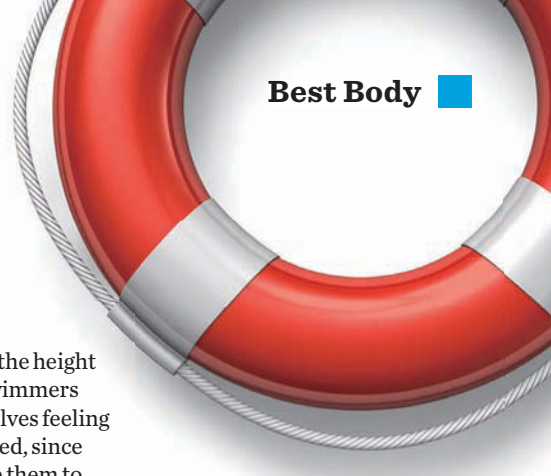




To the Rescue

Surf's Up—but that doesn't mean swimming is out. While "swell" is a surfer's dream that sends many an ocean-swimmer running for the shore, big waves don't mean you can't still enjoy a jaunt in the sea. We help you brush up on the basics of water safety so the beaches can stay your playground all year round...

By Yi-Hwa Hanna



Blue skies and calm waters—that's the image that's usually conjured up when you picture the coastline of the UAE. But every year, as the temperatures cool down for the winter, both residents and tourists alike find themselves surprised at just how windy and downright aggressive the sea conditions can be at times. Sure, surfers across the city rejoice as the long-awaited swell comes to town, but what about the casual beach-goer who just wants to take a dip, then finds themselves in a precarious situation? Although the UAE's many luxury resorts and hotels always have a lifeguard on duty, and the coast guard and beach police patrols try their best to keep a watchful eye on the sand and water, many beachgoers don't heed the warnings against swimming in rough

like a number of his staff is a qualified beach lifeguard, says that while they wouldn't put this down as an official record by any means, he recalls one year where his team marked a board with a notch for every person they had pulled out of the water, simply out of sheer curiosity. The toll came to about 40-50 people. "It is predominantly during the surf season, which is when we get waves here, so from October until about May or June (when we get the most amount of swell) that people tend to get into trouble," he says, explaining that even outside of the surf season, people can still find themselves in trouble based on something as simple as the temperature of the water. Despite the at times rough nature of the water, the

warm as a bath in the height of the summer, swimmers could find themselves feeling weak and exhausted, since the heat can cause them to tire more easily—it's just another factor that could have a massive impact on their overall water safety if beachgoers were only made aware. Scott is just one of many experts passionate about the importance of education and the enormous ripples that could have in the way people comport themselves in and around the water. "Everyone needs to have a basic level of education, and I think that's what it comes down to the most," Scott says, continuing: "[It's important to] have ports of call where people can be educated about their local coastline, and how to

report isn't just for surfers—a useful resource for beachgoers and watermen (and women) alike, it breaks down what you can expect in the local area of Dubai's Sunset Beach in both surf-speak and layman's terms. "There's three parts to our forecast—one is an actual report, just the stats of the day. So we'll tell you the tide timings, which will let you know when the tide is pushing and when it's going out, and then it gives you the sea state on the day as well, so the wave height—which is the swell and face height. These are two different things: Swell height is the open ocean swell height, and face height is the actual size from the surface level of the water to the crest of the wave—how big the face of that wave is—that's when it breaks when it's closer to shore. That's really good if you're heading down to the beach and want to know what it's doing right there and then. The other part to it is our take on what it'll be doing throughout the day, based on the wind and what we know is happening. We pull from three different sources—tide sites, wind sites, and swell sites—to put together a picture of what we think the surf is going to be doing throughout the day. And then there's also the long-term forecast, where we'll let you know what's coming about five days ahead," Scott says.

In Dubai, while surfing zones are clearly marked with signs on some beaches, different countries employ

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weather, resulting in a number of people finding themselves in trouble—or worse, drowning—year after year.

