



REX FLODSTRUM, PHOTO BY BRUCE DONALDSON (@BRDONALDSON)

# WAVE MASTERS

PETER LAMBERT, PHOTO BY BRUCE DONALDSON (@BRDONALDSON)

## SURFING LAKE MICHIGAN

By Cheryl Wooten

**A** biting north wind howls outside, and the temperature hovers below freezing. While most folks are at home, cozy and warm, a handful of intrepid adventurers dressed in black wetsuits are having the time of their lives ripping and shredding through the frigid waters of Lake Michigan.

On days when the waves break along the Lake's southern shores, surfers of all ages, backgrounds and abilities grab their boards and take the plunge. All in the hope of spending a few hours getting a natural high. "Surfing is pure fun," says entrepreneur Kai Cromwell (24) who's been surfing with his dad, Craig Cromwell of Chesterton, for over 10 years. "I love the feeling. The adrenaline is there. It's different every single time. I can be creative and try new things. It's a very physical activity but on the flip side, it's pretty mentally soothing. No matter what's going on in my life, it's a nice reprieve from that. All I'm thinking about is surfing. I'm dialed into nature and it's a mental check out for a couple of hours."

Winter weather produces the best wave action on Lake Michigan. According to Valparaiso dentist Leonard Ostrowski (38), "Our window of opportunity for surfing is pretty small and you've got to be able to get up and go when the conditions are right. But if you're willing to brave the cold, you can get some good waves. If you enjoy it enough, you're going to go no matter the temperature."



MIKE CALABRO, PHOTO BY BRUCE DONALDSON (@BRDONALDSON)

The 321 miles of Lake Michigan from top to bottom is what's called the fetch length, the area across which a wind with a consistent direction generates waves. So, when the wind is blowing, area surfers, experts at weather watching, know it's time to paddle out and carve away. "On average, there are about 60 days throughout the season

with surfable waves," says Cromwell. "Summer is almost always flat, spring and fall are really good, and winter is good as long as there's no shelf ice."

"The key is being at the right place at the right time," says Michigan City resident Bernie Konrady (68), owner of Konrady Plastics Inc., a 20+ year surfing veteran. "There are spots from St. Joe to Whiting, all the way around the south end of Lake Michigan. Depending on the wind and wave direction, that determines where we surf.

Some of the best sites have break walls in place. We get a wave that's comparable to an ocean wave because as the waves cross the break wall, they shape up into a breaking wave instead of a closer. We can get a really long ride. The excitement for me is catching and cruising on a wave for 100 yards, just flying. That's the draw. The thrill. It keeps me young."

Roger Coppinger (50) of Porter grew up on the beach. "I've been shaking sand out of my shorts all my life!" He's also been surfing for over 35 years. "When the weather is crappy, and no one is at the beach, that's when this little secret group of folks comes out to surf. No one knows we do it. We're an anomaly." He recalls what surfing was like in the 1980's. "My first experience, it was below zero and the water just above freezing. My buddy, Jim Hoop, and I were in Michigan City and my beard was covered in ice. I was frozen into my wet suit (they weren't as good as they are now), so I was hypothermic inside a ball of ice. I had to sit in my car to defrost before I could get out of the suit!"

But staying warm is surprisingly not difficult when you have the right gear. "Wet suits these days are pretty amazing," says Ostrowski. "The only part that's exposed to ice-cold water is your face. It's like getting an extreme ice-cream headache the first few times when your head goes under water. After the first three or four duck dives, your face numbs up and it's not so bad. As long as your core is warm, you can stay out there for an hour or two."

Surfing in fresh water is a bit different than in saltwater. While shorter boards offer more creativity and stylistic opportunities, many lake

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surfers prefer long boards, some as tall as nine feet. “The larger surface area makes them float better because fresh water is less buoyant than saltwater,” says Cromwell. “Plus, it’s less work paddling out on a long board when you’ve got a thick wetsuit on.”

Lake surfers face many dangers including shelf ice, icebergs and currents. But some of the deadliest threats are piers and structures... something that Dave Benjamin (51), surfing since 2008, discovered firsthand. “Ten years ago, I had a bad wipeout and got separated from my surfboard. It was destroyed on a rock wall and I almost drowned. I thought I knew how to swim, and that drowning would be impossible. I was 40 years old and knew nothing of water safety. I didn’t understand waves and dangerous currents, especially those that run along structures.” That experience motivated Dave to create Great Lakes SURF Rescue Project ([www.glsrp.org](http://www.glsrp.org)), a nonprofit dedicated to water safety and eradicating drownings by providing training, public preparedness, and public awareness.

For those interested in surfing Lake Michigan, a key resource is Third Coast Surf Shop, with stores in New Buffalo and St. Joseph, Michigan. “The owner, Ryan Gerard, is a great asset to Great Lakes surfing,” says Coppinger. “I can’t say enough about those guys. He’s got a good crew of people working for him.”



KAI CROMWELL, CHRISTMAS DAY 2018.



LEONARD OSTROWSKI.

Many area surfers are part of the South End Surf Club, a group started by Jim Hoop in the 1990s. “It’s just a crew of great people that love surfing and live on the south end of the lake,” says

Konrady. “There’s about 30 people in the club and it’s a unique scene with lots of camaraderie and great friendships.”

How far have some gone in pursuit of their passion? Leonard Ostrowski has surfed in New Zealand, Australia, Nicaragua, California, and Florida. Craig Cromwell surfed in Japan while serving in the Air Force, then on North Carolina’s shores before moving to Indiana. While Roger Coppinger has surfed “up and down the east coast from Rhode Island to Florida and been to California dozens of times to surf, it all started at Porter Beach on Lake Michigan. Yet no matter which part of the world they paddle out and surf,

home is always where the waves are.

For a great look at surfing the Great Lakes, watch *Southend: The Place Where I Go Surfing* by local filmmaker Pat Noyes and *Unsalted: A Great Lakes Experience* a film by Vince Deur.

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