

Learning to be a surfer dude in Carlsbad, Calif.

By Bob Carden

March 7, 2013

The monster wave approached. It had to be 20 or 30 feet. Undaunted, I paddled forward. Well, all right, maybe it's more like 2 or 3 feet. But does size really matter?

I jumped onto the board, turned into the crest and caught it. And for three mind-numbing seconds, I stood up — love handles dancing in the air.

Dude, I'm surfin'.

[Details, Carlsbad, Calif.](#)

There are worse places to be in the summer than Carlsbad, Calif. About 35 miles north of [San Diego](#), the beach town has bright sun, good bars and restaurants and oh-so-tasty waves. It doesn't get much more SoCal than this. The weather is about 75 degrees, the water temperature about 70. If you want to learn to surf, this is the place.

This was an end-of-summer vacation with my wife and two teenagers. A four-day surf camp promised good weather, physical activity and maybe even a remedy for a midlife crisis. Surfing lessons are cheaper than a Mercedes convertible and safer than friending your recently divorced high school flame on Facebook. And it rocks. Just ask Rusty, Keenan or Evan.

They were our surfing instructors. We met them on the beach across from the hotel. Thick of hair and bicep, they were young, animated and good-looking. I hated them on sight. Well, I wanted to but just couldn't. They were enormously energetic, encouraging and likable. "You rocked that wave, dude."

Did I mention Rusty's abs? Never mind, my wife did. "Are they a four-pack or a six-pack?" she wondered.

Surfing is harder than it looks. As is the case with most things, the younger you start, the better you adapt. My son and daughter were standing on the board after about 15 minutes in the water. My wife and I are in our 50s — though I'm on the wrong end of the decade — and it took us a lot longer. But I was determined to be a Surfer Dude and turn my wife into a Surfer Babe — at least for a week.

It's worth it just for the coolness quotient, like learning to talk and act like a Surfer Dude. To wit: A few years ago we went to San Diego for a few days. My son mentioned this to Keenan and asked whether he liked the city.

“SD rocks, I do PB on the reg,” said Keenan. (Translation: I enjoy San Diego and I go to Pacific Beach — one of the city’s main beaches — often.) Keenan then asked us if we were going back.

“I don’t know, Keenan,” I said. “Not sure if we can get to SD or PB because we’re planning to drive north through the OC to spend a day or two in LA.” Nailed it.

All aboard

The first day, we learned basic technique. You lie on your stomach, with your toes touching the end of the board. If you’re a beginner, you first get up on your knees, then stand with your feet about three feet apart, knees bent. Instructors launch you into a breaking wave. You have to learn to stand before paddling to catch a wave.

The first lesson lasted two hours, and that was enough. As is true in much of California, the waves in Carlsbad come in sets. So you tire quickly trying to cut through them to get back out to the break point.

Learning to snow ski, you start with short skis. It’s the opposite with surfing. Beginning boards are 9 to 10 feet long and hard to handle. “It’s the stability, man. You need that buoyancy,” says Rusty.

After two hours, I’d had enough buoyancy and needed a soft towel and a cold beer. And Carlsbad has plenty of options for that.

For lunch, we walked across the street from the beach to a place called Dini’s by the Sea and sat on the shaded outdoor patio and watched the waves. Halfway through lunch, one of the owners showed up with a trayful of a chilled concoction of banana, Irish whiskey and cream. He passed the drinks out free to all his customers. I could get used to this.

The second day, we were sunburned and sore. Overusing seldom-used muscles does that to you. Still, we persisted and arrived on the beach at 9:30 a.m. We did get better; not good, but better. We took the next two days off till our third and fourth final lessons and decided to explore Carlsbad and its environs.

Around town

The city of more than 100,000 has seven miles of pristine coastline. As in much of California, the beaches are below a bluff. You have to walk down steps or a ramp to get to the sand.

Carlsbad was settled in the 19th century and is named after the Karlsbad spa in the present-day Czech Republic, because mineral water found here had the same chemical qualities as Karlsbad spa water. In fact one of the town’s founders was a German immigrant who marketed the mineral water as a cure for skin and stomach ailments.

The weather is pretty much perfect. Even in winter, the average high is in the 60s and lows are in the 40s.

