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Hamptons Magazine

Hooked on a Feeling

It was a July morning last summer, early enough that the crowds were still hours away. Next to me, some local guys with their hoodies pulled up were shaking their heads at the sight of a brawny surfer appearing on the precipice of a wave—light as a feather at first, then dropping in and splitting the wave in half. Java, known as one of the best surfers on Long Island, was catching every one: dipping in, gliding a hundred miles an hour along the length of the wave. The wave had crumbled and he was still riding something, still on that graceful sideways trajectory. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

The hoodie guys asked me if I surfed. I replied that I'd tried once. They told me to get a "Java push" on a wave and I'd move like a locomotive and catch anything. That's when I learned about the Flying Point Surf School, and that's when I got to know this Southampton surfer posse.

At first I signed my kids up for lessons. And soon after, my whole household—my husband and I, my cousin, my houseguests, my babysitter, and my children—were hooked. We loved being in the water together. Paddling out to the wave break on a beautiful morning next to my 10-year-old daughter is one of my all-time favorite Hamptons memories. Simultaneously catching a "party wave" with my husband, daughter, and cousin Jay is as good as life gets. Surfers say you can't describe the exhilarating feeling of riding a wave, but once you've experienced it, it's hard to think about much else, except the next time you can get in the water.

The surfer posse used to joke around with me when I first started taking lessons. They laughed at the way I jumped off the board when I missed a wave—apparently, I was kind of froglike. They thought my husband's fancy-ass Vilebrequin bathing suit was "beat," not surfer. But we kept coming back—and back and back. They started to respect me a tiny bit because I never freaked out after my constant epic triple-somersault, feet-in-the-air wipeouts. But mostly the posse liked that I was a 42-year-old mother of three who suddenly, after one lesson, got hooked on the sport, and that they and I were seeking the same joy out there in the water.

At first we didn't get along, the surfer boys and I. The first time we met, I had just paid them to take my daughter and two 12-year-old French exchange students into the water for a surfing lesson. There was a strong ocean breeze whipping the mist off the top of the waves and churning them up high. The sea was angry that day, and I was anxious because of it. After a 10-minute safety lesson, the surfers took the girls far out, way beyond the shore, to waves that were breaking a hundred yards out. I ran to get **Shane**, the head of the surf school, and told him I was going out on a board with the girls as well. "You don't want to do that," he counseled.

"I can handle the water."

"I'm sure you can, but let the guys handle the girls alone."

I immediately thought about the French girls' mothers across this very ocean, and I knew I had to be with them to make sure they were safe. About halfway out, I started to understand that perhaps **Shane** had a point, and maybe I should have just let the surfers handle the safety angle. The ocean was so powerful that day I could barely paddle back to shore. I started out the day as an uptight mom who thought she knew best, and left with a newfound respect for the power of the ocean and for the knowledge these guys have of safety in the waves.

Day after day we surfed more and more as a family. The kids adored the camp. The grown-ups in the house started taking every lesson they possibly could. In town we'd gravitate to the surf shop just to ask about the waves. I even started honking each time I passed the shop like some crazed groupie.

Every weekend I liked to check in on the guys. There's Java the Hut, who looks like a gorilla in his wet suit but can surf the pants off anyone else in the lineup. There's **Shane**, the surf-camp ringleader, who bosses the younger instructors around with that Hampton Bays born-and-bred tough-guy stance—but his wry expression lets on that he doesn't really mean it. Sunshine was named for his blindingly blond dreadlocks, and though he recently shaved his head, his smile continues to earn him the moniker. There's Alex, the brainy architect who will go for the big career, but in the meantime just can't stop surfing. And young Jay-Po is always hanging around the parking lot with a gaggle of high-school girls and Bathing Corp. moms swirling around his six-pack.

These guys speak the same language, practice the same religion, and enjoy the same fully legal high. Sunshine says people walk into the store just to talk about one wave for 20 minutes. And they all listen—raptly.

And at the top of the heap is Zuke, the nonsurfer, the so-called Suge Knight of the East End surfer crowd. He's the paternal figure; the one they're scared of, who whips them all into shape and keeps them in line and focused. He reminds me that he's intimidating size-wise but not heart-wise. That's evident in the way he puts his arm around anyone I introduce him to. Zuke watches out for all the guys around him and won't let anyone who's into smoking or drugs hang out anywhere near the store. He started off working in a shop getting paid eight dollars an hour, and ended up with enough business savvy to own three stores of his own.

Alex tells me, "Every sport has its peak. No doubt surfing is becoming hot now. It's more of a trend, like skateboarding in the seventies and eighties. I think it has something to do with the fact that people are more involved in the environment. They're enjoying the beauty of the water."

Shane, whose wife, Tisha (with whom he owns the four Collette clothing and home furnishings stores in the Hamptons), is pregnant with their first child, has watched the trend grow since he started teaching about four years ago. He prefers working with kids because they take to it so quickly and because he feels he's teaching them lessons for life—like how to be safe in the water. "As far as our camp goes, safety is our primary objective," he says. "It's all about respecting the ocean and knowing our limitations. We have three kids per instructor. Our guys swim next to the kids and tread water after they push them on a wave. We never take our own boards out because it's not safe."

First thing in the morning the kids at the camp meet to talk about the winds, tides, currents, and swells. Next they do yoga and stretching exercises, and only then do they surf. My eight-year-old son's favorite part starts when they bring out the watermelon covered in cooking oil and try to grab on to it in the water.

Sunshine says the kids have a great time regardless of whether they fall or catch a good ride. "It's always fun for everyone at every age," he says. "Surfers acknowledge that you can't describe the feeling. Even when I'm jackknifing headfirst and getting a G force of water up my nose, I still want more." Sunshine is even trying to build businesses around the sport, like the cool T-shirt company he's recently launched, Newyorksunshine.com. So far this summer, the shirts are flying off the Flying Point Surf Shop's shelves.

My kids loved Sunshine so much that my husband pushed me to hire him as my personal assistant, or "manny," for the school year in New York. People wonder why I hired a Hamptons surfer dude for this job. "It's quite simple," I tell them. "He's good at everything. My kids like seeing him after school and my husband and I like the surfer vibe in the house when it's rainy and cold all year." It also didn't escape me that when we would travel to Mexico or Florida to surf during the winter, it wouldn't take much to push Sunshine to come along and give us some pointers.

So what is it about that surfer vibe after all? I'd say it's the relaxed lifestyle. It's the respect for the power of nature. It's the tendency to hang in a close-knit group and to find family in friends. But most of all, it's the constant, desperate, obsessive seeking of the beauty and pleasure in life.

"The ocean is constantly changing," Java explains, "so you can never feel a wave twice. Every wave is new, and that's where the obsession comes from.

"I'm so hooked," he adds. "It's by far the most fun thing I've ever done. It makes life worth living; it makes me happy. That's the perfect explanation of what surfing is all about."



Java, Sunshine, and **Shane** at Flying Point Surf and Sport.



Jay Pollak, Derek
Alegría, **Shane**
Dyckman, Collen
Astarita, Sunshine
Margaritis, and Java
Bailey.