

Travel

Get on board for surfing break

ABOUT 14 years ago I took a few surfing lessons during a back-packing trip on the west coast of Australia. After a day of struggling, I finally got up on my board and rode a small wave.

"One of the best days of ya life," said my haggard surf bum turned surf instructor. He wasn't wrong about that.

I was 27,

now I'm 41, but the memory of that thrill remains with me. So when I was recently on holiday in Portugal I couldn't wait to get back on board ... so to speak. I hooked up with a surf school which operates from laid back surf town Lagos on the Atlantic Coast. It's a perfect place for beginners, intermediates, and experts.

Weather is sunny year-round, the water not too cold and there's always a beach nearby you can surf, whatever the

weather conditions are at sea.

I was introduced to my mentor - Bretislav, 27, from the Czech Republic. "Hang on," I said, "Isn't the Czech Republic a land-locked country?" Turns out Bret had learned his trade in Blyth, earning his spurs at Newquay and St Ives. A qualified instructor, he treated me as an absolute beginner, which in effect, I was. Although my brain could remember surfing, my muscles couldn't.

He went through the basics of safety, the sort of thing they don't mention in Big Wednesday or Point Break. The key thing is to guard your head. A wave can propel a surf board fast enough you'll end up wearing it as hat if you don't protect yourself. Luckily, we were using a soft 'learning' board, which doesn't hurt

as much.

Next was learning how to go from lying on your board to standing on it. And that sums up what I spent the next four days attempting to do. As a beginner you need to look for small 'white water' waves that break waist-high and maintain a slowish momentum up to the shoreline. What beginners also need, Bret explained, is a 'beach break' where the waves break because of the mounds of sand underneath the water. That's different from bigger breaks caused by a rock or reef, a 'reef break', or by a promontory, a 'point break'.

Whichever beautiful beach we visited, and there were many, it was the same drill. Lie

on board. Pick appropriate wave. Paddle. Attempt to stand up. Fall off. Get back up again. Lie on board...

There's no doubt, surfing is hard. Trying to balance on a board moved by an unpredictable flow of water is never going to be easy. But with practice and dedication, and... well, a bit more dedication, it's possible for a 41-year-old man who surfed 14 years ago to rise to his feet on a board surf again. I'd say there's something about the elation of standing on your board that is incomparable to the thrill of just about everything else.

Once you've mastered white water riding, the next stage, in surfing parlance, is to get on 'the green water'. This is where the rider joins the wave before it breaks and rides wave parallel to the beach, rather than just allowing the white water to send them toward the shore. This is the zone for proper surfers who can control their boards. For those who can ride barrels or tubes where the wave holds up but the top curls over this zone is known as the 'green room'.

Sounds like a great place.

Andy Cronshaw

Surf speak
Blown out When stormy weather makes waves unrideable
Green Room The inside of a wave 'tube'
Kook A beginner
Wettie Wetsuit
Wipe out Falling off your board



CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD Andy Cronshaw returned to surfing after a 14-year break and loved every minute of it

What a w

It was animal magic for **Kate Watkins** as she got close to some magnificent mammals in Florida

AS I dipped my toes in the freezing water, I questioned whether I had made the right decision. Sure I was about to get up close and personal with a beluga whale, a once in a lifetime experience, but the water was so cold and I was waist deep in it.

But when Klondike swam over and put his gigantic white head in my lap, I knew it was worth it and I was in love with this the one-tonne giant of the Arctic Ocean.

I was on the Beluga Whale Interaction programme at SeaWorld Orlando, Florida, USA. This programme is one of several behind-the-scenes tours visitors can take while at the park.

My 30-minute beluga experience included helping one of the SeaWorld's animal trainers with Klondike's training. On this session we worked on communicating with hand signals.

When I flipped my hand up from facing palm-side down, this resulted in Klondike, splashing me with his tail and me getting completely soaked with ice cold water.

And when I waved with my other hand, he replied by waving with his fin. We went over each signal a few times with Klondike. Sometimes he got it and other

times we had repeat to things to ensure he understood what was happening.

