

Proof That You Can Learn to Surf at Any Age

Here's how the sport can enrich your life

by Marla Cimini, [AARP](#), December 11, 2019 | Comments: 0



PETER FRANK EDWARDS

Surfer Christine Scaplen at The Washout, Folly Beach, SC

Sharing a love of the ocean inspires surfers worldwide to paddle out and catch waves every day. But not everyone first jumped on a board as a child or teen. For women who have learned to surf after age 40, the beach has become a place of community, solitude and triumph. Across the United States, women are finding that learning to surf as adults has enriched their lives on many levels, leading to travel, new friendships, and [healthier lifestyles](#). And this means Gen X women will be surfing well into their 60s, 70s and beyond.

In Malibu, California, Ellen Johnson is a 59-year-old real estate agent who started surfing at 50, after her divorce and while her children were in college. At that point in

her life, she was fortunate to have a flexible schedule, a lot of patience and plenty of time to practice in the water.

"I was always curious about surfing, but I also had some fear of the ocean," Johnson said. Around that time, she traveled to Fiji for a surf trip and fell in love with the sport. Upon returning home, she bought a wet suit and took lessons with instructor (and pro longboarder) Carla Zamora. She also connected with a group of nearby female surfers and tried to get in the water as often as possible.

"Surfing has given me so much joy. I don't think there is a better feeling than being in the ocean catching glassy waves. It gives me a thrill and energizes me each time," Johnson said. "After a fun session, I'm pretty much smiling, happy and relaxed for days. I've also met so many great people surfing, and I've taken many super fun surf vacations to spots I would have otherwise never visited."

Laura Klees, of Huntington Beach, California, started surfing in 2008 at age 44. The sport has inspired her life so much that she launched a surf travel company three years ago, Gypsea Life Surf, where she offers guided surf trips for clients and shares her knowledge of swells, breaks, tides and techniques.

Before learning to surf, she spent a summer watching her 12-year-old son take lessons and wondered why she wasn't out there on the waves, too. When her son returned to school, she took a few classes and purchased a surfboard.

Growing up, Klees spent time on the beach and had a boogie board, so she was no stranger to the ocean. She said, "When I was a teenager, the guys surfed, and the girls watched. I guess I never had the guts to tell them I wanted to surf, too."

She said surfing has positively affected her life in many ways. "First of all, I joined a women's surf club (and prior to this, I had never joined anything in my life), and have made many lifelong friends through surfing — in and out of the water."

When other women ask her about surfing lessons, she tells them, "You have nothing to lose, and a lot to gain. Surfing raises your confidence, and boosts your physical and mental well-being. Besides, who doesn't love a sunrise or sunset surf session?"

Surfing is not just for West Coasters, either. Christine Scaplen, 50, is a marketing and communications professional living in Chelmsford, Massachusetts — and she surfs year-round. "We have a hearty crew in northern New England," she said. "The cold keeps us young."

She learned to surf about nine years ago, when she took a private lesson from a surf shop using a secondhand fiberglass board. She spent the first two years surfing on summer weekends and fell into the surf community. After gaining confidence (and

investing in winter gear), she began shredding seriously in “deep winter” (January to March) as well.

"Surfing brings so much to my life on so many levels," Scaplen said. "Similar to [yoga](#), but more intensely, it gives me balance and peace of mind. It's made me more patient, more mindful, more grateful. It connects me to nature, to people around the world, and to myself."

All of the women pointed out that surfing takes perseverance and that, ideally, it's best to be in decent physical shape, have upper-body strength, possess [good balance](#) and know how to swim. But they also agree the benefits outweigh the potentially frustrating learning curve.

"Learning to surf at age 41, I gained more than I expected. Surfing brought me something new to learn, and the experience of progressing with a skill that challenges me mentally, emotionally and physically," Scaplen said. "Beyond the physical joy of surfing, it has taught me how to challenge myself, [push my limits](#) and not be afraid to fail. It translates well into life lessons ... to accept and respect the conditions outside my control, and learn to work with — rather than against — the waves. It brings me a sense of accomplishment while providing me with a way to play."