Despite the best efforts of the lifeguards that do exist on both fully governed municipal beaches as well as the private entities that run beach-based environs, experts feel that the region could still do with some work when it comes to the level of professional help when it comes to water safety, with an increased presence of lifeguards as well as widespread education for the public. The UAE's surfing community has been a real boon in helping to keep the public beaches safe. Scott Chambers, founder and CEO of Surf House Dubai, who,

winter season is actually ideal for swimming when it comes to the climate. "Water temperatures here fluctuate from about 22°C during the deepest part of winter, so from January to February, up to about 37°C in August, which is like a cup of tea and not pleasant at all," Scott says. But even in the hottest parts of the year, you can still get out there if you pick your timings right: "I'd say early mornings, when it's still very bearable, and late evenings, are best during the summer months. Other than that, from now until about June it's pretty amazing," he says. The heat isn't just unpleasant—with water temperatures as

use it responsibly. [When it comes to] your swimming ability, you need to know your limits, and what the water is like on a particular beach as well, because if you do understand the way it works, then there's ways to go about it safely no matter what the conditions are."

Scope It Out

If you're not quite down with the lingo, don't fret since help is at hand: There are plenty of sources online where you can find live or up-to-date reports on what the conditions are like at your desired location. On the Surf House Dubai website, for instance, the daily surf

Best Body

various techniques to let beachgoers know what's going on. Most common is the flag system, wherein different coloured flags are used to denote how safe certain parts of the sea are to swim in. Here, ropes are also used to indicate the different zones, with the surfing area on Sunset Beach cordoned off by perpendicular ropes that run straight out from the beach for about 100 yards, parallel to the shoreline. Still, as Scott explains, since surfers typically traverse the waves parallel to the beach, as buoy lines become encrusted with barnacles over time, these can become a bit of a hazard. The GCC is still building an ever-evolving system, and experts feel it would be wise to look at the best practices employed by countries that have had surfing in their histories for a lot longer. According to Scott, an ideal system would be "the flag system, combined with a lifeguard system where they are talking to beach users, explaining where to swim and what the flags mean on a daily basis—so it becomes common knowledge to all beachgoers."

Educate Yourself

Awareness of the state of the water is about more than just how choppy the waves look on any given day, and is something any beach-lover should brush up on. "People think Dubai isn't a place for big waves or surf, so it's nothing to worry about, but on any beach regardless of how big the waves are, you can have quite strong rip currents—and we do here," Scott says. Being able to identify a rip current is a key here, he says, and there are visual ways to do so. "[These are] areas of the beach where the water looks more unsettled, and it sometimes has a sandy colour to it rather than the normal blue or green hue. It will look disturbed, and the wave pattern will be breaking completely differently in that area. You may even see that water is rushing straight out to



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sea," Scott says, explaining: "What's happening here is that wave energy is breaking up to the shore, and at some point, that energy reaches a level where it has to release—and the only way for it to do that is to head straight back out to sea. So the currents just start to carve out the sea bed, and you end up with a deep water channel where the water is essentially rushing straight out to sea. This is what we see happening all the time, where people go out and all of a sudden step into one of these

deeper channels so they can't touch the bottom anymore—which for some people is already a place where they don't feel comfortable. And they'll enter a mild state of panic." Losing your cool is the worst thing you can do in such a situation, and staying calm can be the most imperative part of your safety, Scott says. "For instance if you're stuck in a rip current, a lot of the time people who panic will try to swim straight back to shore as their first instinct, but in reality that's the worst thing you can

do since you'll keep getting pulled in different directions and wind up tiring yourself out, when sometimes, you just can't fight the force of the ocean," he says. In a situation like that, it's best to actually swim parallel—"it's usually only about 8 to 20 feet and once you're out of it, you can easily swim back to shore." Keep your wits about you, Scott says, and remember what you've educated yourself with, so you won't find yourself in a situation that you're totally unfamiliar with. If you're out on a stand up paddleboarding



