

# LAKE SURFISTAS

*Women breaking the mould and surfing the Great Lakes*

words SHAZIA MAZHAR

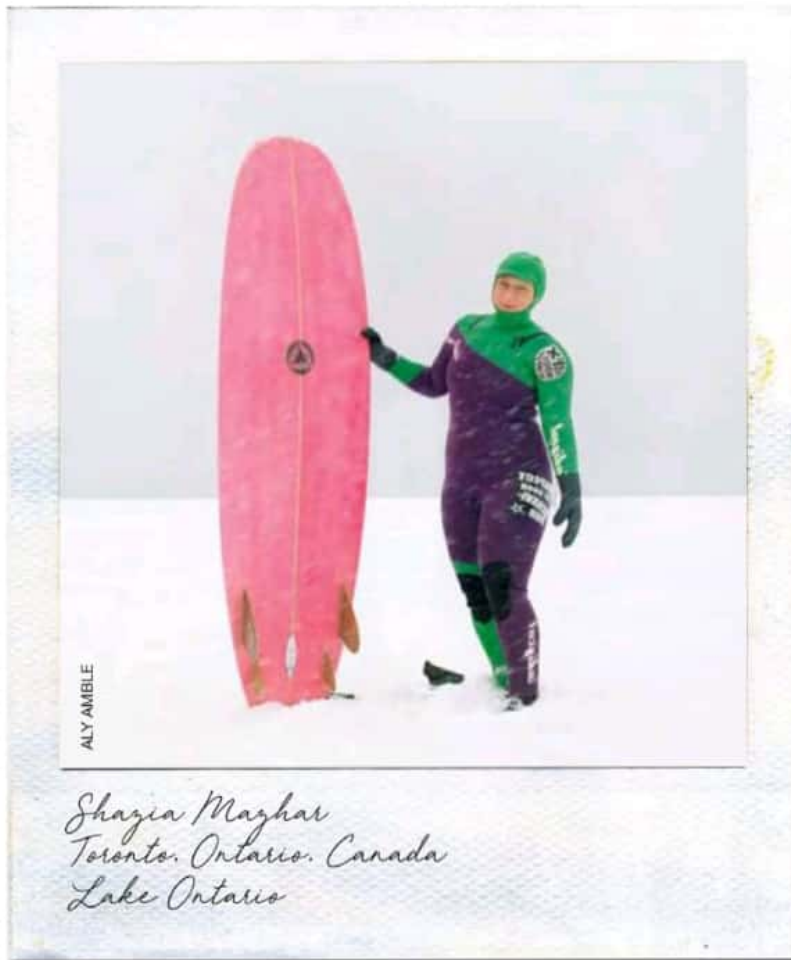


**G**ender equality in modern surfing has been on a journey for some time, only recently seeing tangible change in professional competitions. Surf girl communities, camps and tours have grown around the world, building inclusive spaces for women to learn and grow. Sitting along the border of the USA and Canada, the Great Lakes community is no different. Surfing the lakes – harnessing the wind swells, winter gales and many kilometres of fetch – is not for the faint hearted. While women have long been a part of this

history, until recently it has been just a small and quiet group. Seeing an opportunity to bring more women to the line up, a few years ago a small meet-up, followed by an online community was born, called the Lake Surfistas.

Since then, more and more women across all five Great Lakes have surfed for the first time, told their stories from years past, and build a sisterhood of hearty, freshwater mermaids. The women who run into the frigid lakes in the middle of blizzards and emerge with iced faces are not the surf girls we may imagine.

Their stories show that no matter age, ethnicity, body type, or personal history, the passion for surf is born of the soul. Whether it be on the Great Lakes, the Gold Coast, Cornwall, or San Juan del Sur, around the world surf women create a beautiful mosaic, dancing and weaving stories upon the waves, each honouring their journey, their body and passion. Here are four of their stories.



*Shazia Mazhar  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
Lake Ontario*

**Shazia, how do you break the mould in surfing?**

I have a condition called alopecia, which means my body fights against my hair. I don't have any hair anywhere. It's been something I've battled with my whole life, and in the last decade I've finally started to come to peace with it. I need to take care in the sun, so I learned to surf wearing a baseball hat. I also must manage my body temperature in the cold conditions, as I don't have arm or leg hair to hold in the heat. A few years ago, I started a large tattoo project on my head, and that gave

me more confidence to be out there with it showing. In the line-up I'm easily recognizable!

