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Riding a New Wave

By Theunis Bates/Newquay

Oli Adams lists the glamorous shores he has surfed over the past year: "Hawaii, Brazil, the Canaries, South Africa." He could go on. Right now, though, the 23-year-old British professional surfer is sitting under a gloomy sky in Newquay — a small beachside town of 20,000 in Cornwall, England's most southwesterly county. And he's exactly where he wants to be. "Cornwall is the most beautiful, mellow place in the world," he says looking out to sea, where some 30 surfers are paddling through 57°F (14°C) waters and cutting along four-foot (1.2 m) waves. "I wouldn't want to live anywhere else.

Adams isn't the only surfer to call these frigid Atlantic waters home. Over the past 50 years, a sport that was once synonymous with sun-blessed Hawaiians, Californians and Australians has been embraced by an ever-swelling number of Europeans. You can now head to any wave-battered beach from the west coast of Ireland to the north of France and see shoals of wet-suited surfers battling to catch the perfect break. In the U.K. alone, the British Surfing Association (BSA) estimates that there are 500,000 regular surfers — a 900% rise over the past 15 years. And it's along Cornwall's north coast that some of the country's finest waves break. Low-pressure systems over the Atlantic push swells toward the county all year round. The 125-mile (200 km) coastline is pockmarked with bays and coves facing different directions, so a determined surfer can track down good waves on almost any day.

Locals and holidaymakers had been riding those breaks on bellyboards — tombstone-shaped pieces of plywood — since the early 1900s. Then, in the 1960s, nomadic Australians and South Africans arrived in Newquay to work as lifeguards. They brought with them modern fiberglass boards, and started to teach local boys, like Roger Mansfield (who went on to become British champion in 1970), the art of surfing. "In 1963, there were 10 to 15 people surfing in Newquay," says Mansfield, author of the soon-to-be-released *The Surfing Tribe: A History of Surfing in Britain*. "It was an isolated, esoteric activity."

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Surge of Popularity

these days, it's hard to get any alone time with the ocean. Three miles north of Newquay, the waves at Watergate Bay are crammed with 100 surfers. Most are beginners, bobbing around in the three-foot (90 cm) swell on foam learner boards, hired from nearby shops for \$10. Dan Deacon, 31, a marketing executive from London, and his wife Ley, a 31-year-old lawyer, have just emerged from the water and are resting on the sand. "It's harder than it looks," gasps Dan. "We've only been at it for 30 minutes, and we're knackered." The couple decided to take a weeklong surfing break after hearing friends and colleagues rave about the waves. "There's a real buzz about surfing now," he says. "A lot of our friends have taken it up."

People like Dan and Ley are one reason surfing's once edgy image has gone more mainstream. According to the BSA, some 43% of British surfers earn \$50,000 or more a year, compared to 34% just two years ago. "Surfers are now doctors, solicitors, architects and accountants," says Chris Jones who has been making surfboards in Newquay since 1965. The sport has also been made more accessible by constant advances in wet-suit design over the past 20 years. Waterproof seams and thicker, more flexible neoprene material mean that would-be surfers can stay in the often icy water for longer, 12 months a year.

The possibility of year-round surfing has brought a new splash of cash to Cornwall. The BSA reckons the sport is now worth \$140 million to the Cornish economy. The spending power of this new wave of weekend surfers can be seen most clearly at Watergate Bay. Until a decade ago, the cliff-top hotel perched above the bay was a fusty, Edwardian pile. On the beach, buckets, spades and ice creams were sold out of a wooden hut. Then, in 2001, Will Ashworth took over the hotel from his parents, and together with his brother Henry set out to create "a ski resort on a beach" where guests could roll out of the sea, straight into their luxury beachside lodge.

A \$7 million renovation transformed the hotel into a slick, modern getaway, and that beach-hut shop is now a café, bar and branch of British chef Jamie Oliver's Fifteen restaurant. An Extreme Academy was established to teach water sports to guests and beach visitors — last year 3,500 people signed up for surfing lessons. Ashworth, 31, says the hotel turned over \$10 million last year, compared to \$2.2 million in 1999. And while the old hotel employed only 10 people in winter, it now employs 102 through the colder months and up to 150 in peak season. "This is immensely positive for the local economy," he says.

Some local surfers worry, however, that surfing's ever increasing popularity could hurt the sport's

traditional free and informal nature. "Tourism is important to Cornwall," says Newquay-based fireman Nathaniel Hooton, 29, who has been surfing for 17 years. "But surfing has completely changed in the past decade. These days the waves around Newquay are too crowded in summer." Even secret spots, once surfed exclusively by locals who would shimmy down ropes into the water, have been outed to the world on the Internet.

Adams and Hooton — the two surf together occasionally — have resigned themselves to their once-tranquil hometown becoming a magnet for surf tourists because they share the newcomers' love of the place. "Surfing here is addictive," says Hooton. "There really is no better feeling in the world than waking up at 4 a.m. and getting in the water as the sun comes up." In Cornwall today, whatever the season, the surf's always up.

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