

SURF UK

SURF UK

The Definitive Guide to Surfing in Britain

ALF ALDERSON

Third Edition



I must get down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide, is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied

John Masefield, 'Sea Fever'



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Rest Bay - South Wales

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Gabe deserting UK shores for some French beach breaks, which are almost as good as North East England. Not sure about that wettie though...

1. Foreword

Surfing in the UK is a mixed bag of tricks – sometimes it's heaven, often it's hell! Long flat spells and cold winter days can put many people off, but when the elements come together, surfing in Britain is comparable with the best in the world – I've travelled around the globe only to return home and find the perfect wave on my doorstep.

The climate may not be ideal but the variety of our coastline, in terms of both waves and scenery, is as good as you'll find anywhere, and you can discover every possible break a surfer could desire. It can be as fun or as radical as you want it to be.

Although I now live in France (work commitments – honest!) I still can't find anything to compare to sitting in the ocean off the UK coast and waiting to catch the pulse from a storm buzzing across the jet stream – it isn't a bad way to live when all's said and done.

Give it a go – I may see you out there...

Gabe Davies
Spring '08



Introduction

From the beach breaks of the UK's surfing epicentre – the South West – to the slab reefs of the North East, quality waves abound in England. Surfers have carved out hard-core communities in places like Lincolnshire and East Anglia, and the south coast has a bustling surf scene, too. England isn't just about Blake's green and pleasant land – it's a country teeming with surf culture and surf spots. Though if you do want to surf in the countryside – past cows, fields, trees and churches – you can do that, too. Just head to the Severn Bore, one of the world's weirdest waves.

Alex Wade, author of 'Surf Nation'

When the first edition of Surf UK was published in the early '90s I thought the sport had got about as big as it was going to get in the UK – which just goes to prove how wrong you can be.

Almost 20 years after my original 5000-mile circumnavigation of the UK coastline to research the book the growth in surfing continues and there are now few major towns in Britain where you can't buy a board and wetsuit, however far they may be from the sea.

Which means, I suppose, that there's more need than ever for a comprehensive UK surf guide because there are potentially more readers than ever before. However, that leads to the obvious complaint from the purists that books like this will just make it even more crowded in the water. Well, the purists may be right, but you could also argue that it'll spread the crowds out a bit. And as I pointed out in the introduction to the first edition, virtually all of the information contained within was provided by local surfers who knew it would be going into a guidebook.

I don't really feel that Surf UK has made any difference to the number of surfers at British breaks, it's just meant that those wave riders who use it have a better chance of scoring good surf when they're travelling to unknown coasts. And although a number of new waves have been 'discovered' since I did my original research you won't find them mentioned here. I figure that the 400 or so breaks featured here are enough for most people to go at, and that quieter and little-known waves should remain that way.

With or without Surf UK the surf is going to be busy as more and more people discover that surfing is a sport like no other and are drawn to organise their life around it. All it needs is a cool attitude and we can all still enjoy ourselves – even on a Bank Holiday at Fistral.

So remember, don't drop in, say hello when you paddle out at a new break and, above all, enjoy the waves.

*Alf Alderson
St David's, Pembrokeshire, Spring '08*

DON'T DROP IN!

Just in case you weren't sure, here it is – the golden rule of surfing.

The surfer nearest the curl (white water) has priority on the wave, and you should on no account take off on a wave if someone is already riding in this position.

2. How to Use This Guide

Much of the following may seem painfully obvious, but it might help you to get a better understanding of the guide if I briefly go through the way in which it's been put together.

First, the layout of the chapters. I've started with England, and perhaps not surprisingly Cornwall, because it's the most popular surf area in the country. From there Surf UK takes you eastward through Devon, along the south coast of England, then up the east coast.

This is followed by Scotland, described in an anti-clockwise direction, from the east coast up to the north coast, along to the west coast, and back down. The Outer and Inner Hebrides are also covered in the section on the west coast and there is a brief nod to the Orkney and Shetland Islands.

Next is Wales, described in a clockwise direction, from east to west along the south coast, then up to the north-west coast.

For each break you'll find a detailed rundown on the surf, followed by varying amounts of info on access, facilities and accommodation, as follows:

SURF

This includes the type of wave, the size and direction of swell required for it to work, any notable characteristics (fast and hollow, crowded, etc.), best stage of the tide, offshore wind direction and/or other winds

the wave may work on, any hazards (rips, rocks, kayakers, etc.), and suitability for beginners.

