

## sports

## For the Love of Waves

Northwest Women's Surf Camps make a big splash with lesbians

by Rebecca Ragain

Julie Huffaker thinks of herself as a mountain girl. She hikes regularly and goes cross-country skiing. She never imagined herself chest-deep in the cold, gray waters of the Pacific Ocean.

But that's exactly where she ended up, one sunny day this summer.

It started when Huffaker and her partner of 14 years, Leslie Bevan, attended a yoga retreat at Breitenbush Hot Springs. There they met Lexie Hallahan, director of Northwest Women's Surf Camps in Seaside.

A water lover by nature, Bevan was immediately excited to learn that surfing lessons are available on the Oregon coast.

"It has always bothered me to live in Oregon and not be able to get in the water," says Bevan. "The idea of getting in the water to play was really appealing to me."

Huffaker, on the other hand, wasn't convinced: "Leslie thought it would be a great idea. But I couldn't think of anything that sounded worse than getting in the cold Oregon water."

But when Bevan's 47th birthday rolled around in June, Huffaker gave her the gift of a one-day surf

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—Julie Huffaker

camp. Bevan wasn't surprised by the gift, but she was surprised that Huffaker had decided to attend the camp with her.

Both women had a blast.

"It was absolutely spectacular," says Huffaker, who now calls herself a surfing convert.

The camp began at a surf shop, where participants were quickly outfitted with boards, wet suits and other gear. Then they were transported to the beach, where they warmed up with a yoga session and learned about surfing techniques and safety.

Next, everyone put their boards on the sand and jumped on and off, practicing the movements they would need in the water. The women donned

their wet suits, broke into groups—each group accompanied by an instructor—and headed into the water.

Huffaker was surprised to find that she was quite comfortable in the water. With the wet suit, she says she wasn't cold even for a second. And although the group gathered where the surf was breaking, the waves were not intimidating.

"Lexie spends a lot of time finding out where the waves are perfect, especially for beginners," Huffaker says.

The presence of an "incredibly positive and enthusiastic" coach also helped make Huffaker more comfortable. Each group's coach offered one-on-one instruction to the neophyte surfers, assisting them by holding the back of their boards and positioning them to catch the waves.

Once in the water, camp participants started by riding the boards on their stomachs, learning to balance on the center of the board. Then they practiced "popping up," or jumping up to put both feet on the board.

By the time lunch rolled around, some people were more comfortable on their boards than others, so Hallahan regrouped the surfers. After lunch, the new groups returned to the water.

"Lexie did a great job of grouping people," Huffaker recalls. "You were always with people who were the same level as you."

"Some people just ride on their bellies all day; others want to stand up and do their surfing fantasy," says Bevan, who worked hard to be one of the latter. "I got up and stood up for a couple of seconds and fell over.... I felt like I had a lot of success."

Overall, Huffaker found the experience empowering: "I really surprised myself.... I thought it was

for extreme surfer dudes, like windsailing, outside my reach. I was amazed at what a thrill I got every time I caught a wave."


Helping others have this feeling of empowerment was one of the reasons Hallahan launched the camp last year. When she started surfing 18 years ago, there were no opportunities in the Northwest for women to learn the sport in a safe environment.

So far, the camp has been well-received. Participants' evaluations usually come back ranked with nines and 10s, says Hallahan. This year the camp expanded to 23 sessions—compared to 10 last year—including a new intermediate series in September.

Attendees range from teenagers to women in their 70s, from petite to 6-foot-4, from retirees to business owners. The only requirements are the ability to swim and a moderate level of physical fitness.

As for Bevan and Huffaker, they plan to try surfing again as soon as their schedules allow. They urge other women to do the same.

"Just do it," says Bevan. "No matter what success you have in your attempts at surfing, you'll have a wonderful time."

Huffaker adds: "I've never seen anyone riding in who wasn't smiling." 

For more information about NORTHWEST WOMEN'S SURF CAMPS call 503-440-5782 or visit [www.nwomenssurfamps.com](http://www.nwomenssurfamps.com). One-day camps cost \$199 and run March through September.

Portland freelance writer REBECCA RAGAIN plans to try surfing as soon as she learns how to swim. She can be reached at [rebeccaragain@yahoo.com](mailto:rebeccaragain@yahoo.com).



The Northwest Women's Surf Camps attract people of all ages.



The women warm up with a yoga session before learning about surfing techniques and safety.

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