



Viewpoint

Surfing turf



Time: 15 mins

Region: South West England

Landscape: coastal



Location:

Fistral beach, Newquay, Cornwall TR7 1HY

Grid reference:

SW 79766 62045

Keep an eye out for:

Big waves!

The Beach Boys, Bermuda shorts and big big waves. These are just three things associated with surfing centres like California and Australia's Gold Coast.

As Britain's average climate is rather different from these hotspots it may seem surprising that a large surfing culture has developed here. But centred on Fishtal Beach in Newquay, the north coast of Cornwall has become one of Europe's most popular surfing spaces.

Why is Fishtal at the heart of European surfing?



The first clue is in Fistral's name. 'Fistral' comes from the Cornish word 'bystal' or 'foul water'. Don't worry this doesn't mean sewage; instead it refers to the large number of waves that hit the beach. These made it 'foul' (difficult) for landing ships.

Surfing though relies on waves - the more of them the better. Three conditions make ideal surfing waves: high speed winds, deep water and a long distance of open sea. As a result the best surfing conditions are on coastlines beside oceans.

North Cornwall is directly exposed to the Atlantic Ocean - the next landmass to the east is the United States. When easterly winds blow all the way from America, large waves build up known as 'Atlantic rollers'. Beaches that face west - like Fistral - are perfectly placed to receive them.

Waves slow down and shrink as they roll, however, so another factor is important for surfing. The regularity and size of waves is also affected by a beach's shape.

Take a look around Fistral. Notice that the bay is rather straight, with headlands at each end and high banks behind it. The beach is basically a shovel that scoops up waves.

The final feature that creates big waves here is underwater. Face the sea and look at the headland to the right, beyond the large hotel. This is Towan Head. Just off it is a large underwater reef known as the Cribbar. The Cribbar acts like a ramp that pushes water upwards; it can create waves 30 feet high.

Surf's up

Once a hobby enjoyed by a few, surfing is now a large industry. It generates over £70 million in Cornwall alone. Fistral is home to various surfing clubs, schools and shops plus the annual Boardmasters Festival that attracts 30,000 visitors.



Surfing is so popular in Britain that artificial reefs have been built inland, such as Surf Snowdonia in the Conwy valley in Wales. These sites aim to create more predictable waves and make surfing accessible to a wider audience.

Artificial reefs could have a huge impact on coastal towns that rely upon the seasonal surfing trade - in theory, surfing no longer requires a beach. What happens if instead of packing away their boards for the winter surfers stay inland all year?