

# WAVE- HILL

**BY MASA TAKEI**

THE COLD, DARK WATERS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FAR NORTH COAST OFFER SOME OF THE MOST THRILLING—AND ISOLATED—WAVES ON THE CONTINENT.



JEREMY KOFESKI

**COLD COMFORT** Most surfers' big complaint is too many kooks clogging the waves. Not a problem on the North Pacific.

**E**MERGING FROM THE WARM cocoon of my quilt, I hear rain drumming on the tin roof above me. I snap on a headlamp and climb down from the sleeping loft to stoke the fire. Sweetypie, the 12-by-16-foot cabin that's my shelter in the storm, is amply heated by a tiny wood stove. Soon the comforting sound of crackling flames overlays the thump of surf breaking outside. Through the beach cabin's expansive front window, North Beach comes into view in the morning's gathering light. It's mid-December, just shy of the solstice, the longest night of the year. Here on Haida Gwaii (formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands) full daylight won't come until close to 9 a.m.

I make out the headlights of a pickup cruising past on the sand flats, the silhouette of surfboards over its tailgate. Its occupants survey the waves from the confines of the cab, as sleet whitens the ground. They have about 40 kilometres of beach to choose from. Their brake lights flare. A decision has been made; they chuck a u-turn and pull up a few hundred metres back down the beach. I scan for other headlights, in particular those belonging to Mike McQuade's Ford F-250. We've been waiting for waves for a week. But I don't see a sign of anyone else in any direction. If it weren't dark, cloudy and sleeting, I'd be looking

clear across Hecate Strait to Alaska.

"Haida Gwaii waves are fickle, cold and terribly difficult to get to." So says Mike, 39, owner of North Beach Surf Shop in Masset, a former fishing and logging town of about 1,000. He points out that many surfers down south with \$800 in their pocket would rather book a ticket for warmer climes, such as Hawaii. But there are still those from off-island who make the trip north to take their waves frosty.

My rental cabin is at All the Beach You Can Eat cabins, run by "Rapid Richie" Schultz and his wife, Lisa Sweanor. They're almost at the end of a road that runs the length of the island. Rich remembers when he built the first shacks on North Beach, 30 years ago. "If you saw two cars out here in the same week," he says, "that was a big deal." He also remembers, more recently, when the local population of surfers numbered just one, "Surfer Jeff." Schutz's cabins are still on a dirt road, off the grid; though traffic has picked up some and land developers have moved in, crowds, on or off the waves, are hardly a problem.

When Mike organized North Beach's second annual Expression Session last November, the event attracted some 30 surfers. Almost all were from on-island. The notable exception was Joe Curren, a photographer and California surfing roy-

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**SWELL TIMES** Haida Gwaii breaks big starting in October, but there are decent waves throughout the year.

alty (his brother Tom is a three-time world champion), who'd flown in to host workshops.

By the time Mike pulls up in his truck, there are still just a couple of surfers, black dots in the water down the beach. Otherwise, it's Mike, the water, and me hemmed in by hummocks of sand, grass and ranks of spruce trees that taper off into the mist. Mike's huddled in an old fleece-lined warm-up jacket, embroidered with his name, a carryover from his previous life as a swim coach.

He's still got sleep in his eyes and, with his scruffy beard, a slightly grizzled look. We head into the cabin, stretch into our 6/5/4-millimetre wetsuits, the thickest available, and cap our extremities with even thicker neoprene mitts and booties. We've morphed into insulated seal creatures, our hands flippers and our earless heads wrapped in tight black hoods. As we trot with our boards to the water's edge, cappuccino sea foam scuds along the wet sand toward us.

To call what I do "surfing" is like calling a headfirst slide on one's back down the bunny slope "skiing." I go out with a

board strapped to my ankle, but consider success to be not inconveniencing my friends by drowning. This time, however, I'm hopeful that, under Mike's tutelage, I'll finally ride a wave in passable form, raise my arms in triumph and be showered in praise and backslaps.

This week standing water will freeze over, as will the water pipes from the cabin's rainwater cisterns. Taking a beating from the waves is a given for a rookie like me, but what I'm more apprehensive about is the cold. The wet kind that seeps into your very being, gives you an ice-cream headache and sucks your will to live. Paddling out, the shock of the first wave washing over my head elicits a trickle of dread. But my fears turn out to be unfounded—the fatty wetsuit does its job, leaving me to do mine, which is to flail, drink plenty of seawater and get generally schooled.