The world's first skateboard park, Carlsbad Skatepark, was built here in 1976. Olympic snowboarder, skateboarder and totally stoked dude Shaun White is from here. Legoland is on the outskirts of town.

There are many shops, restaurants galleries, etc., within walking distance of the beach. The Pizza Port Brewing Co. in the center of town is a local favorite. Lots of great homemade brews, decent pizza, crowded, loud and fun.

The Coaster, a commuter train that travels from Oceanside to San Diego, runs through the middle of town. More than 20 trains run on weekdays, and it's a great way to experience the dramatic scenery of San Diego County. The Carlsbad Lagoon near Interstate 5 rents jet skis, kayaks, boats and paddleboards. The place is loaded with water toys. It's a fun place to spend an afternoon.

Even if you don't like horse racing, you have to see Del Mar racetrack. Situated near the ocean in the upscale town of Del Mar, 15 miles south of Carlsbad, the track is open from mid-July until right after Labor Day. It was built in 1937 by a group that included celebrities Bing Crosby, Jimmy Durante and Pat O'Brien. Seabiscuit became famous at Del Mar. It's difficult for four people — each betting different horses in each race — not to have at least one winner in the course of a day. But we managed it. I'm a worse handicapper than surfer, and that's scary. But this is a great place to lose money.

One tip: Del Mar can get crowded. Getting in and out of the parking lot is a pain. Instead, we drove to the neighboring town, Solana Beach, had lunch at Chief's Burgers & Brew, parked and took a free double-decker bus to the track. It's a five-minute drive, drops you at the entrance and makes the loop throughout race day. So there's never a wait. FYI, Solana Beach has a commercial street called Cedros Avenue Design District. It's a compact, pedestrian-friendly avenue with loads of funky antiques stores, designer shops and artsy enclaves. Not typical Surfer Dude fare, but a fun way to spend an hour or two.

Still resting sore surf muscles, we spent the next day at San Diego Zoo Safari Park, which is nowhere near San Diego. It's just outside Escondido, about 32 miles northeast of San Diego and 40 miles almost due east from Carlsbad. While the weather on the SoCal coast is ideal, that's not so much the case as you travel east. The Safari Park is in the San Pasqual Valley. If it's 75 in Carlsbad, it's probably 95 degrees in San Pasqual. Keep that in mind. And forget all that pap about "well, there's no humidity, so it's not that bad." Yes, it is — 98 degrees is 98 degrees.

The cost of admission includes a 30-minute tram ride through the park, where you can see — up pretty close — the best that Africa has to offer: elephants, giraffes, etc. There are also petting goats, bat caves and monkeys. And for an extra \$5, you can feed the giraffes. But go early, before that "no humidity" afternoon sun starts sucking the life out of you.

If you only have time for one big attraction in the Carlsbad/San Diego area, it's SeaWorld. Pricy, but worth it. SeaWorld is almost 200 acres of dolphin shows, rides, sharks, Shamu, penguins, pirates. Many people attend,

but it never seems crowded; the layout includes wide pedestrian walkways and squares. It's in the beautiful Mission Bay area of San Diego and is open throughout the year.

We tried to have dinner in San Diego on the way back to Carlsbad. Bad idea; the city's too popular. We went to the redeveloped Gaslamp Quarter. It's loaded with great restaurants, beautiful architecture and people, lots of people. We drove around for 20 minutes and couldn't find a parking space or an empty lot. Downtown SD rocked too much for us that night. And the Padres were playing in the Petco baseball stadium, sucking up most of the parking in the area.

Standing tall

Back to Carlsbad and our final days on the boards. Veteran surfers by now, we lugged our boards confidently toward the water. Keenan, a single father and former marketing executive, said that the pay isn't great for surfing instructors, but there are other benefits.

"Got two phone numbers yesterday," he said. "I think it's going to be a good night."

We wrapped up after two hours in the water. The kids were riding waves, while my wife and I stood up long enough to be videotaped and posted online.

Not sure how often we'll continue our new hobby. Surfing, I figure, can be like fishing. Sometimes it's best when the line's bobbing in the water, and the fish just won't bite. Keeps things simple and relaxed. Same with surfing — sometimes you just want to lie on that board and not be bothered by any waves.

Carden is a documentary filmmaker based in Washington.

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