Whether you're surfing breaks that are well known to you or you're on surfari, you'll need a **tide table**. This is especially important in the UK, which has some of the biggest tidal ranges in the world – these can have a massive effect on the quality of a break. Tide tables for the year are usually available at surf shops and newsagents in each area and daily times of low and high tides can also be found in most local newspapers and on the Internet eg www.magicseaweed.com.

ACCESS

Any decent road map will get you to most of the breaks described in this book, although an Ordnance Survey Landranger map may be useful too in more remote areas.

The rest is easy enough – it consists of fairly straightforward details on the roads, footpaths and possible cliff scrambles you'll need to travel on or negotiate to get to each break.

You can assume that on most beaches you'll have to pay some outrageous and usually unjustified fee to use car parks between May and September, but you may find that parking is free in more remote areas.

FACILITIES

This section includes details such as refreshment facilities available at or near the break, whether it's patrolled by lifeguards, the nearest surf shops (where applicable), and in some cases, a few ideas for things to do after you've surfed or if it's flat.

ACCOMMODATION

This is simply very basic information on what's available locally in the way of accommodation such as caravan and campsites, hostels and

B&Bs. Info on websites for accommodation is provided at the start of each chapter.



When Gwenvr looks like this it's well worth the steep slog up and down the cliffs to get to the waves

Greg Martin/Surfpix

3. Cornwall

In Cornwall is two speeches, the one is naughty englyshe, the other is Cornyshe speche.

Andrewe Borde's 'The Fyrst Boke of the Introduction of Knowledge'
c.1540

Surfing has been part of the Cornish scene since visiting Aussie lifeguards introduced Malibu-type boards to the north coast over 40 years ago, and in the intervening years the sport has gone into hyperdrive to the extent that it's now a major contributor to the local economy.

The Cornish peninsula is ideally situated to pick up most North Atlantic swells, and whilst these unfortunately lose some of their power as they move shoreward due to the British Isles' long continental shelf, Cornwall is still well exposed to most swells. It also has the advantage of having a coastline that consists of an enticing mixture of beaches, cliffs, coves, inlets and headlands facing in all directions, so on any decent swell it's usually possible to also find decent waves.

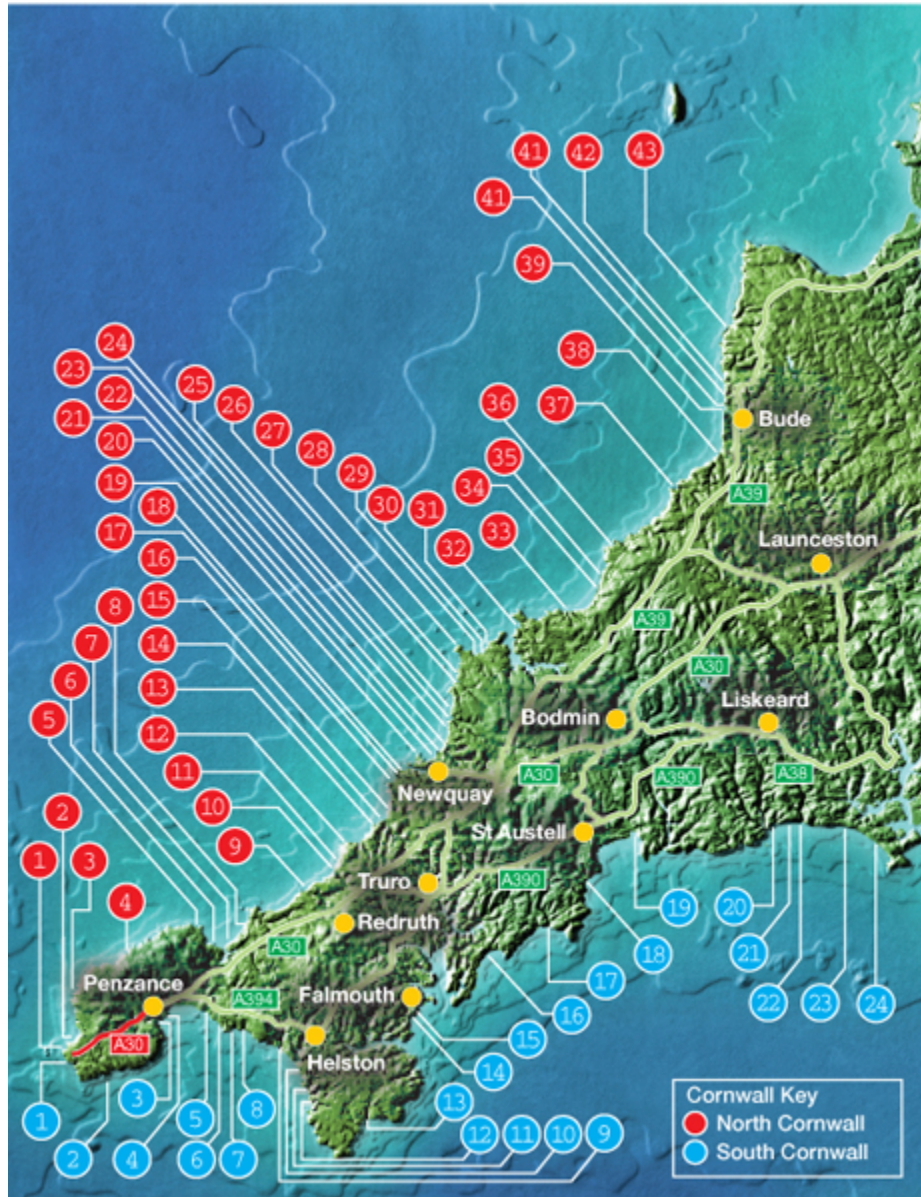
Cornwall has, arguably, the biggest and most consistent surf in England (there are people in the north east who may disagree but we won't get involved with that ...). This, along with air and water temperatures that are the mildest in the UK, has led to the county becoming the focal point for what's happening on the UK surf scene – and it's a situation that seems unlikely to change much in the future. Of course, along with that comes all the hype, tat and space wastage

