

all in this together

Lake Surfistas help others catch



Robin Pacquing catching a wave. Taken in March 2016 in Mississauga, ON.

the latest Great Lakes wave. BY KIM SCHNEIDER



The Lake Surfistas at a summer meetup event.

PHOTO AT RIGHT BY ABDUL ABD KAHAR; PHOTO ABOVE BY BRUISED CAMERA

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With the air temperature hovering just below zero on this late winter day, most Toronto residents were likely rejoicing over the system of underground passages and malls that let them totally avoid the elements. But not Robin Pacquing. Between clients, the Canadian realtor was checking the end of her street to see if an oncoming storm system was whipping up waves big enough to inspire a plunge into icy Lake Ontario.

Cofounder of a group called the Lake Surfistas, Pacquing has made surfing the Great Lakes an integral part of her life. She's also made a mission out of helping other women (and men and families) make it part of theirs too, with the benefit of greater physical and mental health, and a side benefit of greater awareness of lake cleanup and conservation needs.

"We want to show everyone that you don't have to be young or super fit to get into the water here, and that water really does heal us," Pacquing says. "It's unfortunate that where we live in Toronto, people haven't really endorsed recreation on Lake Ontario. We want to show women and everybody else that you can."

Surfing on the Great Lakes does bear some resemblance to catching a wave in Hawaii,



Robin Pacquing



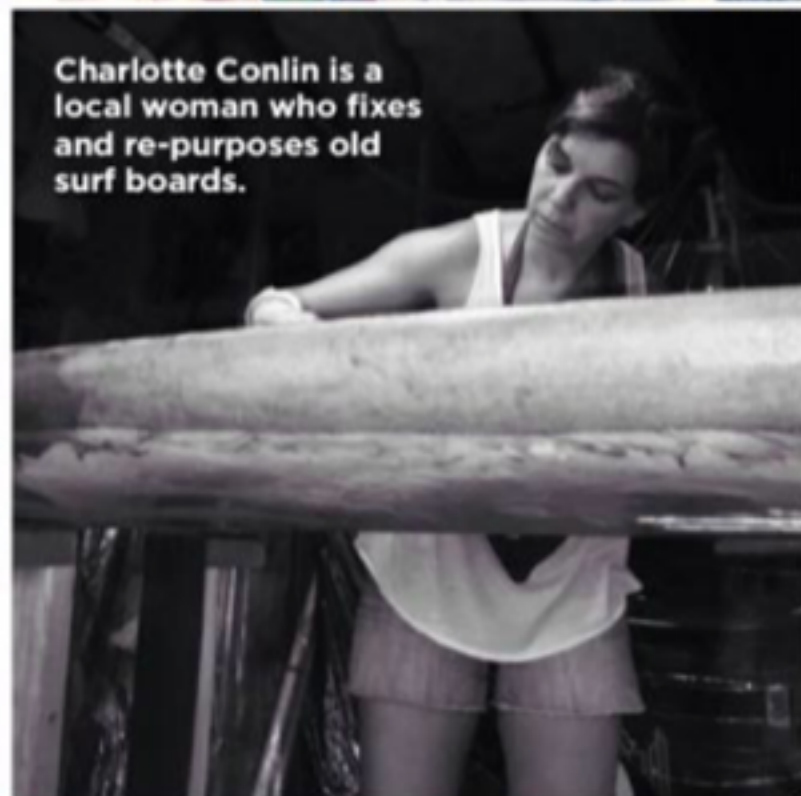
Jessica Rando instructing at the 2016 Lake Surfistas event in Port Colborne, ON.



Sonia Jaafar and Robin surfing at Bluffers Park in 2010.



Charlotte Conlin is a local woman who fixes and re-purposes old surf boards.



where Pacquing learned the sport. But there are distinct differences, even once you get past the fact that the surfing lifestyle is more commonly associated with margaritas near an ocean than hot chocolate on a frozen lakefront.

One perk is that there are no sharks in the Great Lakes; however, you're also less buoyant in freshwater than salt. Waves react differently. And the temperature brings a mental block (and literal danger if you're not properly dressed) because the best surf conditions tend to exist when the lake is at its most frigid. Come summer, when the Great Lakes are at their most pleasant, humidity creates a bubble around Toronto, as it does over much of the rest of the Great Lakes. This bubble blocks out wind and brings summer lake calm, which is great for a sweet dip but not so great for catching a wave. Because winter and late fall are best for surfing, it's important to have a buddy system like the Surfistas, whose online forum offers tips on forecasting wave condition, gear swaps and a heads-up on who might be surfing where in case others want to join.

