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California Travel: Santa Cruz still reigns as surfer's paradise

By **KATHLEEN KENNA** Special to the Star
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SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA—It's always been about the surf.

White sand, blue Pacific and 300 days of sunshine a year — Hollywood couldn't invent a better spot for the birthplace of mainland surfing.



Professional surfer Jason "Rat Boy" Collins shows why he's world-famous for "big fat air" at Santa Cruz. (COURTESY O'NEILL WETSUITS)

The boardwalk at Santa Cruz. FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Hawaii reigns as its true home, yet three Hawaiian princes introduced surfing to the mainland in 1885, when they rode redwood plankboards here.

To prove it, Hawaiian royals told the story on a bronze plaque; it's at the "world's first" Surfing Museum, overlooking historic Steamer Lane.

Steamer Lane is among 30 hot spots drawing surfers here from all over the world, says professional surfer Jason "Rat Boy" Collins.

"I've been everywhere and Santa Cruz has the best waves," he says, describing swells of more than 3 metres in summer, and almost 12 metres in winter.

Collins, famous for "big fat airs," was on his first board at age four.

"It was a hippie town then," he shrugs. "My dad surfed; my mom was a seamstress — she sewed my first wetsuit because they didn't have one my size."

He says this near Pleasure Point, which draws surfers of all ages, including youngsters in pint-sized wetsuits pioneered by surfing legend Jack O'Neill.

At 89, O'Neill isn't surfing anymore, but his name is everywhere, from the surfing museum to several shops with his name. Headquarters for the family's international business — R & D capital for surf gear — is only blocks from Pleasure Point, where O'Neill lives in a cliffside home.

O'Neill started the world's first surf shop in a garage off Ocean Beach in San Francisco in 1952, then moved here in 1959 to develop his wetsuits.

His famous explanation for that venture: "I just wanted to surf longer."

The original O'Neill Surf Shop is a California "point of historical interest" at Cowells Beach, which Collins advises is good for novice surfers.

Still surfing professionally at 38, youthful Collins offers a Santa Cruz secret with another shrug: "Surfing keeps you young."

When O'Neill opened his first surf shop here, Santa Cruz was a small beach town, known for its seaside amusement park.

That 1907 Beach Boardwalk is a national historic landmark.

Hand-carved wooden horses on the 1911 Looft Carousel still circle indoors. The 1924 Giant Dipper is surrounded by more modern rides, but is still cranking. The wooden roller coaster is estimated to have had more than 59 million riders.

Carny games dating to 1910, carny food, 300 video and pinball games, and a two-storey minigolf course are a big draw at the Boardwalk.

Part of the 1.6-km beach is staked off for volleyball nets, busy with players — and fans in their own lawn chairs — long before the Olympics.

Other gawkers hang off the municipal wharf nearby, photographing sea lions and their pups snoozing on a wooden platform below.

Kayakers paddle under the wharf, too, spotting seals, jellies and other ocean life. You can kayak in Santa Cruz under a full moon and see bioluminescence in the surf. Or slip past yachts in the harbour after dawn — with pelicans for company — and enjoy a quiet paddle through the kelp beds.

Paddling with long-time guide Katrina Wagner, 28, and surfer-turned-kayaker Dave Grigsby, 39, we stopped just in time to watch a mother sea otter waking, with a pup still asleep on her chest.

The pair rolled in their kelp blanket a little, and each lifted a paw, tentatively.

"It's almost like they're waving to us," whispered Grigsby.

He is an ex-surfer who says he grew "tired of sitting on a board waiting for waves."

Grigsby turned to kayak surfing — it makes Olympic whitewater canoeing look tame — and liked being on the water so much, he left a full-time job as an insurance broker to buy a kayak business with his wife, Jessica, a 34-year-old attorney.

"We have 22 miles (35.4 kilometres) of open sea" along the Santa Cruz shoreline, he says. "We're out 364 days a year, from warm-ups to serious paddles."

Hard-core check: Grigsby's idea of a serious paddle is a 6.5-hour trek to Monterey Bay, about 42 kilometres south.

Even tranquil Santa Cruz paddles can go viral. A kayaker posing for a tourism promotion got the thrill of a lifetime when two humpbacks lunged out of the waves beside him.

