



## GREAT OUTDOORS

### Tofino: I am 'Surf Wax America'

**And so can you! Surf camps build beach mojo**

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The boyfriend who introduced me to Weezer said of the band's self-titled debut, "At some point, every song will be your favourite." I can't say I ever got into every song, but "Surf Wax America" I definitely did not like. Until now.

Perhaps I hated "Surf Wax America" because surf culture, which I typified as So-Cal slang, tacky printed shorts and bleach-blond hair, never appealed to me. Perhaps it was the fact that I'm a shitty swimmer. Or that bikinis terrify me. Or that everything we see about surfing involves long white beaches and hot summer days, which in Canada are nearly as common as unicorns. I just couldn't connect with surfing.

But last summer, I decided to at least try to understand how surfers' feet seem to stick to the board and why getting nailed by towering walls of water seems exciting. I had recently scored a spot as a winter guide for Backside Tours ([backsidetours.com](http://backsidetours.com)), an adventure company based in Edmonton, and decided to join its inaugural summer surf camp.

*"The sea is foaming like a bottle of beer  
The wave is coming but I ain't got no fear."*

After a couple hours on the roller coaster Pacific Rim Highway, the Backmobile (Backside's 20-passenger van) pulls into Wickaninnish Bay. Twenty excited twentysomethings scramble out the door. Neall Alden, Backside's energetic general manager, has grouped us by experience level. I have none, so I'm plunked with four other surf virgins. We struggle into our wetsuits, neoprene squeaking, and peruse the surfboard

selection laid out in the parking lot. Jayna, Wendy and Kristie choose seven-foot, nine-inch boards while I pick a Cadillac nine-footer.

"I can't swim," I admit to the others, hoping the fact that I can barely grab the edge of the board under my arm due to its width means I'll float better.

"Well, then you better learn how to surf," quips Wendy.

One million people visit Vancouver Island's Pacific Rim National Park every year, and I can see, feel and hear why. Cool mist dampens our cheeks as the sun starts its drop toward the horizon. Behind us, a thick corridor of driftwood separates dark sand from lush green brush. Ahead of us, infinite grey-blue waters. The ocean swells, boils and breaks relentlessly along the beach while we wait for our surf instructors to gather their charges. Thankfully, at least one stereotype is ringing true. Our instructor is a boy, and a very cute one at that.

We look at each other, raised eyebrows silently communicating our response to the lithe man now standing before us, surfboard at his feet. "Let's get you ladies surfing!" We nod and smile, curl the sand between our toes and try not to giggle.

"It's my patented six-step process," explains our instructor, Jon, in a snappy British accent. Jon marks the line of a surfboard in the sand and drops to his belly in the middle. Adept white feet sprout from the legs of his black wetsuit. We awkwardly mimic his motions.

Jon explains how to read the water, when it will break and fold over on itself. "Once it breaks," he enthuses, "paddle, paddle, paddle!"

He swipes the sand alongside his body. "Hands to the outside of your body beside your chest, paddling all the while. When you feel the water at your toes, wait till it's at your knees, then press up." He stretches like a cobra. We stretch like stiff slugs.

"Now get your back leg underneath you in the centre of the board." He contorts his body into twisted plank along the mid-line of the surfboard outline. We tip our heads curiously.

"Now for the hard part." Jon smiles slyly. "Bring your front foot between your hands and pop up."

His legs snap into a low squat beneath him. Bright white teeth shine against his tanned cheeks. "Easy, isn't it?" he asks, slapping the sand from his hands and jumping on his toes. I'm still on the ground, trying to get my foot between my hands and fathom how this might be possible while floating on a roiling ocean wave.

We practise paddling, the cobra stretch and popping up until my shoulders burn. Jon appraises our form, moving shoulders here, pushing on lower backs until he is satisfied. He drops to his knees. Before we get into the water, he says gravely, we must understand the dangers. We'll only be in the whitewash after the wave breaks, but rip currents are

present along the beach between underwater sandbars. Pointing vaguely to different areas we should avoid, Jon explains how wind and waves push toward the shore while the backwash is pushed sideways by the next waves. Where the water finds its way back out to sea, is a rip current.

"Don't get caught in one," Jon warns. "If you do, swim like hell to your right or left. Now, let's get out there." That swimming thing might be a problem, I think.

The Backside group stretches a kilometre along Wickaninnish Beach, black silhouettes floating, standing, then dropping back into the water between the beach's rocky headlands. I stand facing the waves, watching as the water persistently swells and bends. The wave's underbelly morphs into millions of tiny white fingers skittering along the surface water below the wave as it furls into itself.

