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Winter Surfing in Toronto

Posted by [Jerrold Litwinenko](#) / DECEMBER 17, 2007

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*Mark and Geoff plan their attack on Lake Ontario*

Canada is brutally cold in the winter. This weekend Toronto had one [massive winter storm](#). 30cm (about a foot) of snow accumulation, gusting winds creating wind chills of -20°C (sub 0°F) and complete road carnage were enough to keep most of us in the city holed up in our homes this weekend. The closest I came to "surfing" was when, in my pajamas, I sank into the couch with a mug of fresh coffee and remote control in hand, and flipped through the channels looking for something to watch on TV.

Hardcore Toronto surfers Mark Karvonen, Walter Tuokkola, and Geoff Johnson, on the other hand, got suited in their neoprene wetsuits, waxed their boards, and headed down to [Ashbridge's Bay](#) to ride the wicked waves of [Lake Ontario](#).

Nuts, I say. NUTS! These guys surfed up a storm during one of the most severe winter storms we've seen in years – and they loved every moment of it.

I was able to get in touch with a couple of these aspiring Arctic penguins and ask the brave winter water warriors a few questions, in hopes of better understanding their motivations and learning more about what looks like a (frigidly) good time. An interview and some fantastic photos of the human icicles follow:

blogTO: While most Torontonians were hiding from the nasty, cold, snowy storm, you guys were doing the most unlikely of activities – surfing on Lake Ontario. Why?!

Mark: Because that's when the waves are at their best! Storms that track up the US, especially along the east coast, kick up some serious swells on Lake Ontario. A little snow storm won't keep us from the sport we love. In fact, we look forward to big storms because we know they bring waves with them. We had some great conditions for surf yesterday. We had a strong NE wind for two days straight and then it switched to off-shore which cleaned up conditions and helped maintain wave shape. At Ashbridges Bay, outside sets were definitely overhead in height and had lots of power. The only thing that sucks about lake surfing is that there aren't too many people willing to take photos of us. We're usually in the water when the majority of the city is huddled indoors. Big props to [Ray](#) for braving the weather!



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





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10 signs you grew up in Woodbridge This is an absolute joke!! Anyone who actually believes that Woodbridge has any cultural significance worthy of an article like this has inhaled way too much hairspray. You people are the...



Mark and his surfboard on the shore

Do you winter surf often?

Mark: Yes, we definitely surf in the winter. Fall season is best however. It's simple science. In the fall, water temperatures are still higher from the summer months, but outside temps have fallen and the wind is at its strongest. This combination produces frequent swells on the Lakes. My first winter surfing session was also my first time ever surfing. My friends and I drove to [Wasaga Beach](#). It was a blizzard and -28°C. We jumped off an ice shelf and paddled through an ice field to get to the waves.

How warm/cold are you in your wet suit? How long can you stay out on the water?

Geoff: Always warm. To be honest, I really dislike the cold. I was lucky to pick up a 6/5/4mm thick [wetsuit](#) on Friday night because my 4/3mm suit was not protecting me enough. All the guys out on the lakes wear pretty much the same stuff: a 6/5/4 hooded wet suit, 7mm booties, and 5 or 7mm gloves or mitts. You can pretty much stay out as long as you want. About 3 weeks ago I was in my suit and in and out of the water for about 7 hours.

Your faces appear to be bitten red with cold. How does that feel?

Geoff: Good observation. Your face doesn't feel the cold nearly as much as other parts of the body. Sometimes petroleum jelly under the eyes prevents wind burn or frostbite. Personally, I don't even think about it. When you're in the water, you tend not think about anything but surfing. Unless, that is, you're caught on the inside and have to duck-dive 3-4 times in a row. That's when you really start to feel it.

Mark: At this time of year, water temps are usually around 3 - 4°C in Lake Ontario. I won't lie...the first time you get pitched on a wave and get caught in the impact zone, you definitely feel it! It feels sort of like someone is jabbing knives into your face. After the adrenaline kicks in though, you just forget about it.

Surely you arrive at a point where you're extremely cold and feeling like your face might turn into a popsicle... what's your post-surf warming-up strategy?

