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Pick the right surfing spots for your ability and attitude. We need to be honest with ourselves about our ability, and our intentions. We also need to recognize that some surf zones are not suited to competitive skills-oriented behavior.

When it comes to selecting a surf spot for the day's fun, each of us has a responsibility to be aware of where we'll feel most comfortable. Surf spots with hollower, more powerful, high performance [wave](#) ranges - Pipeline, for instance - will almost always feature a higher-skilled and more potentially competitive pack of surfers. Generally at such Hot Zones, the better the surfers' general skills, the more waves will be ridden per surfer, and the more pressure will be on each individual surfer to keep up the pace.

On the other end of the spectrum, Cool Zones, surf spots with softer, easier and less critical [wave](#) ranges - San Onofre springs to mind - will usually feature lots of beginners or intermediate surfers, and the vibe in the lineup will be much more relaxed, with considerably less performance pressure on the individual.

In between lie a huge variety of spots, many of which aren't particularly fixed in the Hot or Cool Zone, but may instead veer

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back and forth depending on a given day's wave quality or crowd type.

It's important for all of us to recognize that by charging into a lineup for which we're not suited, we're likely to be frustrated and to disrupt others' surfing enjoyment. If you're not a high performance ripper, but just engaging in the early learning process or feeling like a cruisey session, then tackling a Hot Zone will leave you feeling way out of your depth and may even place you or other surfers in danger of injury. If you're a budding hot surfer trying to develop a high skill range and eager to ride with people of a similar intent, then paddling out at a Cool Zone is likely to leave you feeling unsatisfied and your fellow surfers irritated by your competitive attitude.

Simply by making a wise choice of location, you'll head off many of surfing's more vexed etiquette decisions at the pass.

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Don't drop in on or snake your fellow

surfer. In other words, do not catch a wave once another surfer has claimed it by being in a deeper or more effective position at takeoff.

Dropping in and snaking are the two most common ways in which we blow each other's fun in the surf. Both are usually caused by greed, and involve a ride-crippling interference by one surfer on another.

The drop-in happens like this: Surfer A is closest to the curl, paddles into and catches the wave, only to find that Surfer B -- the dropper-in -- has also caught the wave, from further out on the shoulder. Surfer A is then blocked from making a successful ride. The two surfers may collide, accidentally or deliberately, but it's unlikely that either will enjoy the wave to its fullest. At some critical surf spots, Surfers A and/or B may even be placed in physical danger as a result.

Drop-ins can and do happen by accident, as well as through frustration and confusion in a crowded lineup. To avoid dropping in, practice the three Ls: *Look*, *Listen*, and *Learn*. Always *Look* to your inside toward the curl before committing to the wave, just to make sure nobody's already in there. *Listen* for the

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common warning - a hoot or whistle from the surfer in position. *Learn* from your errors - if you drop in, make sure you're off the wave as soon as possible, say sorry, and make sure the other rider's OK before going on with your session.

A more subtle, yet potentially more offensive form of ride interference is the snake. This move is very bad etiquette, a greedy exploitation of the generally understood drop-in rule, and is usually practiced by competent and aggressive surfers. Snaking works like this: Surfer A, in position and having waited his or her turn, begins to paddle for the wave. Surfer B (the snake) waits until A's focus is purely on catching the wave, then makes a quick move to the inside and takes off, claiming the wave. If both surfers end up riding, it appears A has dropped in and is in the wrong, yet both surfers, and usually most onlookers, know otherwise.

Snaking can be distinguished from dropping in, in that it's rarely accidental. The result, however, is less predictable, and if A is also a competent surfer, bad feelings and even arguments may occur. If you're being snaked repeatedly by a single surfer, don't react -- it's unlikely to be personal. Simply move to another area of the break, putting yourself and the snake out of each other's wave-catching rhythm. If you find yourself being persistently snaked by a range of surfers, you may be sitting too wide of the takeoff to fully claim the wave; paddle deeper and make your intention clearer.

Special note to beginners: You may occasionally note surfers breaking these drop-in codes, riding around each other, and grinning away in the process -- obviously enjoying the wave share. Very likely they're friends or acquaintances who've taken off on the same wave deliberately, or who're making the best of an accidental drop-in. This should NOT be a signal to you that dropping in is just fine at that particular spot.

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When paddling out to or within a break, it's your responsibility to stay out of the way of riders on waves. This has its roots in the same thinking behind "don't drop in" - once a rider has selected and caught a wave, all other surfers should do their best not to interfere with his or her enjoyment of the wave. It's also extremely practical.

