



Oregon Surf Adventures owner Rebecca Johnston tames the tide at Oswald West State Park.

Beach Break

On your next coastal tour, don't just stare out to sea: Dive in and feel the power of the Pacific at your feet.

STANDING WAIST-DEEP in swirling sea water near Cannon Beach, I squint through sideways rain toward the horizon; were it not for the Pacific's roiling waves, it'd be next to impossible to determine where gray sky meets gray sea. It's a spectacular, if somewhat sinister, scene, witnessed by me and the five or so other neoprene-clad surfers bobbing in the tamer waters of Oswald West State Park's protected cove.

"Welcome to Oregon surfing," says my sun-bleached instructor, Rebecca Johnston, the owner of Oregon Surf Adventures. "Surfers here are a different breed—it's not like you can put on your cute little Roxy bikini and go paddling out there. You have to be able to put up with a lot."

Like foul weather. And cold water. With its 190 days of rain and ocean temps that hover in the 50s, the Oregon coast is hardly recognized as an international surfing destination on the order of Oahu's North Shore, which is just fine with the small, tight-knit group of resident surfers who share this little secret: Oregon's beaches boast waves that rival those of northern California, but without the crowds. Yet.

Or so asserts Johnston, a 12-year veteran who has plied waves in Hawaii, Cali-

fornia and Central America. "People are beginning to realize what great waves we have out here," she says. "And with such easy access from Portland, surfing here is becoming more popular." In fact, Oregon hosted its first tow-in competition (in which Jet Skis tow surfers into the hungry jaws of waves towering more than 20 feet high) in 2005, and two new surf schools—



Oregon Surf Adventures and Northwest Women's Surf Camps—have opened on Oregon's north coast in the last two years.

A lesson with Oregon Surf Adventures begins inside its cozy Cannon Beach headquarters, where Johnston fits students with wet suits and surfboards. While it isn't easy to wiggle into the four-millimeter-thick neoprene suit, without it—and the booties and gloves—

I'd be functional (read: conscious) for less than two hours in the frigid Pacific, which is about 55 degrees in the winter and is actually colder in the summer, when the current brings waves from the north instead of the south.

To ride those swells, Johnston gives me a seagoing plank that stands nine feet from tail to nose and is close to three feet wide. "You want something that's going to give you stability and make it easier to stand up," Johnston explains. Because they put more surface area in contact with the water, longboards—those taller than eight feet—are less squirrely when riders try to stand up. The downside to these buoyant behemoths is that they're about as maneuverable as a TriMet bus; for easier turning—and more advanced riders—Johnston recommends a short-board (less than seven feet).

My particular brand of longboard is called a soft top, thus dubbed for the soft foam layer on top designed to protect my noggin—or someone else's—should head meet board in a fall or a collision. When you've got a bevy of beginners trying to pilot a fleet of canoe-size surfboards, the vast ocean quickly shrinks.

In fact, popular surf breaks attract so many riders that an informal etiquette system exists to ensure that everyone gets a turn. Johnston breaks it down: The basic rule is that each wave has only one rider. Out past the break line—where the big waves crest, eventually forming into smaller, more manageable ones—surf-

ers will line up playground-style, catch their ride, then circle back around to the end of the line. "Dropping in" is code for cutting in line, or paddling into someone else's wave when it's not your turn.

While we beginners won't be out in the "lineup" past the breakwater, the same rules apply to our flailings in the whitewash. "You also need to be aware of surfers riding those bigger waves in," Johnston explains, after diagramming the flow of traffic. "If you're paddling out, and someone is surfing in, it's your responsibility to get out of their way."

It takes two of us to tote my oversized surfboard the quarter-mile from Oswald West's parking lot to the beach, nicknamed Short Sands. After some shore-side paddling and pop-up practice—which really involves less popping and more gradual repositioning from stomach to knees to feet—Johnston declares me ready to ride.

In my first few attempts, I perfect the unintentional side dismount, otherwise known as the wipeout. But the water landings are soft, and I am undeterred, having felt the thrust of the wave as it

WADING POOLS

Get schooled in the ways of waves with a lesson from one of the north coast's surf outfitters—such as **Oregon Surf Adventures** (\$99 for a three-hour lesson; www.oregonsurfadventures.com), **Cleanline Surf Shop** (\$100 for a 3½-hour lesson; www.cleanlinesurf.com) and **Northwest Women's Surf Camps** (\$199 for a one-day camp; www.nwwomenssurf.com)—then grab your gear and hit one of these beginner-friendly beaches.