make sure you check the forecast beforehand, but if you do get stuck in something unexpected and can't paddle back, on a SUP what you'd need to do is lie down completely with the paddle under your chest or to the side, or at least get on your knees. This will take off a lot of the wind resistance that occurs when you're standing. Then you can try paddling with your arms, like a basic front crawl swimming stroke. If you're too exhausted to do anything at all, you may have to wait it out—eventually if it's an onshore wind, it'll blow you into something on the coastline. If it's an offshore wind, that's a bit trickier since it'll take you straight out to sea—in that case, try to flag down any boats you see. If there aren't any or you don't manage to get their attention, just wait it out because at one point the wind will subside, and once it drops you can paddle back. Always stay with your board—it's the best buoyancy aid, so at least you're not going under water. You may be a bit hungry, tired and dehydrated, but at least you'll stay afloat," Scott says.

Play It Smart

Being a strong swimmer at your local pool doesn't equip you for intense ocean swims either: "Open water swimming is very different—not only is it much

more dehydrating, not to mention often hotter, there are also currents you can't control," Scott says. Luckily, in the UAE there isn't much sea life that we have to worry about hurting us. Jellyfish are plentiful throughout parts of the year, and their stings *will* hurt—but the pain caused by the commonly encountered types will subside within around 30 minutes. If you are stung and can't wait to nip it in the bud, any ammonia-based solution will do the trick: Yes, the myth of urine being an effective cure *is* true, but according to Scott, the Surf House, coast guards and most pharmacies carry either vinegar or ammonia based solutions should you find yourself in need. New species do turn up each year, however, and while it is rare, it's important to be aware that this can happen and, as always, not to panic. "[In the rarer breeds] you might find that some jellyfish will actually leave their tentacles on you—if they're wrapped around you, you'll want to make sure you pull all of it off, or the sting will carry on," Scott says, adding that once you've cleaned it completely and poured on an ammonia solution, you should be safe. If you're experiencing a more

severe reaction—such as anaphylactic shock—have someone take you to the hospital immediately. If you spy someone else in trouble on the beach, staying calm is still important. Much like the old airplane rule of putting on your own oxygen mask before helping others, before assisting anyone else in a rescue, first make sure that you're in a physical and circumstantial situation where you won't end up with two people—the other being yourself—in trouble. Strong swimmers with no other option can attempt to go out and help those in trouble, but should always remember that there is a certain way victims are meant to be carried to safety. "It's best to first see if there's anyone around who can help, assess the situation, and don't try to be a hero for the sake of it—be honest with yourself about whether you can handle it or not, then call for help," Scott says. If you'd like to become a qualified beach lifeguard, there are courses available in Dubai—try the four-day course at Safety Skills Training DMCC, which involves a physical and theory test recognised by the local authorities. Above all, remember: Be smart, respect the ocean, and enjoy it. We'll see you in the water! ■

session rather than a swim, the same rules apply: Stay calm, and follow protocol. "It can be really difficult paddling in windy conditions," Scott says. "Always

SAFE SWIMMING

While you don't need to be an expert, it's important to be aware of a few basic terms. Scott Chambers, Founder and CEO of the Surf House Dubai shares the need-to-knows...

Long shore drift is the flow of water and sediment as waves approach along an angle to the coast. In Dubai, it is typically south to north and it moves you parallel to the shoreline. Being aware of this current is good to anticipate your movement in the water, and having a fixed

landmark reference point on the beach will allow you to gauge how much you have drifted with the current.

Rip currents can occur with waves as small as 6 inches.

They are created by wave energy surging onto the beach needing a place to escape. As waves get bigger, the rip currents get stronger and larger. Rip currents have three major parts—see image at right. If you're caught in one, your best escape route is where the green arrows are. For more info, try redcross.org/prepare/disaster/water-safety/beach-safety.





ON THE JOB
Ever wondered what it's like to be a professional lifeguard at some of the most crowded beaches in the world? We chatted to Corey Oliver, Founder of Original Fitness Co and Oceanman and Head of Leisure at Three60 Leisure, and a former professional lifeguard at three of Sydney's busiest beach municipalities, for the inside scoop...