associated with all the surf wannabes, hangers-on and idiots who orbit the edges of the Cornish surf scene, but you can usually avoid the worst of that with a bit of effort.

CLIMATE AND WATER TEMPERATURE

Year-round surfing in Cornwall is no problem. Warmed by the Gulf Stream, and with mild but moist prevailing SW winds, water and air temperatures rarely get unbearably cold.

That's not to say it doesn't get chilly in winter though. At this time of year the average air temperature is about 7° C (45° F), with water temperatures as low as 8–9° C (46–48° F). You'll need a winter steamer, boots, probably gloves, and possibly a hood – depends on your threshold of tolerance. Obviously not idyllic conditions, but winter has the advantage of producing the most consistent and powerful surf.



CORNWALL

Spring gives a gradual rise in both air and water temperatures so it's not unusual to see people wearing summer steamers by mid-May, and you can also get some deep lows in the Atlantic being held at bay by high pressure over the UK, producing excellent surf and weather.

Summer sees the surf drop and the temperature rise. Average air temperatures are around 21° C (70° F), but it can, and frequently does, get a lot warmer. Water temperatures will vary from 13° C (55° F) in

early summer up to 18° C or more (the mid sixties F) in late summer. The surf is generally small, but the odd impressive swell comes through now and again. However, this is the holiday period, so as soon as the surf picks up, every man and his dog (and his dog's mate) will be in the water, particularly at popular spots such as Newquay.



Pray for surf
Greg Martin/Surfpix

You won't need anything more than a summer steamer at this time of year, and on sunny days a spring suit may well suffice – even board shorts if it's really hot.

Late summer into autumn has the best surf conditions, and the additional advantage that the crowds will have thinned as the holiday season draws to a close. Water temperatures are at their highest, air

temperatures are still pleasant, and the surf starts to pump through quite consistently from deep lows out in the Atlantic throughout the autumn. Often the lows are still tracking well north, having little effect on the weather but giving day after day of clean groundswells.

As it gets later into autumn, temperatures obviously fall, and by early October you'll be thinking of getting out the winter steamer again, to be gradually followed by the boots, gloves and hood as the New Year approaches.

Some sort of wave will usually result from any North Atlantic low pressure system below about 992 mb – obviously the lower the better. If this coincides with high pressure over the British Isles you can expect the perfect combination of clean groundswell and offshore winds. The north coast is more exposed to these swells and thus has more consistent surf than the south Cornwall coast.

You'll find once you're in Cornwall that local TV, radio stations and newspapers provide regular surf reports for the area throughout the week in addition to the plethora of web-based surf reports.

OTHER STUFF

There are no real hazards in the water apart from weever fish, which live on the sea floor off sandy beaches in shallow water and can give a bad sting which may need professional attention. It's not unusual at more isolated breaks to find seals out in the line-up, and you may also see dolphins, porpoises and maybe even harmless basking sharks.