Indian Beach

2 miles north of Cannon Beach

Made famous in the final scene of *Point Break*, Indian Beach's wind-sheltered shore offers waves for all skill levels, but beginners should stay beach-right for mellower rides.

Oswald West State Park

10 miles south of Cannon Beach

Dubbed "Short Sands" because the shoreline shrinks to almost nothing at high tide, Oswald West is a scenic spot

to practice popping up on your board—and because there are plenty of other beginners doing the same, it's a genial place.

Oceanside

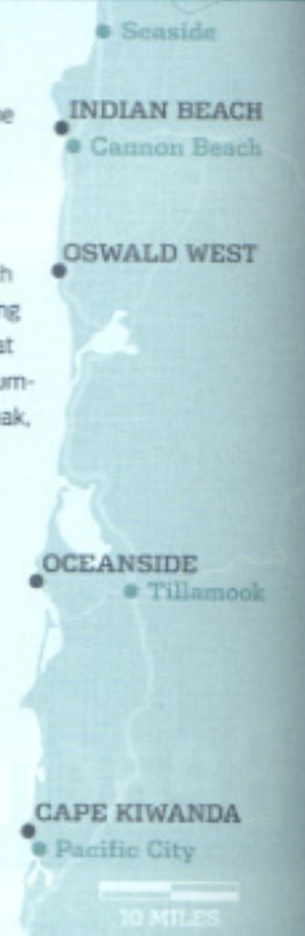
11 miles west of Tillamook

In the winter, this two-mile stretch of shore is a prime agate-collecting site, thanks to strong currents that wash away the sand, but in the summer the real gem is the beach break, which can get windy, but offers plenty of room to practice.

Cape Kiwanda

One mile north of Pacific City

Home to picturesque Haystack Rock, this beach has varied breaks that make it a favorite among all kinds of surfers. Neophytes can play in the gentle beach break in front of the parking lot, then walk across the lot for a well-earned burger from Pelican Pub & Brewery.



catches up with my board and sends me springing shoreward, like a giant hand pushing an invisible swing.

Somewhere around attempt No. 6 everything clicks: My feet stick, and suddenly I'm gliding in the cradle of an 18-inch wave, feeling the exquisite delight that harnessing the power of the sea inspires. I'm still grinning from cheek to windburned cheek when I tumble into the water two seconds later and

emerge from the surf to the knowing smiles of the other bedraggled rookies.

"Great day to surf, huh?" jokes one, nodding skyward.

I peer out at the stirred-up sea, at the mist wrapping its way around the stands of Sitka spruce on the cove's steep-sided hills, then back at a near-empty beach, ours for the savoring.

"Couldn't be better," I say, then turn and head back to sea, initiated. ●

▶ TRAIL OF THE MONTH



Ecola State Park Clatsop Loop Trail

Activity: Hiking

Why it's great: Minutes from the bustling boutiques of Cannon Beach, the Clatsop Loop Trail is the perfect spot to burn off that saltwater-taffy sugar high with a 2½-mile trek through forest awash in an aquatic symphony, from Indian Creek's melodic gurgle to the cymbal crash of the Pacific's pounding waves. Once used to connect Clatsop and Tillamook tribal villages, the trail climbs 800 feet through groves of 350-year-old Sitka spruce and delivers hikers to the edge of Tillamook Head's western face. Here, weary hikers are rewarded with spectacular vistas of Oregon whitecaps and the hardy tribe of surfers who ride them.

Distance: 2.5 miles round-trip

Time: Two hours

Route: From the north side of the parking lot, climb gradually along the banks of Indian Creek. The hike's halfway point comes at Hiker's Camp; a covered table, fire pit and cabins (free to overnighters) make it a good place to pause. Then follow the small side trail west to the edge of the headland, where you'll see a mystical seascape featuring the 62-foot-tall Tillamook Rock Lighthouse, 1.2 miles offshore. Return to camp and head south on the Clatsop Loop as it switchbacks through ancient meadows of huckleberry and salal. Complete your journey with a stop at Indian Beach, near the trail's end, where you can hunt for seashells or simply wiggle your toes in the sand.

Getting there: Follow U.S. 26 west to U.S. 101, bearing south toward Cannon Beach. At the first Cannon Beach exit, follow signs for Ecola State Park. Turn right on Fifth St. immediately after the Ecola Creek Lodge, and take the next right, following signs to Ecola State Park (\$3 day permit) for 1.6 miles. Inside the park, take the first right toward Indian Beach; the parking lot is 1.5 miles down a winding road. —Kristy Holland