

A winter's day and the smile on Sam's face is priceless.

Winter Days

Winter: when the water turns frigid, the wind cuts through your wetsuit like a knife, and daylight becomes a fleeting luxury. And yet, surfing through the chill can make you feel utterly alive. So be inspired.

Hanna Scott, coldwater cool, Tofino, Canada.



COLDWATER SIRENS

Every wonder why more women are embracing chilly winter waves?

words HAYLEY LAWRENCE



Frost under my feet. Every breath fogs the air. I zip into my wetsuit and step into an ocean so cold it stings my skin and numbs my toes. This is one of my favourite times of year to surf. Are you game?

Winter waves are worth every ounce of effort that it takes to pull on a wetsuit when all you want to do is hide under the duvet and crank the heating up full blast. The waves are more powerful, the environment wilder, the line-ups less crowded – and the stoke is ten-fold for every wave so well earned. Outside it might be cold, but inside winter surfing ignites a glow that takes me out there every winter. All winter. Along with a growing community of surfers that share smiles from beneath neoprene hoods on the most bitter, howling days.

You see, coldwater surfing isn't about location – or perfect waves. It's a mindset. It's about chasing the joy that waits on the other side of discomfort. Surfing waves in conditions that many people avoid. It's about the neoprene armour, the raw beauty, and the empty lineups. The hit of feeling utterly alive.

Surfer and artist Hanna Scott lives in Tofino, where a thriving women's surf scene knows the pull of winter waves only too well:

"It can feel like you have a closer connection with the environment in colder places – there are less people in the water, so less competition for waves – more time and stillness," says Hanna.

After surfing in Hokkaido, Japan, Alice Brown agrees:

"Don't get me wrong, I love surfing in hot places with turtles and all that, but you usually get crowds. I like the quietness and space of coldwater destinations."

Coldwater surf missions are challenging. Crammed into short daylight hours, and ruled by

fickle weather patterns, the effort often outweighs the reward. But it's rarely about perfect waves – sometimes it ends up not being about the waves at all.

Alice recalls driving around Hokkaido for two days, searching in vain for surf on snow-piled beaches. Spirits were low. "And then – through the gates of a looming power plant, the coast opened out into a beachside car park. The waves weren't perfect. But after the mission, it felt ecstatic just to get in."

And when the mission does pay off with those perfect peelers, the magic eclipses every fruitless search.

"We'd been chasing this wave we'd only seen on an Insta account," Alice recalls. "Hours of tunnels and mountain passes later, the cliff shape came into view and we just knew. The lefts were beautiful – no one else around. Two Japanese guys joined us, we just nodded and smiled, sharing the stoke."

Fewer crowds and wild places make it appealing. Better wetsuits make it possible in brutal conditions. The sort of cold that slices through boots and gloves. The exhaustion of paddling in a heavy 6mm wetsuit. The fleeting highs and bone-chilling lows. There's nothing else like it.

Hanna remembers her first trip to Nova Scotia in February, a few years back:

"It was -20 degrees and -0.5 in the water. I'll never forget the first duck dive – I felt winded. The water felt so sharp – like it was scratching my face off. None of it felt real."

Fitness is everything when you're fighting the cold, too. "Every autumn I promise myself I'll get surf fit for winter in a 6mm suit, and I don't," says Alice. "Then those bigger, colder days arrive and I'm not as strong as I want to be. It's exhausting and knocks my confidence."

Alice likes the quietness and space of coldwater destinations.



Cold thoughts with your scribe, Hayley.





Preparation is everything

Beyond the wetsuit, it's the small hacks that keep you smiling:

Take a thermos of hot water to pour into frozen booties before putting them on," advises Hanna, "as well as head-to-toe wool base layers, and snowboard mittens for when you're not in the water. If you start cold — in a wet wetsuit or frozen booties — you can't ever really come back from that. But if you start warm, you have a slowly dwindling window where you can function in the water."

What you need:

- Hot water bottle: Slip it into your clothes so they're warm when you get out.
- Wool gloves: Essential for post-surf fumbling with car keys.
- Food and flasks: Warming from the inside counts as much as neoprene.
- Changing robe and beanie: For the ice-cold carpark shuffle.
- 6/5/4mm hooded wetsuit: Go Yulex if possible. 5mm booties and gloves, too.

Feeling the pull? These coldwater destinations have thriving women's surf communities – and waves worth braving the chill for:

Tofino, Canada

A rugged surf town on Vancouver Island where mist hangs over rainforest and the waves don't stop for snow. Tofino has one of the strongest women's surf communities in the world – and they're true winter warriors. Expect icy paddle-outs, and post-surf warming in wood-fired saunas.

Iceland

Glacial beaches and volcanic backdrops. The swells are powerful, the water hovers just above freezing, and the weather can turn in a heartbeat. But the rewards? Empty lineups, black-sand beaches, and surreal, solitary surfs.

Norway

Jagged peaks, Northern Lights, and frigid lineups. Winter here means short, dramatic days and paddle-outs in sub-zero air. The scene is intimate but welcoming, with female surfers carving out their place in one of the harshest environments.

Japan (Hokkaido)

Mountain passes, steaming onsens, and snowy beaches hiding powerful reefs. On the northern island, surf culture is low-key and lineups are often guarded secrets. But the search itself is part of the magic.

It's not about comfort. It's about transformation. The call of frozen beaches, misty dawns, and empty waves – a call more women are answering.

Scotland

From Thurso East to remote Hebridean reefs, Scotland serves up raw, Atlantic-fuelled surf that demands respect. Winter sessions can be brutal — ice on the sand, gale-force winds, heavy rips — but also deeply rewarding.

The coldwater mindset

Why are more women chasing icy lineups? It's not masochism. It's empowerment.

There's a resilience in the ritual: layering neoprene, paddling into grey seas, choosing joy in discomfort. The sisterhood is growing. And the reward is more than waves — it's clarity, presence, and proof of what you're capable of.

It's not about comfort. It's about transformation. The call of frozen beaches, misty dawns, and empty waves — a call more women are answering. Will you?

Preparation is key to coldwater surfing, Hanna in her 6/4/3mm.