Let's face it: Few moves make less sense than paddling close to, or directly into, the breaking line of waves on the way to the takeoff zone.

For one thing, natural waterflow through the lineup will make the trip a lot easier if you paddle clear and in open water. For another, not all surfers in the water will have the skills or inclination to avoid your prone board and body floating up into their paths. Therefore, always paddle out wide of the break, making sure you're not interfering with your fellow surfers' waves.

If you find yourself caught inside the whitewater line, don't cut across riders' tracks in a frantic attempt to reach the shoulder; maintain your position, pushing through the whitewater until the set passes, then go wide again into open water as quickly as possible. Paddling into the path of a surfer in the tube in order to save yourself a duckdive is extremely bad etiquette.

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Never block a fellow surfer's path into a wave by paddling beneath his or her entry line. Doing so - whether or not you believe the surfer is capable of catching the wave - is a gross breach of etiquette, and if the surfer does in fact take off, you will be exposed to potential injury, or at the very least a wipeout for which you will receive little sympathy.

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Thou shalt learn to take turns. Hey, let's face it: Surfers are greedy creatures. We all want it for ourselves. But we're not alone on this planet, which means sharing the wave-catching opportunities during any given surf session.

The etiquette of break-sharing can be seen at almost any surf spot ridden by two or more people at a time, and depends very much on the nature of the spot and the skills and attitude of the riders.

At a reefbreak with a consistent set-wave takeoff zone, the ideal situation is for everyone to simply take turns. This is most easily accomplished when the lineup is largely composed of surfers who know each other, but can be achieved at any spot under reasonable crowd conditions. In the classic turn-taking model, an informal "line" of surfers springs into being, with the surfer whose turn it is sitting deepest and in the logical takeoff spot for the wave he or she wants to ride.

Etiquette permits some leeway here. For instance, the best surfer's skills may earn him or her an occasional extra wave, or a wider opportunity to choose the precise wave he or she

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wants. If surfers are taking turns with set waves and Surfer A drifts down the line out of the primary takeoff zone, the other surfers may choose to allow A to catch some of the smaller waves, but in doing so A will lose rights to really good set waves that break further outside. Remember, in a taking-turns surf environment, it's your responsibility to be in a good position to catch the wave when it's your turn.

At a pointbreak with two or three sections, groups will form at the beginning of each section and take turns as at a reef, with one proviso: if a surfer is riding down from a section up the line and looks likely to make the wave, other surfers should make every effort to permit him or her a clean shot. The most common breach of etiquette here is pre-emptive paddling: Surfer A is hurtling down the line from a long way back, and Surfer B - figuring A won't make the section - begins to paddle into the wave. As A approaches, B pulls back, but his paddling efforts cause the wave to crumble and break down in front of A. Result: A wipes out or is caught behind, and the wave peels off unridden. Bad move, B.

Point and reef break etiquette can begin to break down if one or more surfers are taking off too deep and out of position, thus wasting the sections and forcing other surfers who are waiting in line to watch wave go unridden. This almost always leads to dropping in, and at the least it'll lead to pre-emptive paddling, as surfers begin to anticipate each other's failures and chase each other's waves from the shoulder.

Beachbreaks tend to feature a shifting wave environment. The takeoff zones - plural, not singular - are spread out, with more waves for everyone. This can break a beach up into several different mini-spots, each with its own turn-taking routine in place. If you're surfing one mini-spot at a beachbreak, keep in mind that if you move to another mini-spot on the same beach, you're entering another mini-society, and should be prepared to go to the end of the wave-sharing line.

Beachbreaks, along with some reef breaks, also lead to the need for peak etiquette. If you are in position for a really good two-way peak with another surfer, you should choose to split the peak - that is, you go one way off the peak, he or she goes the other. In splitting the peak, communication is the key. You might both prefer to go the opposite way, or one of you might want to be sure he or she isn't about to commit a drop-in. The only way you'll find out is to ask each other- and then make the choice quickly!

Backdoor entry: Surf spots of all three types can sometimes feature a method of lineup entry - jumping off rocks, perhaps, or paddling from behind a point - that provides immediate access to the inside takeoff position. In such cases, you should NOT use that artificial inside positioning to jump the turn-taking rotation. Doing this is bad etiquette and will lead to bad feeling among your fellow surfers. Instead, either let the surfers already sitting and waiting to take the waves they want until the lineup's clear, or paddle wide to the outside and move into position along with everyone else.