The photo went all over the world, because the whales were so close to shore that visitors snagged cellphone shots from the beach, and from balconies of the Dream Inn.

We saw so many spouts, flukes, fins, and whale backs during a three-hour trip aboard the *Velocity* that I stopped counting. I missed a humpback breach because I was on the other side of the boat, counting humpback spouts by the dozen.

And then, a blue whale rose out of the water like a surfacing submarine.

"That's the biggest animal on the face of the planet!" naturalist Maureen Gilbert shouted. "That's the biggest animal that has ever lived!"

She estimated its length at six metres, and said some days, she has logged 10 blues.

"This is the largest gathering of blue whales in the world," said Gilbert, 60, a retired teacher.

Experts estimate as many as 2,000 are migrating from the Bering Sea, she added. Hundreds of humpbacks have been spotted.

"It's been good for the last three years, day in, day out, but today was exceptional," said Capt. Ken Stagnaro, 50, whose family owns Santa Cruz Whale Watching. "We have people fly in from Europe just to see blue whales."

This would sound like hype if it wasn't for photographer Paul Schraub's shot.

Stagnaro is so matter-of-fact about what he sees in Santa Cruz waters that he's devised a marine definition for grand slam: orcas, humpbacks, blue whales, dolphins and porpoises, all in one day.

Minutes before docking, three dolphins swam by, almost on cue.

Mentioning this later to a local resident, she said, "Yeah; we see them all the time."

Kathleen Kenna is a Southern Oregon-based freelance writer who blogs at: www.tripsfor2.wordpress.com. Her trip was subsidized by the Santa Cruz County Conference & Visitors Council.

JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING Santa Cruz is a 90-minute drive south of San Francisco.

SLEEPING Best new spot is the 9-room, Pacific Blue Inn, a New York-style boutique hotel with big breakfasts, firepit in a bamboo courtyard; wheelchair accessible. Rates: \$189-\$249; current special, without breakfast \$159. 636 Pacific Ave. 831-600-8880. pacificblueinn.com. The retro chic ('60s) Dream Inn is the only large hotel on the white-sand beach. All rooms have ocean-facing balconies. Off-season rates start at \$169; summer rates, \$439-\$479. 175 West Cliff Dr. 1-866-774-7735. dreaminnsantacruz.com. West Cliff Inn dominates a hill overlooking the ocean. Full breakfast, bicycles, afternoon wine and appetizers. \$185-325. 174 West Cliff Dr. 1-800-979-0910; westcliffinn.com.

DINING The Picnic Basket is a sweet spot for beach-watching, homemade lemonade, local produce and meats (\$6.50-\$10, salads, sandwiches), 125 Beach St. 831-427-9946. facebook.com/thepicnicbasketsc. Fresh fish on the wharf is at Firefish Grill. 831-423-5200. firefishgrill.net. Upscale dining with a water view at Dream Inn's Aquarius Restaurant, (entrees \$15-\$29). aquariussantacruz.com. Best hilltop view of ocean: Casablanca Inn & Bistro, 101 Main St. 831-423-1570. casablanca-santacruz.com. Cheap eats at the Beach Boardwalk run from \$3.68 corn dogs to \$7.99 smoked turkey legs.

DRINKING The Dream Inn's happy hour has \$4 beer, \$5 house wine, and \$2 "bar bite of the day." Sun.-Thurs., 3.30-5.30 p.m.

DOING More than a century of surf history at Santa Cruz Surfing Museum, Lighthouse Point. santacruzsurfingmuseum.org. Donation suggested. Santa Cruz Whale Watching: \$44.95 for 3.5-hr. cruise, from Santa Cruz West Harbour; buy online at santacruzwhalewatching.com or by calling 800-979-3370. Kayak Connection: Rentals, \$35 single, \$55 double, up to 4 hours; (paddleboards are \$35 for 4 hours and \$50, up to 24 hours); 831-479-1121; Santa Cruz Harbour, kayakconnection.com. The Beach Boardwalk is one of the last great amusement parks on the West Coast, with rides, laser tag, minigolf, pool tables, air hockey and more. Hours vary. The Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Exploration Center just opened at 35 Pacific Ave., with interactive exhibits on tidepools, the kelp forest, deep sea canyon and more on rich biodiversity here. The \$16-million centre is a private-public venture aimed at showing links between humans and the local ecosystem. nmsfocean.org.