The tidal ranges are exceptionally large and these naturally affect the surf. If a break is recommended as being best at a particular stage of the tide, get there then; there may be nothing at all at other stages!

Sea pollution is seldom a problem, and as the home of the renowned environmental group Surfers Against Sewage (see chapter 14) the issue of the coastal environment continues to have a high profile.



The end of a long journey – clean Atlantic lines roll ashore near Land's End

Greg Martin/Surfpix

Despite being outnumbered by visiting surfers, most Cornish surfers retain a pretty laid-back approach to what, for many, really is a way of life – in some families four generations may surf. This commitment to surfing also means that the standard of wave riding here is amongst the highest in Europe, as befits a region that continues to produce world-class surfers of the likes of Russ Winter, Alan Stokes, Ben Skinner, Spencer Hargreaves, Sam Bleakley and Lee Bartlett.

On the cultural front, Cornwall is an ancient Celtic region known in the native tongue as Kernow and you'll invariably see the regional flag – a white cross on a black background – on flagpoles and bumper stickers as you drive around. There are moves afoot to revive the original Cornish language, and although the area suffers from lack of employment opportunities in common with many other rural parts of the UK, this revival along with developments such as the much lauded Eden Project have helped to create a certain pride and dynamism about the county.

GETTING THERE AND GETTING AROUND

The three main routes into Cornwall are the A39 north coast road (which takes you past many quality breaks), the A30 across Dartmoor and the A38 across the River Tamar from Devon. All of these will be crammed with traffic in summer, as will the smaller A and B roads which lead to the coast – patience IS a big virtue when driving through Cornwall in summer.

You can also fly into Newquay Airport which gives almost instant access to the surf along the north coast.

STAYING THERE

As the UK's major surf and beach holiday destination there's a huge range of accommodation options (although these will be more limited in winter) from campsites through to B&Bs, self-catering, hotels and numerous surf hostels. If you're visiting in peak season (July–early September) it's a good idea to book ahead. A good one-stop shop for accommodation and activity/visitor info is www.visitcornwall.co.uk; 01872 322900.

USEFUL WEBSITES

Cornish surf conditions: www.magicseaweed.com;
www.cornwall.co.uk/surfing/surf-report.htm

Public transport: www.cornwall.gov.uk

THE SURF

For convenience Cornwall is divided into two sections – north coast and south coast, with an arbitrary dividing line between the two at

Land's End.

Beach break surfing is the norm around West Penwith, where quick changing, fast moving tides, and relentless winter swells shift sandbars around regularly. After periods of either flat surf or east winds, the sandbanks get good at Godrevy, Gwithian and Sennen. Pulse in a 4-foot swell with a 10-second plus period and these breaks come alive. They are rarely heavy, but usually peeling and always fun.

Sam Bleakley, Sennen local, pro longboarder and former European champion

Cornwall North Coast

1. Sennen Cove

SURF

The most south-westerly surf beach in the UK, and one of the most consistent breaks in Britain on account of its exposed West Penwith location, although the adjoining beach of Gwenver is usually bigger. A WNW-facing beach break, with left- and right-hand peaks up and down its length. It tends to be best from low to mid/high tide but is affected by shifting sands, which can vary the stage of the tide at which it works best.

Best in SE or E winds, which are offshore. Can hold a good-sized swell and may have a wave when everywhere else is flat.

A good place for beginners and experienced surfers alike, as the waves tend to increase in size as you move north up the beach, so you can choose the size of wave you feel happiest with. Watch out for rips though, especially at low tide, and rocks at the south end of the beach.

ACCESS

To get there take the A30 towards Land's End, then right on a minor road in Sennen village and down the steep hill to Sennen Cove.

FACILITIES

Car park above beach – spaces at a premium in summer so you may have to park in a field above the beach and slog down. Lifeguards in summer. Chapel Idne surf shop above the beach is friendly and well stocked and also does board hire, and there's a surf school, a great cafe, changing rooms, toilets, pubs and hotels – go to www.sennenbeach.com for more info. On the other hand you could visit the nearby Land's End Experience if you want to see how to wreck a once lovely natural environment...

Webcam – www.chapelidne.com

ACCOMMODATION

Caravan parks and campsites in Sennen and Crows-an-Wra. Youth hostel at Kelynack, just outside St Just, and good value dorm accommodation is available at Whitesands Lodge (www.whitesandslodge.co.uk; 01736 871776) above the beach.