Shazia Mazhar, a relative newcomer to the group and to surfing, started the Lake Surfistas online community after meeting so many people with questions — and doubts.

"I always say, 'Give it a try!' We're here to make this a safe journey," Mazhar says. "My philosophy is to welcome women to the sport regardless of any characteristic, such as age or ability; surfing is something that comes from within. For safety, always have a buddy and make sure you have the right equipment for the weather. The Lake Surfistas is a community that will cheer the loudest to encourage the journey."

A self-described "nomadic mermaid," Mazhar first surfed in 2012 on a trip to Nicaragua but didn't start surfing the Great Lakes regularly until the winter of 2014. Since, she's found it's something that goes well beyond sport.

"Surfing for me is renewal. It's like a meditation and a reset for the soul," she says. "On cold winter mornings it's definitely not easy to jump into water just above freezing, but the joy of the first wave always brings me back."

Pacquing, on the other hand, says she was a water baby from childhood, when her Filipino parents were teaching her to swim, instilling the idea that "being in water is awesome." Her geography degree comes in handy when reading charts predicting waves and patterns, but she admits that she was first inspired to surf from watching episodes of the 1990s hit show "Baywatch" and having cousins who were into the skateboarding and surfing scenes. She first surfed some 17 years ago, but it wasn't until many years later that she realized surfing the Great Lakes in Toronto was a possibility.

"I thought, 'I've lived here all my life. How is that possible?'" Pacquing says. "It's been a big life's work of surfing and surf journeys ever since."

TOP LEFT PHOTO BY WARREN WON; TOP RIGHT PHOTO BY DEB REANEY

Give it a try

Want to follow the lead of Pacquing and the other Lake Surfistas? You can start by learning the basic principles of forecasting, perhaps by taking one of their free upcoming forecasting classes or by using the tools located in the forecasting section of their website (LAKESURFISTAS.ORG). Where Pacquing lives on Lake Ontario, the best surf day is one with a strong easterly or southeasterly wind. But if you're looking to surf along in Lake Michigan in Chicago, for example, look for a wind coming from the north, she says. "It's picking up all the water north of you in Lake Michigan and coming all the way down to Chicago, so that's probably going to create a pretty big wave. It's all about geography."

Pacquing is also a stand-up paddleboard (SUP) instructor who especially loves SUP surfing. Adding paddleboarding to the surfing mix lets both experts and beginners enjoy the lakes in every season. When she suffered injuries from a serious surfing accident in another country — one that could have claimed her life — Pacquing says paddleboarding let her transition back into surfing by taking away her fears and letting her discover the landscape in a new way.

"It's like a giant surfboard, but I can see the water," she says. "Because the Great Lakes in summer are often more flat than wavy, it's another way to get on the water. It lets me do reconnaissance on spots — see what the bottom is like. And I got to see views of the city I'd never seen before. It's also been a natural progression for the public in Toronto: Surfing became popular because of SUP here."

The ability to surf, swim or paddleboard has also evolved in part due to lake cleanup efforts, Pacquing says. Pollution in Lake Ontario near Toronto and other major cities has been greatly reduced since the 1980s. As the water quality has improved, swimming and plunging into Lake Ontario's waves has also increased. The cycle has created a culture of conservation, too. Even online community creator Mazhar says that until she started surfing, during her nine years living in Toronto she never previously realized the value and beauty of the Great Lake she lived along.

"I'm much more mindful now of waste, how we treat our ecological systems and the importance of contributing to efforts to conserve and help with clean-ups," Mazhar says.

There's been another shift in thinking too, as people witness the regular gatherings of women, their children, the occasional boyfriend or spouse, or just Pacquing, heading out amid the small ice floes (she avoids days when ice gets too large).

"We're way past people thinking of surfing as just a man's sport now," Pacquing says. "At least here, no one would ever dare say, 'Oh, you're just a woman.' They see what we can do. We may not be super shredding, but we're getting out on the coldest of days and taking big waves. We're all in this together." ★

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