Sometimes there are just too many people in the lineup, without enough waves for everyone. In such cases, even with all the goodwill in the world, turn-taking can fall apart, the lineup tends to become a free-for-all, and the drop-in rule is just about the last thing left standing. In that situation, be prepared to adjust your attitude to what's happening. If you can't, it might be best to find another spot.

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In any surf session, respect the pre-existing vibe in the lineup. This holds true no matter your status, equipment, or ability level.

Hour to hour, on any given day at any given surf location, the attitude or 'vibe' in the lineup can vary greatly. Surf conditions can influence the vibe, sure, but the human element is a much broader influence. Simply speaking, attitude changes occur with each change in crowd identity. Anyone who's regularly surfed a break through its daily cycle and felt the change in mood as the various crews - the dawn patrollers, the mid-morning shift, the lunchbreakers, the after-work rush hour pack - pass through will know precisely what we mean.

Since the lineup's vibe is unpredictable from hour to hour, it's not always a good idea to make assumptions as to its nature. For instance, often at uncrowded point or reef breaks with specific takeoff zones, surfers will develop a natural rotation of sharing waves. In this situation, there's nothing worse than one person, all unawares, just crashing through the rotation. Such actions can turn an ideal session into a hassling, ugly free-for-all.

Therefore, before jumping in, you should always attempt to gain a feel for the vibe in the lineup. Ways of doing this include:

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Asking surfers who've just finished a session. 'Hey, how's the crowd factor?' 'Get plenty of waves?' 'Much room out there?' A simple question or two will earn you some valuable inside information and maybe save you (and others) a lot of trouble.

Watching and listening. Aggressive crowds are full of 'yellers' - people who raise their voices to each other during and after rides. Aggressive crowds also rarely feature just one paddler for a wave; there are almost always a bunch of people trying to gain the initiative on any single ride. These are two quick-and-easy giveaways, observable by any surfer within 10 minutes of setting eyes on a spot. In mellower lineups, single surfers are given a clear paddle-in passage, and you're likely to see a number of waves go unriden.

In any case, once you do paddle out, it's your responsibility to adjust to the current vibe, not expect it to change to suit you. If you find it difficult to make this adjustment, it might be a good idea to find a spot where the vibe matches your attitude, instead of vice versa.

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Always aid another surfer in trouble. But don't put yourself in a situation over your head. Two surfers in need of help are in a much worse a state than one.

Unlike most other sports, surfing is often practiced in places where, and at times when, medical or paramedical assistance may not be instantly available. It's also practiced in a medium - the ocean - where a human, if rendered helpless, can be literally out of his or her depth, fast.

This means we have only one real safety net in times of danger: each other. The physical safety of your fellow surfer should be a paramount concern, overriding any disputes or bad feelings that may already have occurred between you.

In the ocean, there is not the luxury available to land-dwellers of standing by and waiting for a doctor or other trained person to come leaping out of the crowd. The nature of any lineup - turbulent, shifty, always moving - means that other surfers may not see a surfer in trouble right away. As a result, it's very important to react quickly as soon as you see a fellow surfer is in trouble. As you go to the surfer's aid, recruit others and work as a team, using boards and wave energy, to help the injured

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surfer to shore as soon as possible. Teamwork doesn't just ensure a quicker result in almost all situations: it's also a way of making sure you don't get into the same trouble as the already endangered surfer.

If you're a beginner, always try to surf in front of a manned lifeguard tower - and never surf alone. Remember, it could be you...

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- 9** Be responsible for your equipment and respectful of others'.

When traveling, thou shalt respect the local surfers and their rights and customs, without forfeiting your own right to a wave.

The term 'local' has nothing to do with where a surfer's home is located, yet everything to do with his or her long-term history at a particular surf location. If the surfer in question is committed to the spot, his history will very likely include epic days of surf and days of [sloppy onshore](#) junk; waves ridden with crowds and with one or two buddies; 'fish stories' about the biggest [swell](#) ever; sessions when the top local outsurfed some well-known visiting pro; sessions when for a precious hour or so, the surfer himself felt like he rode like Curren, or Slater, or Lopez. All of this - along with local camaraderie, the coming-of-age of the local grommets, maybe the death of one or more senior regulars - will have passed unshared by the casual visitor (ie., YOU).

This 'knowledge gap' becomes more and more marked the further you choose to travel from your own regular surfing zone. Travel to another country, and the gap can yawn much wider than your skills can cross. That gap can only be crossed by nurturing trust between traveler and local.

