

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

See a sample reprint in PDF format.

Order a reprint of this article now

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

MAY 3, 2008

'Gnarly, Dude'

Surfing schools and tours are targeting a generation that grew up with Gidget

By KELLY GREENE

Carol Stoney Bautista has lived in Southern California her whole life. But she didn't take her first surfing lesson until January, after retiring as a utility-company analyst at age 58.

"I have no intention of being a competitive surfer," she says. "I just want proficiency on the long board so I can go out and enjoy it."

Ms. Bautista figures she can use surfing as a way to interact more with people who live in the places where she and her husband plan to travel in retirement. Next year, for instance, they are planning to go to Australia.

With baby boomers who grew up with Gidget now heading into retirement, surf schools and tour operators are starting to target older travelers who want to hang 10, or at least stay upright, in such sunny spots as California, Hawaii and Central America. But being a beach bum is a thing of the past. These tours often include activities like massages, yoga and eco-tours, as well.

'Adventure' Trips

Among the offerings: surfing cruises aimed at people in their 50s and 60s to Mexico and the Caribbean; women-only weeklong tours in La Jolla, Calif., and near Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; and combination surfing/yoga tours to Costa Rica. Even Elderhostel Inc., a Boston-based educational-travel provider for people 55 and over, is in on the action.

On Elderhostel's "adventure" tours in Hawaii, for instance, participants can learn to surf off Waikiki Beach, kayak in Kauai and snorkel in Maui. The provider's intergenerational trips to Hawaii teach grandparents to surf alongside their grandchildren -- in addition to exploring active volcanoes and riding in a submarine 100 feet below the ocean's surface to check out reef life.

The starting cost for the 11-night adventure trip is \$2,621 a person (not including airfare). The starting cost for the nine-night intergenerational trip is \$2,410 per person.

No Fear

Randy Meyers, a 61-year-old retired botanist in Kotzebue, Alaska, went on a weeklong surfing "safari" for women along Mexico's Pacific coast in February. Ms. Meyers says she had dreamed of learning to surf since 1996, after watching surfers along North Carolina's Outer Banks during a family reunion.

"I was standing on the balcony watching these guys through my binoculars, and I was just mesmerized," she recalls. "I just wanted to do that."

So when she saw a mention of a surf camp in a women's athletic-clothing catalog, Ms. Meyers signed up.

The camp, Las Olas Surf Safari, is run by women's travel operator Manifesta Corp. of Carmel-by-the-Sea, Calif. Manifesta was formed 11 years ago by Bev Sanders after she went on a surfing trip with girlfriends.

Most of the tour's participants are beginners, which means "they don't come along with a war story or a fear, or a bad experience learning to surf with a boyfriend," Ms. Sanders says.

Surf and Salsa

The trips, which start at \$2,695 per person excluding airfare, also include lessons in salsa- and guacamole-making by local cooks, Mexican Huichol beading, and whale watching or baby-turtle release, depending on the season.

"It's not about turning out world-class surfers, although some of the ladies have gone on to do that," says Ms. Sanders, 54. "It's about the fun we have. We had an investment banker who quit her job to travel and start writing and surfing. There are ladies who go on to compete. Some of them may never surf again."

So, just how hard is it to learn to surf later in life?

"If you're comfortable swimming, there's a good chance you'll get up on a board," says Karen Lockwood, programs director for the Pacific Islands Institute in Honolulu, which coordinates the Elderhostel trips.

Participants get instruction on land at first, then practice in the water in groups of four or five surfers to one instructor. The teachers help students determine how the waves are rolling in and also help them push out, if need be. "A lot of it is timing," she says.

And upper-body strength definitely helps, says Ms. Meyers. She says she didn't anticipate "how hard it would be. It was very physically taxing. I've been running since November 2003. I've run a marathon and a couple of half-marathons, and I started doing push-ups a couple of months before I went. But I wish I had started the push-ups a lot sooner."

To prepare for future surfing trips, Ms. Meyers says, she may try swimming regularly this summer to build up her stamina. "It's upper-body strength and paddling that you need," she says. "The first day, if I stood up, I was over immediately. It was so discouraging."

Back on the Board

But the second day, Ms. Meyers stayed closer to shore and managed to stand up on her board. "I got so I could stand there, feel the water underneath, feel the board rocking back and forth, and attempt to make very gentle leanings to try to go right or left," she says.

What saved her: an hour of yoga every morning, with plenty of stretching, hourlong massages, and breaks spent "just sitting on the beach in the warm sun, chatting with some new friends, watching the action out on the water," Ms. Meyers says. "It just felt like it was the place I wanted to be, doing exactly that."

She is now planning a trip to New Zealand with her husband that will include surfing lessons, and she's thinking about buying a wetsuit so she can practice paddling. She also hopes to return to Las Olas.

"In two to three days of lessons, you can certainly expect to learn enough to stand up and ride to the beach, and have enough knowledge about surfing conditions and boards to go out confidently," says Lisa Mead, who owns Central Florida Surf School in Vero Beach. She thinks it's important for new surfers to learn "how to read the ocean and catch your own waves" rather than having to rely on an instructor's help to do so.

Early Retirees

Ms. Mead says her students include "quite a few 55-year-old early retirees who have a second home here and spend quite a bit of the winter down here."

Finding local surf instructors isn't a problem in popular surf destinations like Waikiki, Vero Beach, Huntington Beach, Calif., or along Costa Rica's coast. And they often include board rental as part of their hourly fee. But the quality of such lessons can be unpredictable.

There's a move afoot among surfing teachers to accredit schools and certify instructors through a three-year-old trade group, the National Surf Schools and Instructors Association. The group's Web site, nssia.org, has a directory of such schools and instructors, though their ranks are small so far.

For travelers who don't want to vet instructors on their own, there are organized trips, including cruises.

Robert Crancer, a 55-year-old cruise-industry marketer -- and surfer -- from Fullerton, Calif., went on a cruise with a few fellow surfers about 10 years ago. They took their boards along to see if they could negotiate getting someone to take them to good surfing spots in ports of call.

Different Levels

They did so. And since then, Mr. Crancer, who works for O'Donnell Tour & Travel Service Inc. (odonnelltravel.com), has organized more than a dozen surf cruises for as many as 30 surfers and additional "nonsurfer" family and friends along Mexico's Pacific Riviera. The cruises, on Carnival Corp.'s Holland America Line and Carnival Cruise Lines, cost about \$1,500 per surfer, which includes surf

lessons, board rentals and a surf shop at sea.

The trips "feature all the different types of waves for different level surfers, and we have surf schools at some of the beaches," Mr. Crancer says. The oldest surf-cruiser so far has been 80, he says, and many repeat surf-cruisers are in their 50s and 60s.

Just about everyone who comes "has a surf affinity," he says. "Even the nonsurfers start getting into the speak and the attire."

—Ms. Greene is a staff reporter for The Wall Street Journal in New York.

Write to Kelly Greene at encore@wsj.com

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com