

UK breaks Padstow



Hype it up and hang ten as often as you like, Cornwall ain't Santa Cruz – but now it's got a very British watersport. **Helen Ochyra** goes paddle surfing

If it weren't so cold, I know I'd be sweating by now. Tomorrow's muscle aches are already palpable and the kinks in my shoulders are settling in nicely. But I don't care because I can now stand up on a board in the middle of the sea. Well, almost.

Stand-up paddle surfing, I'm told, is the 'latest celebrity craze'. Jennifer Aniston's doing it – you'll have seen the pictures, a toned figure in skimpy shorts gliding along the sun-drenched Californian coastline. I, on the other hand, look like a seal who's been washed up on our grey shores. I'm in Cornwall and I'm surrounded by the Padstow surf set. Memories of last night in The Old Custom House, surrounded by loud, laughing surfers telling stories of their day battling the waves float back to me, and it's fair to say I feel slightly out of my depth.

My instructor, Chris Rea (no not him), is the sort of person who puts you instantly at ease, despite handing you equipment seemingly made for someone taller than Bao Xishun and throwing around phrases like 'wind and juice, dude' and 'big swell'. This is fortunate because I'm

All aboard
Surfing too thrilling? Try paddle surfing

not a natural water baby, preferring turf to surf and generally avoiding anything that might involve a wetsuit. I peer out to sea through the rain and wonder if Chris's promise to have me standing by the end of this first lesson might be a tad ambitious.

We start on the beach with Chris explaining how to avoid clocking myself on the head with my board, by positioning myself in its centre and not swaying, leaning or generally moving around too much. We're going out without the paddle first so Chris shows me how to use my arms to propel myself – mostly a case of doing the front crawl as quickly as possible, made difficult by the width of the board and the relative shortness of my arms. I suddenly feel very small as, safety briefing over, we head for the sea.

Paddle surfing is done in the flat water beyond the breakers so we must first get through the surf, which seems to be getting a good whipping up by the cold Cornish wind. Chris shows me how to handle the board, pushing down on the end (the 'tail') to funnel the wave safely underneath. All in the timing, it's simple enough and before I realise it we're out in flat water.

My next challenge is to rise to a kneeling position.

Thanks to the calm waters it's quite easy and, feeling confident, we return to the beach for our paddles. But the waves are getting loftier and I find hanging on to the paddle tricky as we head back out; although I am treated to an occasional faceful of crashing salty water,

we manage to reach open water again and start paddling from a kneeling position.

It's all going so well... then the wind suddenly picks up. The ever-present beach suddenly isn't and Chris tells me to hang on to his ankle strap for a tow back to shore. It's a prolonged, energy-sapping journey which leaves my stomach aching for fish and chips back in town, and I'm thankfully nodding when Chris proclaims it too dangerous for standing up beyond the waves.

Back in shallow waters, we continue the lesson, but falling off (a frequent occurrence) is more

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hazardous here so Chris runs alongside me as I rise to my feet and try to stay there. Many times I don't but finally I find my balance and paddle a good few metres before an incoming wave topples me.

Heading back up the shore, board under arm, to sip hot chocolate on the windswept cliff top with the other surfers, I realise we're not so different. Perhaps I'll be able to hold my own in Padstow's pubs tonight, after all.

Harlyn Surf School offers an introductory paddle surfing experience for £85, and a weekend of tuition including a speedboat ride for £150 (01841 533076/ www.harlynsurfschool.co.uk).

Eat

Rick Stein's Café

★★★★★

For those on a budget who want to do 'Padstein', Rick Stein's Café (inset) is the answer. More easy-going than elegant, the chunky pine tables and cushioned banquette seating encourage relaxation and a lively holiday atmosphere. Stein builds his menu around what's good at the fish market that day, serving up dishes such as mussels from the River Fal with a chilli, tomato and parsley sauce, Cornish lemon sole goujons with salsa verde mayonnaise and his own Black Forest gâteau. Accompanied by an Aussie shiraz so delicious that I am the last to leave.

Rick Stein's Café, 10 Middle St (01841 532700/www.rickstein.com). Three-course set menu from £21.50.

Sleep

Ruskin House

★★★★★

Set back from the road, this ramshackle guesthouse is decorated in 'beach house' pale blue and white with striped wooden floors, plenty of white-painted wicker and jaunty nautical touches, including boat-themed loo-roll holders. Room 4 is the best, with estuary views, roll-top bath and a double bed beneath the eaves. Mod cons abound, with flatscreen TVs, crisp white linens and the largest choice of tea, coffee and hot chocolate I've ever seen in a hotel room. The guest lounge has comfy worn-in sofas and an honesty bar.

Ruskin House, Fentonluna Lane (01841 532455/www.ruskinhouse.com). Rooms from £47.50 per person per night including breakfast.