

HOUSEBOATING THE RIDEAU CANAL ✨ GRASSLANDS NATIONAL PARK CAMP OUT ✨ BAY OF FUNDY ROAD TRIP ✨ PADDLING THE YUKON RIVER

CANADIAN *Traveller*

STAYCATION NATION

PLUS! How to travel the
world without leaving Canada



SUMMER/FALL 2020 \$6.95

DISPLAY UNTIL NOV. 30, 2020



PM 42720012

WETSUIT WISDOM

FIONA TAPP's initial surf experience had her riding waves of insecurity. What better place to squeeze back into a wetsuit and give surfing another try than at one of the largest all-female instructor surf schools in the world?

MY FIRST SURFING LESSON was an exercise in teenage humiliation. We shuffled around anxiously on the cold sand of a Welsh beach, pre-dawn, waiting for the wetsuit shack to open. Our teachers tried their best to cheer up the group of 14-year-old students on an adventure sports field trip, but there was no escaping the horror that was about to unfold. Under one another's unforgiving gaze and, of course, in sight of the boys, we were about to bare all by zipping up in a wetsuit that presented us practically naked, sheathed in tight black rubber and leaving nothing to the imagination. Every self-conscious bump and curve would be on display.

The thrill of catching a wave and giggling with my friends quickly replaced my embarrassment, but I still remember how I felt too big, too developed and too curvy to surf.

The paradox of surfing is that although it can be difficult for body-conscious people to brave the wetsuit—or, heaven forbid, the bikini required to participate—once you are beneath the surface of the water, you are truly free.

Paddling away from shore, all you hear are the waves and perhaps an odd seagull. For safety's sake, you can't get too close to others and the bobbing of the board upon the water lulls and soothes. It can be a very peaceful sport—and that's just when you're practising. I still haven't managed to stand up and ride a wave for more than a second or two, but I imagine it must feel almost transcendental.

AFTER FIVE PREGNANCIES AND one birth, my body no longer resembles the slender frame that I was so ashamed of on that Welsh beach, but once again, just before my most recent lesson, it was that fear of body judgment that occupied my every thought. ►

Surf Sister is a women-led surf school in Tofino, BC.



During the training and orientation session at the beautiful oceanfront Pacific Sands Beach Resort, in Tofino, British Columbia, I made self-deprecating jokes as the instructor looked for my size wetsuit. I posed for a cheesy selfie knowing I would despise the picture. I looked around at the other women, categorizing and ranking us by size in my mind, hating myself as I did so.

I then made the mistake of checking my reflection in the mirror. It's impossible to look good in a wetsuit, I told myself, just as the svelte instructor walked past looking every inch the *Blue Crush* movie star.

Surf Sister employs more than 30 staff members—all women—and though they'll teach anyone who wants to learn, they do offer women, in particular, a unique

on a surfboard before a wave knocks her off in a spray of salty seawater. Midway through our lesson as I tried, again and again, to get up on my feet, this young woman who made it all look so effortless continued to genuinely compliment and encourage me.

Slowly I began to believe her. I was getting better and it was getting easier, despite the exhaustion creeping in and the fact that without my glasses the coastline looked more or less like a steamy shower door. There was something addictive about the process. Paddle, position, push up, kneel, try to stand, fall, splash—and repeat.

I didn't want to stop. In fact, as the rain moved in and the air cooled, I was the last one still out on the water. My group beckoned me to come in and reluctantly I set my sights on one last wave.

On the beach on that day, I began to think beyond my size, even in a wetsuit. Learning to appreciate my body despite continuing to judge it harshly and wishing it was smaller has always been a work in progress.

But when it has been challenged, it's rarely let me down. This body, the



1

Catching the waves at Chesterman Beach.

1

2

Tofino is known as the surf capital of Canada.

experience. Located at the one of Canada's most famous surfing locations, this group of women oozes confidence, and it's quite contagious.

Batting off my worries and questions with simple explanations and tips, it was the most prepared I have ever felt before stepping into the ocean waves.

We surfed at Chesterman Beach in February and as such, were decked out in possibly an even more embarrassing getup than the standard wetsuit. To keep warm, we accessorized with little booties, gloves and even a tight-fitting hood. We looked like sad little turtles.

As our instructor led us through the sand-based tutorial, I envied her athleticism. The easy way she sprung up from laying on her tummy to balancing on the board was inspirational. But I realized it wasn't just her size that I coveted; it was her body confidence. She *trusted* her body; she knew it wouldn't let her down.

I used to be a teacher and I still appreciate the power of encouragement when learning a new skill. A "way to go" or "good job" is just as meaningful to a five-year-old learning to read as it is to an almost middle-aged woman kneeling



2

only one I'll ever have, has nurtured and fed a baby, and given love and comfort to the people I care about.

In extreme situations across the world, it has excelled. It has pushed on, through the pain during the last minutes of a dragon boat race, propelling our boat forward with my team to victory.

It has wiggled and shimmied on the stage delighting burlesque audiences. It has been strapped in and thrown off a building in New Zealand and has made its way down an impossibly high slippery waterfall in Peru.

It has squeezed through underground caves, swam in icy cold cenotes and trekked through rural Japan.

And it just happened to take a misty beach, a surf sister and a wetsuit to remind me that it's a brave, bold, capable body. **BT**