "You can have a nice board, but if your teeth are chattering, you're not going to enjoy it. With a good wetsuit, you'll be warm and comfortable, and you'll get a lot more time in the water."

Suits are labeled with two numbers; the first indicates the thickness in millimeters of the neoprene on the chest, back and front of the legs. The second refers to the arms and back of the legs, where you need more flexibility and are less likely to lose heat.

"Most people around here go with a 4/3," Brandon tells me. "In the summer you could drop down to a 3/2. Women might want to wear a 5/4 since they tend to have colder extremities. Male or female, you need to know if you get cold easily."

Those with hearty constitutions can wear a shortie, or spring suit, that stops above the knees and elbows. You can also find styles with a long-sleeve upper and shortie legs in a straight 2 millimeter or even a 2/1.

Once you determine the right weight, consider price. There are three things that increase as the price rises: warmth, flexibility and comfort/fit. "In a baseline suit, say \$180, the neoprene is nice, but it's not the same grade as a high performance \$400 suit," Brandon tells me. "The nicer the neoprene, the better it forms to your body, so it keeps you insulated better. You want it to be like a second skin."

The air pockets inside the neoprene trap air, allowing your body to heat it up as insulation. All neoprene absorbs water, but in a properly fitted suit, it doesn't circulate. If your wetsuit is too loose, or gaps and bulges, water will keep flushing in, taking the heat off your body more quickly.

OK, so you're suited up. What about booties? These snug neoprene slip-ons serve two purposes: They help you retain heat and they also protect your bare feet from the rough reef or other underwater dangers. "Surf long enough and your feet will toughen up," Brandon assures me. "But booties are essential around here for the winter." Hoods are less popular, but usually a good idea on cold days.

Totally confused? Try renting your gear the first few times. You won't end up spending hundreds of dollars on a suit that will sit in your closet. Most local surf shops rent wetsuits and wetsuit/board combos on a daily basis.

If you do buy a wetsuit, take good care to make your investment last. Rinse it with fresh water after every use and then hang it to dry, out of the direct sun. Most importantly, take it out for some wonderful, wet fun.

Santa Cruz Surf Schools

Club Ed Surf School

(831) 464-0177

www.club-ed.com

Richard Schmidt Surf School

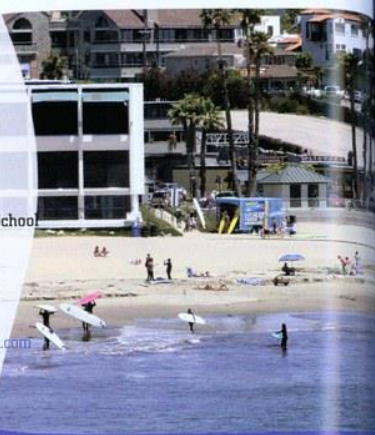
(831) 423-0928

www.richardschmidt.com

Santa Cruz Surf School

(831) 345-8875

www.santacruzsurfschool.com



Schmidt recommends that kids be fully comfortable in water above their heads before they try surfing. If parents are experienced surfers who know the local conditions, they can take a child out on their own. For most, however, a group lesson is the place to start.

Do most beginners stick with it?

"We teach a lot of people, both locals and visitors, and only a small percentage follow through," Schmidt concedes. "It takes a long time to get really competent. But you can get out there and have fun along the way!"

"I don't have any big ambitions," Cowen admits. "I may never get past Cowell's, but for right now I'm happy with that. It's good exercise. It's a great family activity. We're learning together."

Meyer followed her first lesson with a summer full of surfing, but like many beginners, eventually dropped the sport. "It was thrilling when I was standing up," she says. "But I was too busy with mechanics to ever get 'in the zone.' And I didn't own a board so I couldn't just grab it and go."

"I definitely improved and got more comfortable," she recalls. "There are so many people who would die to hop on their bikes and go surfing like we can. I'd like to get back into it now that the kids are older. They need to try it."

Then there are those like Almendras who, eight years after catching his first wave, is a true convert. "I would surf everyday if I could," he says with a grin. "Now I teach nine months of the year, surfing once or twice a week. Then I spend a month in Costa Rica surfing in warm waters!"

"If you live by the ocean and it gets a hold of you, it's something you're going to do all the time," Guzman says. "There's an exhilaration people feel surfing, a sense of release from whatever you're going through at home or at the job. You feel like a kid!"

"You've gotta try it," Cowen concludes. "Just jump in!"