

Surfing the Waves of Life

How surfing went from “impossible” to a life-long passion

By Elaine O'Rourke

The one thing I thought I would never do with an ostomy was surfing. I figured it would be impossible. After all, it took years to get over the fear of staying in the water for any length of time as I was paranoid about my appliance falling off. I even limited my shower time and only luxuriate in long showers on the days I would be changing my system which I would sync up with washing my long, thick head of hair.

Impossible Challenge

Another reason I had written off surfing was because I thought I'd never be able to lie on my belly for that long, although I could lie prone comfortably in yoga poses and during body treatments. Being on my belly certainly isn't a position I choose to be in.

The timing of my output was another consideration as my ileostomy is quite active. But I know my body well enough that if I don't eat after 6 p.m. the previous evening, then my output should be quiet by 8 or 9 a.m. the next morning. I don't tend to eat till later in the morning, so this gives a good window of time without having to empty my bag.

On top of these reasons was the simple fact that I had no desire to surf until my sister started. Nothing like sibling rivalry to try the impossible!

I was in Costa Rica, in 2009, and I decided to take on this impossible challenge and do a surf lesson! This was the longest I had spent in the water since getting my ileostomy in 2005 and I was definitely nervous about the whole thing.

I changed my appliance the day before to make sure everything was adhering well. I wore my bikini with board shorts and rash vest, no wetsuit required in that warm water. My appliance stayed adhered to my skin and I was amazed, especially that I was able to be in the water for so long.

Wetsuit Worries

At first, it was really frustrating as the instructor had me use the board like a boogie board. I was useless and on the brink of giving up when he finally showed me how to pop up. I'm quite agile and found it easy

enough to stand up. He was pushing me into the waves and adding a lot of stability, but at least I was actually surfing.

The following two years while leading yoga retreats in Costa Rica, I took lessons, but it wasn't until summer 2018 that I actually dived in for real. I'd been looking enviously for a number of years at the surfers out at my local beach in Gloucester, MA, but until recently there was nowhere to rent gear. Wetsuits are also a necessity and I'd no idea if I could be in one with an ostomy for any length of time. But the longing to surf again had been building within me like a good swell.

Sunday night is ladies' surf lesson night. So, on a hot August Sunday, I signed up. I got myself and “Ingall,” my ostomy, into the wetsuit and out on the board. I can't tell you how happy I was. Absolutely no fear, just exhilaration, much more so than when I'd been in Costa Rica. Probably because I had come so much further in my acceptance of everything about my ostomy, plus this wasn't about sibling rivalry anymore.

Body Image Issues

Being in the healing holistic world has helped me through all the challenges, emotional breakdowns and to rewire how I think about myself. I hadn't realized how much I was in denial about my body image and some other aspects of having an ostomy along with underlying fears such as staying submerged in the water.

That lesson propelled me into my newest passion. We were in the water for at least 90 minutes, learning the basics in the white water. Soon enough, I was borrowing my friend's board and getting out as much as I could. It is the hardest sport I've ever done, yet the most satisfying. There is so much to learn and not enough waves where I live! So, this last year I took myself on a couple of surf trips. The first one was in Portugal for a week-long surf immersion before I led my own yoga retreats in the Azores islands.

I spent an average of three hours each day in the water and wetsuits. Admittedly, I ate very little to minimize on my ostomy output. But once the second lesson of the day was done, I thoroughly enjoyed the reward

“I'm stoked to say that I've joined the hardy New England surfers paddling out in the winter – crazy folk!”