**What has surfing given you?**

I was going through some big transitions in my life when I started surfing, and since then it's become a centrepiece to who I am. It's the one sport where I'm not competitive, the one place that gives me peace while also pushing my limits. Through travel, surfing brought me to a place I now consider a second home – northern Nicaragua. I am there multiple times per year and

have so much gratitude for the local community. When not travelling, I brave the cold and snow to take advantage of the beautiful lake at my front door. I feel lucky to have salty and freshwater waves to play on throughout the year. I helped to grow our local community of women that surf on the lakes and facilitate our Lake Surfistas group. These women inspire me every day! Being able to show newer surfers how one can progress is something I love to give back.



*Sarah Stilgenbauer  
Cleveland, Ohio, USA  
Lake Erie*

**Sarah, how do you break the mould in surfing?**

I'm a late-in-life surfer, I had zero experience with board sports, no history of consistent athleticism, and I live on the smallest of the great lakes – Lake Erie. Physically, I don't really look like a surfer because I don't look particularly athletic. Also, serving as a carer to my parents for the past 2.5 years has moved me even further from that. I was talking to a guy in the line-up in Maui this year who told me that if he hadn't seen me surf, he never would have believed that I was a surfer, much less one that learned

on the Great Lakes. That was a great moment for me.

**When did you become a lake surfer?**

I think it was 2013. I was cycling on a path headed home when a van with two surfboards passed me going the other direction. I turned around and followed them to the boat launch. I learned that they had stand-up paddleboards (SUPs), and they gave me the card of a guy who was opening a local SUP and surf shop. I bought a board and that July I went out in a windstorm for my first ever

SUP surf session at age 37. I wore a life vest, had a bunch of fun knee rides, and I was hooked. Whenever there was any hint of a wave, I'd gear up and go out and went straight into winter surfing. I love the thrill of the glide. It's addictive. I'll take the trade-off of poor conditions and an empty line-up over ideal conditions and a crowded line-up any day.



*Sonia Jaafar  
Markham, Ontario, Canada  
Lake Ontario*

**Sonia, how do you break the mould in surfing?**

I always wanted to surf, even as a little girl in industrial Sheffield, England. I am a mum of a 5-year-old daughter, and I have been a police officer for almost 20 years. My last 10 years have focused on investigating drug crimes and internet child pornography. When I returned to work after maternity leave I instantly felt the tremendous burden I carried from investigating these hideous crimes against children. What I thought was stress being a

new mum back at work was quickly diagnosed as chronic PTSD. I have actively worked on my recovery, but my trauma has crept into all aspects of my life including my surfing. Fear is an everyday symptom of PTSD and now I must honour and respect this fear when I surf. Eventually I learned that I surf for me and no one else. I now know to surf within my comfort levels and to experience the bliss and peace that the ocean brings me. I push myself to improve every time I go out, but if my head says 'no', I smile a little smile and paddle in.

**What are your hopes for your daughter related to surfing?**

I met and married another surfer and I want our daughter, Coral, to love surfing for whatever it is for her. I want it to be place free from judgment and exclusion, where she can find the same joy, bliss and peace it brings me. My surf community is my surf family; they are important to me because we share the same passion, are motivated to surf in the most extreme weather conditions, and have positivity for the sport and for life.



ERIK WILKIE

*Yvonne (Vonnie) Wilkie  
Webster, Wisconsin, USA  
Lake Superior*

**Vonnie, how do you break the mould in surfing?**

I grew up on Pike Lake in the St. Croix Chippewa's Indian reservation, Webster, Wisconsin. Aside from my daughter, I'm the only other woman who is St. Croix Chippewa who surfs on Lake Superior. Watching surfing in the Gidget, Beach Blanket Bingo and Blue Hawaii movies, I had the misconception that it would be an easy sport to take up. I was also afraid of the sharks and the power of the ocean waves. At 55 years old, I now enjoy the adventure of driving the 90 miles one way in extreme weather

conditions to surf on Lake Superior around Duluth, Minnesota!

**What drives your passion to surf and ties you to the water?**

My tie to Lake Superior is my great, great, great, great, great grandparents, who wintered on the shores of Lake Superior in the early 1800s. It's my ancestral home. I feel most comfortable around water (lakes, rivers, wetlands or oceans) and enjoy swimming, water skiing and sailboarding. I stand-up paddleboard too, but prefer surfing when there are waves. My passion for surfing comes

from the peace I feel when I'm surfing; it's a spiritual experience for me.

Looking back at the history of surfing, from Hawaii to Southern California to the Great Lakes, surfers have, and I believe will continue, to be advocates for clean waters. We are blessed here on Lake Superior to surf in relatively clean, pollutant free waters and if we wish to continue surfing in clean waters, we must protect the waters on this planet.

*Follow Shazia Mazhar on Instagram at @cybershaz and the Lake Surfistas community at @lakesurfistas*