Although I couldn't go into the water and swim with Klondike for health and safety reasons, I did get to give him a kiss on his head before he swam away, my heart in tow.

As part of my five-day SeaWorld behind the scenes tour, I visited its sister parks Discovery Cove, Orlando, Busch Gardens, Tampa Bay, and Aquatica, Orlando.

My beluga whale encounter was not my only foray into a freezing climate, despite being in the so-called Sunshine State.

I also went on the Penguin Spotlight Tour where I went inside the park's popular penguin attraction. This included chatting with an animal care expert about the various penguins and how they are looked after in their below freezing habitat.

I petted several, including a charmer named Stephen who was very keen to make friends, especially since I was standing next to a bucket of fish. I'm not much of a fan of birds so I was hesitant about touching Stephen for fear of being pecked, but he was incredibly gentle and soft to the touch.

I was informed SeaWorld's penguins are very friendly and accustomed to human interaction, which was certainly the

FACTFILE

My trip was organised by surfholidays.com which flew me by Monarch airlines from Manchester. Seven nights accommodation plus five days of surf lessons starts from £287 in low season and £350 in high season. Surf holidays.com accept a 20 per cent deposit and the balance four weeks prior to travel. Contact surfholidays.com, info@surfholidays.com, phone: 02081449950.

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CLOSING TIME
The poll ends tomorrow, so make sure your regulars have voted!



Whale of a time I had



ANIMAL CRACKERS Spend time hanging out with elephants and orangutans



case with Stephen, who followed the group around throughout our visit.

During my stay I visited Discovery Cove – an island oasis with sandy pathways, Caribbean tunes and marine life adventures – all in the middle of Central Florida.

My visit included a swim with bottlenose dolphin Akai. Unlike beluga whales, dolphins prefer warmer water, so I jumped right in accompanied by a trainer.

When I first touched Akai, I was struck by how warm he was and then I remembered he was a mammal, or a warm blooded

TAKING THE PLUNGE A waterslide takes riders through a whale tank at Aquatica to mimic the feeling of swimming with the creatures

creature. He was an older dolphin, aged 40, but I felt an instant connection with him and knew I would be safe during my swim.

I put my arms around his body and when the trainer sounded his whistle, Akai took off with me floating happily along. My swim lasted a matter of second, but was incredible. I'm a capable swimmer, but swimming with an

animal that is made especially for the water was very special.

I also visited Busch Gardens in Tampa Bay, where I went on an Elephant Keeper Experience and helped clean the elephant habitat. Fortunately, this didn't include cleaning up their daily deposits which the full time keepers took care of. Instead, I got to place grapes and melons around the enclosure for the elephants to find during a treasure hunt. Apparently, these kinds of activities help to stimulate the animals.

The park has opened a Sesame Street Safari of Fun

where guests get to meet their favourite characters from the hit children's TV show while learning about the world's animals.

The final park I visited was water park Aquatica. It has your typical flume and tube rides, but what makes the park different are its animal experience. One of its slides takes riders underneath a dolphin tank to give the feeling of swimming with the animals out in the wild. And animal experts bring their feathered and furry friends to various spots in the park throughout the day.

Due to a jam-packed schedule, I had little time to check out the

Renaissance Orlando SeaWorld Resort Hotel where I stayed during the trip. I visited its Tradewinds Restaurant with its decadent American cuisine, which includes lobster macaroni and cheese. The hotel has a heated outdoor pool, a plush day spa, three bars and a sushi restaurant. And it is right on the doorstep of SeaWorld itself, so you can't go wrong if you want to really see the park.

Needless to say, there is a fair amount to do at SeaWorld and its sister parks and I will never forget any of my animal experiences.

FACTFILE

DISCOVERY Cove Ultimate Adventure Package is available from **Virgin Holidays** from £189 pp. Kate travelled to Orlando on a **Virgin Holidays** tour – seven nights in Orlando including scheduled flights with **Virgin Atlantic** from London Gatwick, accommodation at the **5V Renaissance Orlando Resort** at **SeaWorld®** on a room only basis with car hire from £805. Prices are per person based on two adults sharing a standard room in May 2010. virginholidays.co.uk

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