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Therefore, it is most important for the traveling surfer to observe some particular points of etiquette when approaching a spot for the first time. Here are the key points:

Take your time. Whether you've spent an hour on the freeway or a couple of days on a plane to get there, the basic rule is the same - there's no need to rush. Watch the lineup closely for at least an hour, taking mental notes on how many waves are being ridden, from which area of the break they're being ridden, and who's doing the riding.

Don't travel in large numbers. Consider the likely impact of your arrival at a spot. Five or six surfers all showing up together and charging out into surf where only a few people are riding ... this will change everything about the session. If you're traveling in such numbers to a new spot, be sensitive to the numbers in the water. Again, take your time - the surfers already out will eventually come in and make room for you. A good rule of thumb, if there are a few guys out: avoid increasing the numbers in the water by more than 25%.

Let the locals set the pace. How do things work in this new lineup? While almost all the world's surf spots are run by similar basic rules, there are a hundred localized versions of surfing etiquette. At some (not many!) spots, it's even considered OK to drop-in. The point is, it's up to you to observe and accept that localized version. Fit into the regular surfers' rhythm, catching the waves they give to you and giving them all the room they require. As you do so, watch closely for possible variations on the basic lineup codes, and take your cues from the local surfers' actions. This may take more than one session to achieve.

Do not try to outsurf the locals. It doesn't matter if they seem less skilled or sharp than you and your friends. Try to take over the waves at that spot, and a local (or more than one) will almost certainly use his or her superior knowledge of the spot to confuse and frustrate you. Keep trying, and you're likely to ruin everyone's enjoyment of the session. Instead, again, take a back seat and let the local surfers dictate the pace of your surf, until they're confident enough of your intentions to give you a couple of set waves.

Leave the place clean. Not just in terms of physical garbage, though that obviously matters too. Your visit should end on a good note for all sorts of reasons, a big one being that every uncouth, uncool action in the water will strengthen any local ill-feeling toward the next traveling surfer. Therefore, after your surf or surfs, say thanks to your fellow surfers for sharing the spot, sorry to anyone you might have dropped in on by mistake,

and let them know they're welcome to visit the spot you call home in return. A simple act of etiquette, yet it can and will work wonders.

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Thou shalt not use your surfing advantages to abuse your fellow surfers.

This includes advantages such as surfboard length, surfing fitness and skill, local knowledge and authority, and (lamest of all) physical aggression and strength.

Getting your head around this profound and quite complex piece of etiquette involves a willingness to acknowledge the advantage itself. Not every [longboard](#) rider, for instance, knows he or she has an extraordinary paddling advantage over almost every [shortboard](#) rider in any lineup, anywhere. But he or she DOES; as does every experienced local surfer surrounded by familiar faces and waves at his or her local break; as does every pro surfer at almost every Joe Average break on the planet; as does every large muscle-bound martial arts expert or violent felon loose in the waves of Hawaii, SoCal or southern Australia, for that matter.

Since we're all in the habit of chasing waves for personal gain, it's only natural that during the chase, we'd wish to use whatever advantages we possess. Here's the big, indeed, the insurmountable problem with that kind of thinking: There's always someone who's got a bigger advantage than you. There's always someone bigger, better, with a longer board, with more authority, with more inherent violence in his soul. Do

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you really want to live in a world where that person can come along and take all your waves? Of course you don't.

The whole idea of such mad social Darwinism is exactly the opposite of what makes surfing fun in the first place. We're trying to escape the rat-race, not become part of it!

Therefore, surfing etiquette requires that you be fully aware of your advantages in the water, and conduct yourself appropriately. Here is a short list of such advantages, and appropriate actions:

The Core Local should at all times understand that other surfers have a right to ride at the spot he knows so well, and that his enhanced knowledge of the break gives him a responsibility as much as a reward. His responsibility involves leading the wave-sharing rhythm, keeping an eye on surfers who look like they might get into trouble, putting a lid on any bullying of kids by older surfers, and providing an example to the grommets and beginners of how to behave in a wide range of surfing circumstances. Taking care of these responsibilities will guarantee the reward (uninterrupted choice of the best set waves). Ignoring them and taking the reward anyway will guarantee ongoing ill-feeling in the lineup.