I turn and jump onto my belly on the wide board, careful to place my sternum in the centre. The curl above the water fingers pushes the end of my board as I lay in the cobra, waiting until the wave touches my knees before I awkwardly attempt to pop up. The next wave I'm slightly left of centre and I drop into the whitewash before I have a chance to correct. The next, I fall off the back. The next I stand.

Slowly, a pink sun sets behind us. Several of our surf campers are waiting on the beach, surprised at how quickly balancing on a board fatigues arms, abs and legs. Dusk darkens our wet hair and shivering shoulders. It's a quiet ride to the Surf's Inn in Ucluelet, our home for the next four nights.

Sunlight pierces the bamboo curtain and I stir, noting a distinct tree-like stiffness. Everything aches, from my hip bones to my neck. My first instinct is to roll over in my bunk, tuck my face in the pillow and return to dreaming about frothy surf. But then Mr. Cuomo wakes me up.

*"I'm waxing down so that I'll go real fast  
I'm waxing down because it's really a blast  
I'm going surfing, I'm going surfing"*

There's a buzz in the kitchen. Everyone's up, everybody's sore, but no one's staying in bed. We charge to the bus and head to Long Beach. The beaches between Ucluelet and Tofino, known as the Long Beach Unit, stretch 25 kilometres. At 10 km, Long Beach is appropriately the longest beach of Cox, Radar, Combers, Wreck, Chesterman, Mackenzie and Wickaninnish beaches in the unit. A world-renowned surfer's playground. Few surfers other than us are within eyesight, however. Long Beach is immense. With its wide expanse and western exposure, Long Beach is the choicest Maui-style surfing in Canada. Vibrant green Sitka Spruce line the beach, the evergreen's resilient branches bent eastward from wind scouring. The grey sky matches the grey ocean and my visions of white sand beaches, towering palms and half-naked athletes vanish. This is Canada, and we're shivering in 6° C water, protected by head-to-toe neoprene.

But it doesn't matter. As a wave thunders toward me, I flip onto my stomach, paddle hard, feel the foam fingers tickle my toes and I jump up. Watching the beach, I lean with my hips, steering the board as I ride into shore.

Many of us are getting up, the infant forms of surfing happening more frequently than not. After eight hours in the water with consistent encouragement from our private surf instructors, we've all improved remarkably. Surfing is a sport I would never attempt without learning how to do it first. The nuances of balance on the board are better explained and anticipated first, before you're flipped upside down by an unpredictable wave, inhale several pints of saline and get banished to the shore in frustration.

Fatigue eventually sends us into the bus, hungry for BBQ salmon and beer. Backside has a feast waiting when we return, and we only have to drag two diehards out of the water before we can refuel for tomorrow.

I opt out of the Hot Springs Cove and whale watching tour for a quiet day in the surf. A few of us head to Wreck Beach on Florencia Bay. It's a smaller, more isolated horseshoe-shaped beach bound tight by rocks. I watch the surf from the top of a winding, roughed-in staircase.

*"The sea is rolling like a thousand pound keg  
We're going surfing, we're going surfing"*

Hauling my massive board down the stairs is a good warm-up for the challenging waves. Where the Wickaninnish and Long Beach waves were rhythmic and symmetrical, the rocks in and around Wreck Beach toss and churn the water without reason. High and crashing, I'm forced to depend on what little knowledge I've gathered of breaking waves in order to catch one.

Far into the ocean, tiny bodies rollick and roll over the massive swells, surfboards burped into the air as their riders are bucked by the water's force. I keep the water at chest level, faintly feeling the undertow slide around my ankles. I turn to look at the intimidating waves. They pile high, shoulders hunched as they charge. Before they reach me, their shoulders shrug, drop out their arms, and white-wash tendrils form below the swell. Here's where I hop on, safe from the power of its highest point not 20 feet before where I stood. It's a quiet ride into the shore, in sharp contrast to the thunderous waves crashing into rocks and onto each other in the near distance.

*"All along the undertow  
Is strengthening its hold  
I never thought it would come to this  
Now I can never go home"*

On the final morning of our five-day camp, it's drizzling and cold. We've come to accept the weather and recognize that if you're going to surf in Canada, you need not worry about shaved legs or how your shorts fit because you'll always be covered by neoprene.

Being immersed in surf and its culture for five days is a welcome reprieve from landlocked Alberta. If you've never connected with "Surf Wax America," go feel what the rollicking rhythm suggests. You won't be able to get it out of your head. **V**

*Backside's Surf Camp 2009 departs Edmonton and Calgary August 16 or 23*  
([backside.com/surf](http://backside.com/surf)).