Usually, winter storms bring big southwest gales, which converge with Aleutian lows here to produce perfect conditions for waves. Local surfers enjoy regular head-highs, sometimes even double-overhead, with the biggest



waves jacking up to 20 feet. But today, the waves are small enough that without me here—and the preceding two weeks of flatness—Mike would otherwise have been back at the house working on an epic home reno. We cruise out further, him on an 8-foot longboard, me on the 11-foot, 6-inch stand-up paddleboard that he'd busted in half on a wave but routed back together.

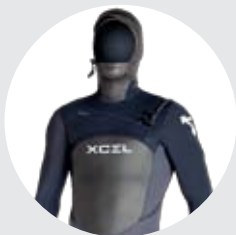
Sky and ocean blend in a flurry of greys, like a messy charcoal drawing. The cloud cover is thick and heavy with rain in some sections but silver bright, where the pale sun fights to burst through. Water comes in from everywhere, plinking off the neoprene brim of my hood and running into my eyes.

A long brown snout breaks the ocean's surface as a sea lion, a cow, spy-hops out of the swell to check us out. Mike involuntarily draws his legs up onto his board, mentioning that he's had bull sea lions bluff charge and even breach up onto his board. We keep a wary eye out when she reappears closer.

Mike catches a couple of waves, dropping a knee. But as things get bigger,

## EQUIPMENT

*Haida Gwaii's rugged conditions requires a unique combo of items to stay up and stay warm(ish).*



**WETSUIT** (\$530) This 5mm hooded suit from Xcel is thick enough to keep you warm but still have some mobility.



**BOARD** (from \$TK) This custom hollow-wood beauty is shaped by Cory Millard of Chinook Surfboards in Masset. Sweet.



**BOOTIES** (\$75) Forgetting your feet is a mistake you'll make only once. Scoop these 8mm from Excel and stand tall.

we switch up; I take his surfboard and he hops onto mine to show me how it's done. With a few deep paddle strokes, he catches a wave and it plows noiselessly past like a train of pure inertial energy. He glides onto its curling face, cutting a heroic form. And shoots along the peeling line, effortlessly hiking over the high-side as the wave closes out around him. I follow him, on my belly, riding out to the last of the white wash, allowing myself a little "wooooo." I'm not surfing in any true sense, but I'm on the water, on top of a board and having a boatload of fun.

I try my hand on the paddleboard again, battered by the wind that's coming in east-southeast, and riding what Mike calls the elevator lift of a swell that comes up behind me, picking me up but

## SURFING CEO

*When Cactus Club's president, **Richard Jaffray**, isn't opening new restaurants, he's chasing swells on B.C.'s wild coast. Here are three lessons he learned the hard way.*

**LAND IT** The more you practice on land, the better you'll be in the water.

**WATCH IT** Don't look at your feet when you stand—look ahead at the beach or shore.

**WARM IT** Before you head out to surf in cold water, fill an empty four-litre jug with hot water. When you're done surfing, the water will still be warm—it's perfect for rinsing salt water from your head and face.

dropping me off the backside as it carries on toward a frothy meeting with the shore. I see Mike's arms arc into the water and a few fluttering kicks, and then his head and shoulders as he stands, walking on water. We use the cabin as a point of reference to keep from getting swept too far down shore. Smoke chortles out of the stovepipe, like cotton smoke in a diorama.

Mike eventually calls it a session, heads ashore and back to his home renovations. But he leaves me with a board and urges me to continue trying.

I pull up on shore and lay on my back in a couple centimetres of water, board still leashed to my ankle. Staring straight up, my eyes slightly closed to shield from raindrops, my entire field of vision is filled with scalloped cloud. Being out here is as close to the edge of the world as I could imagine. A pure elemental expanse. With no one around to observe me, I can lie here, content and indulging in my flights of fancy.

Eventually, I pick myself up and battle through the break again. And, not too long afterward, it happens. I'm in the right place, at the right time; a wave jacks up and I don't fall off. I'm standing up on my two hind legs, just as God intended. I'm surfing.

My dismount may leave the judges wanting, but after I come up out of the water, sputtering, "HOLY!" through an open-mouthed grin, I crane around like a boy who just rode without training wheels, looking for whoever bore witness. There's no one. *wl*