I grew up swimming and surfing. My grandfather, father, friends, uncles, aunties—it was a part of the lifestyle for all of us, and I learned to be a surf lifesaver from when I was about 10 years old. My home, Thirroul, in the northern suburbs of Wollongong, Australia, was an hour south of Sydney on the coast. It was a small seaside town, and becoming a lifeguard felt like a natural progression.

I worked as a professional lifeguard in three Sydney municipalities—Cronulla, Wollongong, and Bondi—for about 10 years, and spent 20 years as a lifesaver, which is a volunteer role. I also did a few stints in Japan during the off-seasons. Being a lifeguard there was a bit like being in Baywatch—we had red and yellow Speedos with “Lifeguard” written across the back, and that’s all we used to wear! So you can imagine the shape you needed to be in. I was training about four times a day. At the start of every year, we had to do a lifeguard test in order to get the job. The test involved an 800 metre swim that to be completed in under 14

minutes—I used to do it in about 10, but some guys were just hitting the cut-off, and it was quite stressful for them. We’d then have to do an Ocean Survival Race in a certain amount of time, along with a defibrillator, CPR and First Aid test before you could start each year. We had a team of about 40 lifeguards, and the female lifeguards had to hit the same standards as the men. On a busy day, Bondi would have about 60,000 people on it, and we’d have around eight lifeguards monitoring one kilometer of the beach each. We were responsible for everything, from thieves coming down to steal people’s bags off the beach to people drinking or playing games on there, or even those who would come down after having been to the nightclubs at 6am. Our hours began at 6am until around 1-2pm, then the afternoon shift would come in until around 6-7pm. From 7pm until 6am there was no-one there, so if people wanted to go for a midnight swim it was at their own risk. There were a lot of drownings during that time. The highest number of physical rescues we had in one day was 123—this involves paddling out to the break, putting someone on the board and bringing them back in, rather than just walking out to the water to help. I was pretty tired that day! We had maybe one person die a year. I’d say the most common cause of death was alcohol-related, like when people would go swimming after having had a big night out, or when people would come straight

off the plane from Sydney airport. They’d get the bus or train down from the airport, and upon arriving at Bondi road they’d go straight to the south end—which is the most dangerous part—and see the beach and sand, then say “Oh great, we’ll just go in here!” There were no shark attacks while I was there—Bondi has shark nets, and you’d stand on the headland and see the boat at 7am pulling the sharks up onto the boat. We used to go out there, training on the ski or the board, and it was out at the back of the nets—we’d

It was a great job: I was single, in my late teens and early 20’s, in good shape and we were like rockstars. It’s a great job. It’s like doing a community service—it’s not just like being a pool lifeguard. The beaches in Australia are like communities—Bondi is the epicentre of Sydney. One of the best parts of being a lifeguard was being able to go to the beach, where I would be anyway, for work, and just be part of that healthy beach lifestyle. It was also amazing to be able to actually help people

Being a lifeguard teaches you *how to handle stressful situations, and to respect the ocean and nature*

swim around it. Getting attacked by a shark is like being struck by lightning—it’s pretty rare. The three most common things we’d typically see when people got in trouble in the water were people that couldn’t swim when they thought they could, people that couldn’t “read” a beach or were ignorant to the signs and warnings, or just those who were induced by alcohol or drugs or who had medical difficulties. The main thing to be aware of when it comes to water safety is that you need to respect the ocean. You can’t be a waterperson overnight, and it’s just experience—you don’t go in and just think you can swim straight away. Swimming in the ocean is very different from pool swimming.

when they’re in trouble. Every time I made a rescue I felt like I’d made a difference, and I felt accomplished. When it was a child, and their mother was on the beach screaming, at full panic stations with a life and death situation, I really felt like I saved that family. Being a lifeguard, or even learning to be a lifesaver, definitely teaches you a lot that can be applicable to the rest of your life. It highlights that things do go wrong in life, and empowers you by teaching you how to react in emergency situations, as well as how to handle stressful situations, and also teaches you respect for the ocean and nature in general from a young age.