Calm dawn conditions greet another autumn swell, Sennen

Greg Martin/Surfpix

2. Gwenver Beach

SURF

To the north of Sennen, the beach breaks at Gwenver are fast and punchy and tend to work better at low and mid tide, although they're affected by shifting banks. At the north end of the beach there's a great right-hander, breaking on a sand and rock bottom, which is best around low-mid tide. Gwenver picks up more swell than any other beach in Cornwall, so if it's flat here it'll be flat everywhere. SE to E winds are offshore. OK for beginners, but beware of rips at the north end of the beach.

ACCESS

Either walk from Sennen Cove along the beach – about a mile – or drive back up the hill from the Cove and take the minor road to Escalls, where you'll find limited parking above the beach at Tregiffian Farm. It's not easy to find without a detailed map. The car park is a couple of hundred feet above the beach and it's hard, steep work coming back up after a long session.

FACILITIES

None.

ACCOMMODATION

See Sennen.

3. Priest's Cove

SURF

A right-hand point break which works on swells from SW to N. SW to SE winds are offshore. Not recommended for beginners as there are

no lifeguards here.

ACCESS

Take A3071 into St Just, a narrow lane leads from St Just to the cove.

FACILITIES

Car park above beach. Occasionally an ice cream van. Toilets in car park. Nearest shops in St Just.

ACCOMMODATION

See Sennen.



Classic Penwith line-up, SW Cornwall
Greg Martin/Surfpix

4. Porthmeor

SURF

This is the small beach at the north end of St Ives with peaks which vary as the tide changes. Low tide produces a fast, hollow wave which has a tendency to close out; at mid tide there's a better wave giving longer rides; and high tide produces well-shaped peaks and a heavy shorebreak on the inside.

The peaks shift around, although there's a pretty consistent right-hander off the 'island' at the east end of the beach. There's also a peak known as 'The Boiler', so named after an old ship's boiler half-buried in the sand. This is a fast, hollow wave breaking in shallow water which often closes out, but if you're into taking off, pulling in and getting barreled briefly before being nailed, it might just suit you – this makes it popular with spongers.

There's a rip running from left to right along the beach, but it can be a hard paddle out on a big day as there's no longer an obvious rip available to help you out. Picks up swell from SW to N; southerly winds are offshore. Not suitable for beginners at low tide. Popular with the St Ives locals and not easy to get a wave on busy days.

ACCESS

In summer it's not usually worth the hassle of trying to drive through town to the beach, just park as near as you can and walk. In the off-season you might be able to park above the beach.

FACILITIES

There are lifeguards in summer, a surf school and plenty of surf shops, bars, cafes, etc. in St Ives, plus public toilets above the beach. A good après-surf location is the ISObar on Street-An-Pol, whilst Tate St Ives above the beach is worth checking out if you're in need of some culture.

Webcam – www.sloop-inn.co.uk

ACCOMMODATION

A massive range of options in and around St Ives from campsites to B&Bs and hotels, but in summer spaces will be at a premium. Try www.stives-cornwall.co.uk for up-to-the-minute info.

5. The Breakwater, St Ives

SURF

This wave breaks off Carn Crows, just north of the old breakwater. A long, often hollow left-hander. It needs a big swell to work, and is affected by ever-shifting sands. When the swell gets really huge it can be one of the only surfable waves on the north coast and on these occasions it may get crowded simply because there's nowhere else to surf. Best from low to mid tide. Southerly winds are offshore. Watch out for strong currents. No lifeguards.

ACCESS

May be difficult in the summer.

FACILITIES

Shops, cafes and public toilets. Lifeguards in the summer.

When the prevailing south-west winds blow, the charming and cosmopolitan town of St Ives becomes the focus, where punchy peaks break at Porthmeor, best on the dropping tide.

Sam Bleakley, pro longboarder and former European champion

6. Hawks Point

SURF

A left-hand beach break breaking off rocks to the west end of Carbis Bay. Needs a really big swell and produces a wave right through from low to high tide. It can work when everywhere else is closed out and the prevailing SW winds are offshore here. Generally OK for beginners but beware of rips and note that there are no lifeguards. It's invariably very crowded, especially in summer.

ACCESS

Difficult to get to – there's no parking, so you have to walk down the cliff path. You can also get there from Lelant, but it's a long hike through the golf course by the church and along the beach.

FACILITIES

None.