Mark: I usually try and change in my car, but sometimes I just throw a towel on my car seat, drive home and take my suit off in the shower. I have plans to build a sauna in my basement so that'll definitely be my post-surf warm up remedy in the future.

Geoff: I hop in the shower with the complete suit on, and start to strip down and warm the core up for a good 10 minutes. Then food - anything with hot sauce (no joke), fresh ginger and garlic. It helps to kill off anything you may have swallowed and keeps your immune system very strong. I've never

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become ill from surfing the lakes.



Geoff tears it up

Do you enjoy other winter sports or do you simply refuse to stop participating in summer sports when most other people do?

Mark: I surf and play hockey. A lot of my friends are into snowboarding, but I'll stick with surfing.

Geoff: I've snowboarded for about 14 years now, and although I typically like the warmer weather, winter surfing really draws you in.

Do you have any advice to offer to aspiring winter surfers?

Geoff: Start surfing in the warmer weather and do not get in over your head or ability. All joking aside, with the temperature of the water is hovering just above freezing, [hypothermia](#) can ensue in seconds. We are all extremely proficient swimmers and have been conditioning our bodies from the summer/fall months to acclimatize to the progressively colder water. Furthermore, we're weather freaks and check the conditions 3-4 times daily for insight to when the next swell comes. If you are looking to get into the sport, pick up a copy of "Surfing the Great Lakes" and check out [Originsurf.ca](#) - there's a lot of information to help you get going.

Mark: For someone who's never surfed before, I wouldn't recommend trying it on a big winter day. Air and water temps, current, rock jetties, your board and the waves themselves can quickly put an inexperienced surfer in a world of hurt. Common sense things like being well rested, eating properly, and being well hydrated before a session are really important. You have to be in good surf shape too. And there's a big difference between being in shape and being in surf shape. I've seen a portly fellow paddle through heavy shore break like a machine while a Bruce Lee built dude slapped the water like a child playing before the first lip landed on his head. It's all about paddling stamina and knowing your limits. There's nothing worse than getting caught in the impact zone with noodle arms.



"Human Popsicles"

Mark is a marketing executive, Walter a youth pastor, and Geoff is a service & accounts manager. All make Toronto home, love the surf, and frequently hang out at [Originsurf.ca](#).

All photographs courtesy of [Reijo Kemppainen](#), who was kind enough to capture his pals on camera from the shore.

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Robyn H / DECEMBER 17, 2007 AT 09:21 PM



THEIR HATS ARE FROZEN.

Props.

Steve / DECEMBER 17, 2007 AT 09:39 PM



Well, there goes ANY excuses for not winter-biking.
Dang.

Adam / DECEMBER 17, 2007 AT 11:28 PM



These guys are out of their minds! Would LOVE to watch this though :)

chephy / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 01:56 AM



Wow. Just wow. And I naively thought I was hardcore for biking in this weather.

lily / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 07:28 AM



FYI...Sunday, Dec. 16th (the day these photos were taken) was also Mark's birthday. This is how he chose to spend his birthday. Crazy guy...

krista / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 07:33 AM



good on ya guys!! keep on surfing!!!

Ray / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 08:02 AM



I know 2 out of the 3 of these guys and I would say they are at least 66% nuts...stay warm!

Jesse / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 10:02 AM



Looks like you guys had a lot of fun. I had a feeling you guys would get out there when this storm hit

Damon Kemp / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 10:16 AM



Cool. I haven't been surfing since I've lived in Hawaii. But I've missed it so much that I may have join up with these guys. I wonder if these guys surf the lake during the summer?

Jerrold / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 10:35 AM



They do surf the lake in the summer, but apparently the waves are better in the fall/winter months :)

sookie / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 01:04 PM



I like surfing too, but really, when the snow is falling, why not just go snowboarding?

Damon / DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 04:04 PM



My bad Jerrold. LOL. Didn't know. But I think Hawaii spoiled me and I am so used to waist-high to overhead waves.

kev / DECEMBER 20, 2007 AT 02:30 PM



These dudes are sweet, think I'm going to definitely try to hit up Ashbridges sometime and see if I spot them. Not likely that I'd drop my board in this time of year, but maybe next fall.

Carol Shirley / DECEMBER 20, 2007 AT 09:40 PM



Wow, you look like you are having fun, On top of the waves
Yeah.....
Me and Mel are talking about ya, right now.....

