

# Me and the Beautiful People

One unathletic lesbian gets up on the waves. | **By Gillian Kendall**

To say that I am an unlikely surfer is an understatement. I'm 47 years old, 20 pounds overweight and barely able to breaststroke a sloppy quarter-mile at the Y a few times a week. I haven't played a team sport since age 11, when I distinguished myself at softball by being the only fielder ever to kick a ball to a base.

But every time I go near a surf beach I spend hours gazing at the beautiful people gliding down those waves. Sure of failure, I've never admitted how much I'd like to try it. After all, on one recent trip to Hawaii, I went for a short, easy hike above Lanikai and broke my leg just walking.

These crises of confidence start whenever I arrive in Hawaii, where the natives and long-term residents float about in suntanned bliss, their untamed hair wafting in the breeze and their posture free of stress. For the first day or two in paradise, I check in to some surf-friendly hotel like the ResortQuest Waikiki circle (a few steps from the water) or the jewel-like Outrigger Regency on the Beachwalk. I get some sun and exercise, take an outrigger canoe ride and start to feel better about myself. The beauty and grace of all those healthy, strong, yoga-instructor types must be contagious, right?

But then I catch my reflection in a shop window, or see myself stepping out of the shower in my hotel room, and the illusion of my own health and beauty dissolves. I'm not Hawaiian, not even faintly fit: I'm just another fat, wet *haole* with my hair in my eyes.

So the surfing lessons were a self-acceptance challenge, too. To learn from my teachers, I had to get over the fact that they were slim, strong, young people who were probably appalled by what they saw from the rear after pushing me into a wave.

The pictures of my lessons look like *Winnie the Pooh Does Waikiki*. I'm a wobbling mess, teeth clenched and eyes wide, as I struggle to stand up on a wave that is barely visible in the photo.

The waves I learned on were hardly big enough to lift the heavy beginner's board, but riding them felt like snowboarding down a sheer wall of ice (I am not a proficient snowboarder, either; on my first attempt I broke my other leg on the bunny slope).

Sensing quickly that I was not going to be a natural, my instructor taught me right away how to fall. Since the water in Waikiki is very shallow, and coral lurks underneath, you don't jump in feet first when you go down, and neither do you dive. The proper way to fall off the board is to belly-flop or drop sideways, keeping your arms near your sides. Since I fell off just about every wave, I became an expert at dismounting, and only once scraped my foot on the rocks.

Besides falling correctly, I grew adept at getting back on the board after a wipeout. In fact, once I was so eager to jump back on that I slammed my head on the board, giving myself a gray, egg-shaped bruise and a slight dizziness for several days. After seeing me nearly knock myself unconscious, my instructor advised, "Just relax! When you go under, hang out for a while. Otherwise, you'll do what you just did."

The hardest part of surfing is paddling out. After discovering just how weak my upper body was, I decided to hire my own personal beach buddy from Outrigger Waikiki beach services. For about \$250 an afternoon, you can get a one-on-one surf instructor and water chauffeur. Kenny, Gina or another of the water deities would lie on a board ahead of me, plant one foot flat on the tip of my board and paddle us both out at high speed. If I dipped my arms in to



Surfing instruction starts in the sand



Kendall hangin' 15

help, they'd call back, "Relax! I got it!"

"Relax!" was the word most often yelled at me in the course of my instruction, right after "On your knees!" and "Stand up!" which were, I thought, contradictory orders. It's impossible to get to my knees and stand up on a rushing, rocking, wet surface and relax at the same time.

But I did catch almost every wave, and the seconds in between standing up and falling in were sheer exhilaration. Even on those slow,

shallow breakers, the board moved much faster than I could think, so I was forced to be in the moment in a way I never am when I'm, say, driving to work or making dinner.

Once you catch a wave, your board surges forward fast, and then, if you're lucky, you feel a little drop as the wave curls up behind you, and you scramble to your feet, keep your knees bent and spread your arms while balancing on a rolling, tumbling-underneath-you wave. Sometimes I lost my balance and slipped off (expertly), but other times I flailed around, got it back and rode in nearly all the way to the beach—long enough to make the "hang loose" sign and whoo-hoo back to my classmates.

Those seconds were the greatest fun I've ever had, the best expression of physical well-being I've ever known, better than sex, dark chocolate or even a great massage.

Coming in off the beach for the last time, I went to shower behind the Outrigger Reef Hotel and saw myself reflected in the windows of the Shore Bird Restaurant, where breakfasting tourists had probably been watching me fall down for the last hour. But what I think they saw was a grinning, bouncing, beginning surfer.

Sure, I thought, I'm a sunburned, middle-age tourist with sopping hair, but there's something else going on now, too. I look a little outdoorsy, a little confident and, I think, a little beautiful. ■