


The Province

TRAVEL

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Women of the waves

**Tofino's Queen of the Peak
showcases female surfers**



Queen of the Peak surfers get ready to ride the waves in the 2013 Tofino competition. The event is held in October when there's better swells and reliable weather. — KYLER VOS

The sisters of the surf

Blissful memories of past waves wash over us in preparation for Queen of the Peak



Spectators line the shore for the annual competition at Cox Bay. — AARON BARR

Catherine Roscoe Barr
SPECIAL TO THE SUNDAY PROVINCE

Early morning light shines through the picture windows in our bedroom, and as I lift my head from the pillow I can see a few dark shapes bobbing on the waves off Cox Bay.

It's October 2013, and more than 100 female surfers, mostly from the West Coast, have gathered in Tofino for Queen of the Peak, a women's surfing competition, and some of them are already out testing the water, sharpening their mental game. More than two dozen of them are girls, under 16, competing in the newly-added Princess of the Peak division.

The event is organized by

Krissy Montgomery, who owns Surf Sister — a female operated surf instruction company — and Shelter Restaurant general manager Mike Jacobsen, who had the idea during the O'Neill Coldwater Classic Canada, a men's-only event formerly held in Tofino, as they mused about why more women weren't entering competitions.

"We reverse engineered Queen of the Peak for women," says Montgomery of the complimentary massages, childcare, and even doggie daycare available to competitors.

The exact beach location, either Cox Bay or Chestermans Beach, is announced each year at the last minute and changes according to the weather.

This time we're lucky to have front row seats from bed at our beach house at Pacific Sands Beach Resort.

Eager to get outside and breathe the ocean air, I leave my still-sleeping husband Aaron in bed, tiptoe down the stairs of our three-level suite, grab my rubber boots and fleece jacket, and head down to the beach with our dog, Charlie, where there's already a small group of dog owners and their pups.

After exhausting himself in an energetic game of chase, Charlie and I walk back to find Aaron up and breakfast delivered; a continental with orange juice, fresh fruit, yogurt, homemade granola and freshly baked muffins.

With camera and an assortment of lenses in tow, we make our way back to the water's edge, where a crowd of spectators has gathered for the competition already underway, and a rainbow of brightly coloured specs out on the waves are visible — competitors wear coloured jerseys over their wetsuits to anonymously distinguish themselves for scoring by judges.

The competition, in its fifth year in 2014, is held in October for its better swells, better wind and reliable weather — perfect for professionals and newbies alike. After watching the professionals do it with such grace, I'm stoked for my turn on the waves.

The next morning, I join a group of novice surfers for a lesson with veteran instructors Nicole Lohse and Rhiannon Davis from Surf Sister, which provides instruction to women and men.

Even for October, the weather is downright balmy — a high of 18 C on this day — and I'm able to forgo gloves and a hood, wearing just a wetsuit and boots.

This is my third or fourth time surfing in Tofino, but first professional lesson here.

My surf-loving younger brother has been my sort-of-helpful-but-mostly-off-doing-his-own-thing coach in visits past.

After an extensive dry land lesson, we walk out to chest-deep water where Lohse and Davis physically help us catch our first wave, and stand by attentively, cheering our successes and offering tips to improve our technique.

Something switched in my brain the very first time I caught a wave.

I understood my brother's and every other surfer's obsession. It's an utterly giddy exhilaration that rushes through and out every cell. You feel at once invincible, and like a tiny drop of water in the powerful, massive ocean.

It's totally addictive.

Get up, fall. Get up, fall, repeat, repeat. I was slowly improving but still decidedly lacking in grace. The experience is really hard work but insanely fun — and incredibly appetite stimulating! Afterward, we had only one thing on our mind: Tacofino.

The tangerine-orange food truck, famous for its Baja-inspired tacos, is located at the back of Tofino's Live To Surf shop's parking lot, and has picnic tables set up for the hungry hordes that flock there.

Satiated in body, mind and gut, we drive back to the resort for a shower and a siesta before getting ready for Queen of the Peak's awards gala dinner at Shelter Restaurant, where Tofino's Catherine Bruhwiler took the shortboard title, Port Renfrew's Leah Oke took the longboard title, and Tofino's 10-year-old protégé Matea Olin was awarded the Princess of the Peak title.

The next morning, as we drove home to Vancouver, meandering along scenic Highway 4 through Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, we already felt the magical pull back to Tofino. Everyone I know who visits this special place leaves feeling blissful and beckoned to return again soon, and I can't wait until the next time I hit those waves.

If you go

➤ Queen of the Peak runs Oct. 3 to 5, 2014. For more information, visit queenofthepeak.com.

➤ For more information about Tofino, visit tourismtofino.com.

➤ For more information about surf lessons, visit surfsister.com.



The view of Cox Bay from the beach house at Pacific Sands Beach Resort. — AARON BARR



The judges, comfortable in their tent, watch the competition. — AARON BARR



The Tacofino truck, famous for its Baja-inspired tacos. — AARON BARR



Surfers wade out, hoping to take the Queen of the Peak title. — KYLER VOS



A surfer catches a nice wave in 2013. — KYLER VOS