The Longboard Rider should be absolutely clear that his or her craft provides an unfair paddling advantage which, if abused, will quickly lead to resentment and hostility from surfers who choose to ride shorter, more high performance equipment. He or she should therefore be highly aware of the wave-sharing rhythm, and be careful not to misuse paddling speed in a way that breaks down that rhythm. Using the longboard to paddle in early from the shoulder, or to 'lap' other surfers by racing to the takeoff zone, is bad etiquette.

The Highly Skilled Pro holds a natural advantage over almost everyone else in any lineup, thanks to his or her greater paddling speed and wave judgement, and ability to take off deeper with relative ease. The Pro should remember at all times that not everybody in the water is engaged in a competitive surfing career, and that this does not rule out others' right to a fair share of waves. He or she should also be aware that fellow surfers may feel uncertain, shy, or even humiliated by a pro's skill level and presence in the lineup, and where possible, should break the ice with a smile, a hello, and/or an offer of a wave or two.

The Bigger, Older Surfer should be aware that whether he intends it or not, his physical presence may intimidate younger smaller surfers, and should thus avoid any behavior that may -

unintentionally or otherwise - create fear in the hearts of his fellow surfers. Instead, he should adopt the approach suggested for the Pro, above: deliberate friendliness designed to foster a good example.

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2 Don't drop in on or snake your fellow surfer.

3 When paddling out, stay out of the way of riders on waves.

4 Learn to take turns.

5 Respect the vibe in the line-up.

6 Always aid another surfer in trouble.

7 When travelling, respect the local surfers.

8 Don't use your surfing advantages to abuse your fellow surfers.

9 Be responsible for your equipment and respectful of others'.

At all times, be responsible for your equipment and respectful of others'.

If it's ignored or treated as something other than a wave-riding craft, a surfboard can be damaged - or do severe damage to other boards and people.

First and simplest to recall: never let your surfboard go. Throwing your board and relying on your leash to get through a closeout or broken wave's whitewater is a very bad call in all but the least crowded and most critical of circumstances. Any other surfer within 10 or even more yards, particularly behind you, is immediately placed in serious danger; and there's a chance the leash may break or otherwise unattach itself, in which case your board's a loose cannon. This especially applies to riders of thick, heavy equipment, such as traditional longboards and some bigger-wave guns. You should consider the possibility that if you can't negotiate a surf spot without throwing your board away, the spot may not be for you.

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An outlier to this key thought is the need to take good care of your board. We're all free to endanger ourselves as much as we like, but super sharp fin edges, broken glass poking out of unfixed dings, and snapped-off noses can be dangerous to other

10 Relax, have fun, and enjoy your surfing and that of your fellow surfer.

surfers too. Such flaws can result in nicks or cuts to your leash, increasing the likelihood of a loose board in the lineup.

Always do your best to make good on any damage caused by your surfboard to someone else's board by arranging for a repair job or in some other manner agreeable to both of you.

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Relax, have fun, and enjoy your surfing and that of your fellow surfer. It can be done!

The presence of others in the water is an ongoing fact of life in lineups worldwide. Accepting this is the key to a healthy, flexible attitude in the water.

As Surfline.com's great old buddy Drew Kampion says: "Life is a wave, and your attitude is your surfboard!" More than anything else, crowd tensions in the surf can be eased by our individual ability to flow through situations and react positively when it's needed.

A positive attitude may seem to come naturally to some people and less so to others, but the truth is that attitudes - in the water, as on land - are made, not born. Here's a hint or two:

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Surf a range of spots, not just one place. Instead of settling into - and eventually wallowing - in a comfy, well-protected wave catching groove, you'll automatically develop crowd-reading skills and learn to deal with (and appreciate) a wider range of other surfers.

Give every other surfer in the lineup the same credit as you supply to yourself. A conscious effort may be required on this

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one, since a surfer's natural instinct is to place him or herself at the head of any wave-catching line. Simply say to yourself regarding your fellow surfer: "He counts as much as me." You'd be surprised at how much difference this can make to your own mood in a crowded situation.

Smile. This particularly goes for the better, older surfers in any lineup. Although at times your patience is likely to be tried by first-stage surfers who don't yet have your surf awareness or skills, you can't influence a beginner in a constructive way by yelling at him/her - you'll only instill fear and anger, and wreck your own session through the bad vibe thus created in the lineup. Beginner surfers are normally a bit scared and excessively on their guard anyway. They'll never forget a kind word or good advice from a skilled surfer, and down the line, they'll pay it forward.

In the long run, that's truly the only way we can help make crowded lineups easier places to be.

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