

Surfboards 101: A Beginner's Guide

Beginning surfers often have many questions about surfboards. What are surfboards made of? What should I look for in a surfboard? What size board should I get? This article covers the ins and outs of surfboards, starting from a novice level.

Surfboards are measured by various dimensions: length, width, and thickness. The length of the surfboard will determine how easily you catch the wave. The longer the board is, the easier it will be to catch the wave. The width of the board will help you with balance. The wider it is, the more balance you will have out in the water. Finally, the thickness of the board will provide you with float. The thicker it is, the more buoyant you will be. You will usually find these dimensions measured in inches and written on the underbelly of the board on the stringer by the tail.

Surfboards are usually made of one or a combination of three materials: wood, fiberglass, and epoxy. Wooden boards were the first surfboards ever used to ride waves but have since become expensive to make and therefore relatively obsolete. Most surfers have balsa wood boards hanging on their walls as collector's items. They are sturdy but heavy.

Fiberglass boards are the typical boards used on the surfing circuit. They are made of foam called a blank with a layer of fiberglass over it. They are the most delicate, but in most cases the most versatile because they can be custom shaped to your liking. The newest surfboard material is epoxy. Epoxy boards are durable but manufactured by machines. They are more expensive and ride the fastest, but they are not custom made, which avid surfers eventually prefer. Beginning surfers might prefer epoxy boards over other materials. Board makers like Bic and South Point have a line of economical epoxy boards that work well for surfers just starting out.

Most recently, there are new boards being made of carbon fiber that are extremely durable but also very expensive. Hollow-core boards are also popular because they provide more float and are extremely lightweight, yet have quick response and high performance.

Most boards also have a stringer and a rocker. The stringer is the wooden line that runs down the center and length of the board. Stringers help to keep the foam and board intact. The rocker is the curve of the board, which prevents the board from catching an edge. The bigger the rocker, the easier it will be for you to turn on your board. Long boards usually have a flatter rocker because they tend to ride on a relatively flat part of the wave. Short boards, on the other hand, tend to have more rocker because they are designed to ride a much more critical part of the wave. Bigger, faster waves require more rocker in shortboards to give the rider ample board control.

Your collection of surfboards is called your quiver. If you stick with the sport long enough, you might eventually have a quiver of 10 to 20 boards! No matter how big your quiver is, it will certainly be a collection of boards with various shapes and sizes to suit different conditions and purposes.

When a board reaches retirement, surfers believe the board "buckles." In other words, the board has developed some kind of weakness in its core that will no longer allow it to perform as you would like it to. When the board buckles, breaks, or is just overly aged, it means it's time to retire your board. One way to prevent your board from aging quickly is to store it in a board bag in a cool, dry place. Boards are best stored horizontally because that will cause any water that does seep into the board to distribute more evenly, rather than sending it straight to the tail if you store it vertically. Also keep in mind that dings—even bad bumps and bruises—are easily fixable, so don't give up on your board if it has cosmetic issues!

About the Author

Robb Bailey works for South Coast Surf Shops, San Diego's premiere surfboard distributor and surf apparel dealer for more than 30 years. He has been inducted as a lifetime honorary member of his college surf club, the Cal Poly Surfer's Association, and has traveled the world surfing for the past 11 years. Find out more about Robb at SouthCoast.com.

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