SHOPPING Shops along Beach St. and the Wharf have beach wear, plastic pails/shovels and souvenirs. Head downtown for made-in-Santa-Cruz clothes, leather bags, jewelry and unique gifts at Stripe, 107 Walnut St. 831-421-9252. stripedesigngroup.com. (Check out the one-of-a-kind ceiling in the men's change room.) Foodies go for free tastings and \$30 samplers of paired olive oils/balsamic vinegars at The True Olive Connection, 106 Lincoln St. 831-458-6457. trueoliveconnection.com.

WEB SURFING santacruz.org.

Surf's up!

It takes a bit thicker blood than you'd need at, say, Waikiki Beach in Hawaii. But there are plenty of good spots in Canada to try your hand – or feet – at surfing. Here are a few.

TOFINO, B.C. – The Granddaddy of them all. Tofino boasts miles and miles of long beach and the waves roll in here fairly consistently. The city has hosted Cold Water surfing competitions in the past and there are tons of surf shops. If Canada has a Surf City, this is it.

LAWRENCETOWN, NOVA SCOTIA — Lawrencetown Beach is described by ibackpackcanada as "a south-facing stretch of sand that unfurls for approximately 1.5 km." It's a provincial park and it's supervised by the Nova Scotia Lifeguarding Service. The water's warmer this time of year but still chilly, so pack a wet suit.

KINCARDINE, ONT. – Yes, Ontario. You'll probably have to wait for a storm but you can catch nice waves all along the Lake Huron shoreline a few times a year. Great beach, too. Oh, and world-class sunsets.

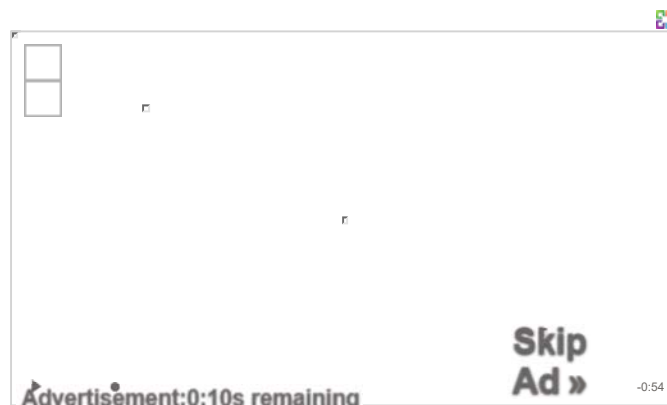
MONTREAL – There's a small pocket in the St. Lawrence (the Lachine rapids) where the river waters flow just right, allowing folks to surf in one spot for 10 or even 30 minutes at a time. They say the waves can get as high as two meters.

INGONISH BEACH, NOVA SCOTIA — Located inside Cape Breton Highlands National Park, Ingonish Beach is a remote and well hidden beach many surfers call their own. The breaks aren't quite as consistent as Lawrencetown, but during winter and particularly hurricanes this area can get crazy quick, says ibackpackcanada.

LAKE ONTARIO — There are times when big storms roll in and create some fine waves on the shores of Toronto. Bluffers Park is an occasional hot spot. Again, a wet suit is advised.

With files from Corbin Fraser and Travel Editor Jim Byers

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SANTA CRUZ SURF CULTURE

In the place nicknamed "Surf City," you'll definitely want to dip into the Santa Cruz surf scene. Home to wetsuit pioneer Jack O'Neill, surfers have been riding the waves in Santa Cruz, California since 1885, when three Hawaiian princes, vacationing in Santa Cruz brought this iconic sport to the mainland. Using redwood surfboards made at a local lumber mill, Hawaiian princes Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana'ole, David Kawananakoa and Edward Keliiahonui tested the local waves and found paradise.