Chris Orbz / DECEMBER 22, 2007 AT 04:05 PM



Tom Green just posted on his blog about his friend Adam doing a bit of this winter surfing too.

Rick / JANUARY 2, 2008 AT 09:08 AM



Where is the best place to Fall/Winter surf on the east coast of Lake Ontario if your from Syracuse NY

gabrielamadeus / JANUARY 2, 2008 AT 10:57 PM



yeah! I went out to WATCH some friends do this in Lake Superior, if the cold doesn't get you, there is always dodging the ice chunks in the breaks. eeesh!
<http://www.superiorsurfclub.com>

Hamish Grant / JANUARY 3, 2008 AT 08:36 AM



Welcome to blogTO, Farkers!

<http://forums.fark.com/cgi/fark/comments.pl?IDLink=3303317>

Jacques / JANUARY 3, 2008 AT 09:17 AM



Right, Toronto is NOT brutally cold in winter. Winnipeg is brutally cold, Ottawa can be brutally cold, Kuujuaq is brutally cold. Toronto is practically balmy in winter compared to most places in Canada. Oh yeah, and the Leafs suck.

Jeremy / JANUARY 14, 2008 AT 10:26 PM



hi, wheres the best place(S) to surf around toronto in summer, i hate the cold, but those 2 guys obviously dont, way to go, if anyone needs a rookie surf partner this year, email me, i wanna learn, makin my own board, email me, bigjerp@hotmai.com

RayK / JANUARY 16, 2008 AT 01:11 PM



Jeremy, check out the website mentioned in the above article (Originsurf.ca). You can join their forums and find out where the good surf spots are.

ang / FEBRUARY 10, 2008 AT 07:35 PM



I want one of those suits for my morning commute!

F sharp / FEBRUARY 18, 2008 AT 07:59 PM



Hi:
I live in Burlington Ontario. I was wondering if you could provide any info about surfing lessons in the area?

Thanks very much for your time and consideration!

Tucci / JULY 19, 2008 AT 04:24 AM



Not only does this prove to ignorant people everywhere that Canadians, more specifically people from Toronto, can surf too, but it also should make them repsect us Toronto surfers:). I've surfed the lakes but never in December. These dudes are my heroes lol.

larry / FEBRUARY 14, 2010 AT 08:02 PM



Hi:
Is awesome to see this pics and such a hard core surfers here in toronto, I am surfer from peru and This winter I am up to surf the great lakes for the first time (in winter), by next weekend my 6/5/4 should arrive so please, let me know when and where to meet for a session. I would appreciate it !!

ride on.
larry pulpos78@hotmail.com

RL / NOVEMBER 23, 2010 AT 12:48 PM



I am from California and when I saw this article it blew my mind !!! Hats of to these guys... to think of surfing on Lake Ontario and to add to it during winter time is just plain crazy !! I wold love to try it tho but I am not sure my body can handle it !! I will mos def put this on my to do list.. I've surfed Bali, Teahupoo , Siargao , Mexico and of course Huntington Beach... Lake Ontario is amust during winter time !!

Peace

RL / NOVEMBER 23, 2010 AT 12:50 PM



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RL / NOVEMBER 23, 2010 AT 12:52 PM



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Peace

jonn3 / JUNE 15, 2011 AT 03:08 AM



comment2,

maddy replying to a **comment from F sharp** / MARCH 10, 2012 AT 07:56 PM



go to if your still looking for lessons :)
http://www.surfontario.ca/faq_surf.htm

Kirsten / DECEMBER 17, 2013 AT 06:20 AM



Just awesome!! Would love to capture some photos of the action if you're looking for a photographer crazy enough to endure the cold with you guys (I shoot skiing too) next storm we get I will be on the lookout :)

Kristen / DECEMBER 17, 2013 AT 06:26 AM



^^ email me if you are looking for a photographer...
www.kristenhanna.com kristenlynnhanna@me.com ^^

Wally / JANUARY 7, 2014 AT 12:52 PM



Haha, frozen food for sharks!! ;)

Keep on surfing – I personally love this weather!! –39 C today (Jan. 7, 2014)

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