A century after surfing was born in Santa Cruz, the [Santa Cruz Surfing Museum](http://www.santacruzsurfingmuseum.org/) (<http://www.santacruzsurfingmuseum.org/>) was born. Housed inside the Mark Abbott Memorial Lighthouse, the museum overlooks legendary surf spot [Steamer Lane \(/Things-](#)

to-do/Things-To-Do-Details/ThingGid/292). Historic photographs, early wetsuits designed by local Jack O'Neill, unsinkable vintage redwood surfboards, and other items trace over 120 years of surfing history in Santa Cruz.

But while Santa Cruz has long been legendary among longtime surfers, few people know that it's also the best place on the West Coast to learn to surf. If you've ever wanted to feel the rush of riding a wave, Santa Cruz is the place to try it. Cowell Beach next to the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf and Capitola Beach are two of the best places to learn to surf. Surf instructors like [Club Ed \(/Things-to-do/Things-To-Do-Details/ThingGid/145\)](#) and [Richard Schmidt Surf School \(/Things-to-do/Things-To-Do-Details/ThingGid/407\)](#) provide wetsuits and surfboards and get you up on the waves. Once you're ready, grab your big stick and head to one of Santa Cruz County's mellow [beaches \(/things-to-do/beaches\)](#).

Each fall, the O'Neill Coldwater Classic, takes place in Santa Cruz, one of surfing's signature events. In 2012, the event was elevated to an elite Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP) World Title surfing event. Santa Cruz was the tenth of eleven tour stops and thousands of surf aficionados cheered on the world's best surfers at Santa Cruz's historic Steamer Lane on West Cliff Drive.

Also in Fall 2012, Chasing Mavericks debuted starring Gerard Butler, which tells the true story of local surfer Jay Moriarty. Santa Cruz's beaches, boardwalk and other key locations were prominently featured.

For die-hard surf lovers with a taste for nostalgia, the Annual Longboard Club Invitational, the oldest and longest-running surfing event on the west coast happens each Memorial Day Weekend.

Finally, Northern California's largest woodie show features dozens of classic "surf mobiles" from all over the West Coast. Take a cruise down memory lane at the annual Surf City Classic: Woodies on the Wharf, in June. In the early 50's, woodies were a cheap mode of transport for surfers who would take out the middle and back of the cars to load surfboards. This event features more than 150 stylish, pre-1952, wood-bodied cars showcased all along the Santa Cruz Wharf.

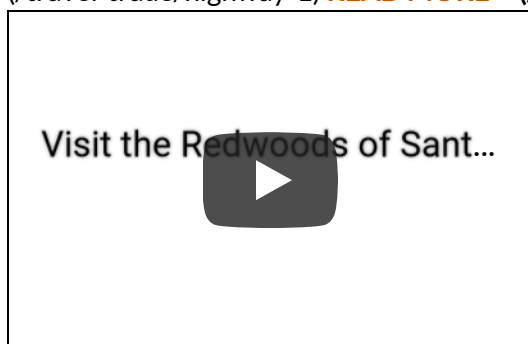
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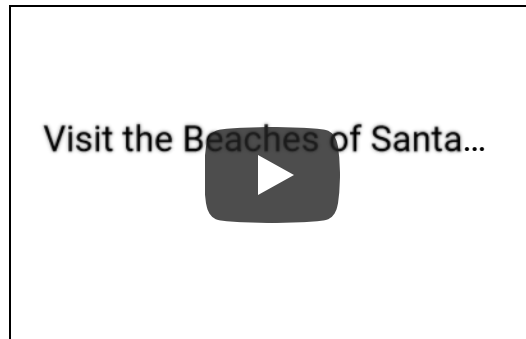
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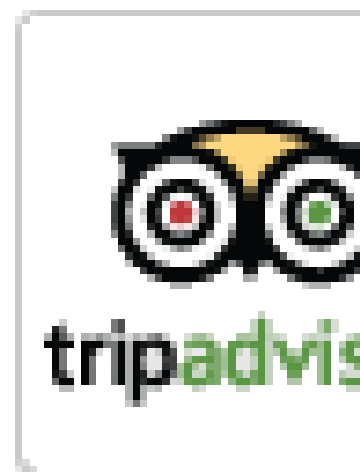


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