



IT'S A SHORE THING

A groundbreaking surf lagoon makes waves as the centerpiece of Virginia Beach's new entertainment district

BY HILLARY RICHARD

Atlantic Park Surf's
Wavegarden Cove
Surf Lagoon

COURTESY WAVEGARDEN AND ATLANTIC PARK SURF

Many of us have fantasized about being at one with the ocean in the quiet of a sunrise, carving across the face of a wave on a surfboard, perhaps paddling alongside a pod of dolphins in a sparkling sea. I am no exception. In an attempt to realize at least part of my dream, one Saturday morning I walked out of The Sitio hotel's lobby in the new Atlantic Park mixed-use district in Virginia Beach. But instead of heading to the nearby shore, I strolled toward an electric blue high-tech surf lagoon, where I donned a wet suit, grabbed a board, and joined a group of five others for a 55-minute beginner surf lesson.

This was not my first foray into surfing. While studying abroad in Australia as a college student about 20 years ago, I signed up for a weekend surf camp despite it being wintertime. After enduring several hours of freezing limbs, crowded waves, and instructors who half-heartedly yelled "Get up!" with no further instruction, I went back to class feeling totally disillusioned with surfing. I had better luck a decade later in Nicaragua, where a patient instructor helped me understand the technical skills of the sport and took our group for tacos after the lesson.

In Virginia Beach, I was about to try riding an artificial wave for the first time. I wondered how it would compare to my experiences in the Pacific.

JUST ADD WAVES

As it turns out, there's nothing quite like Atlantic Park Surf's Wavegarden Cove Surf Lagoon. It's located just one

block from the ocean and is the first in the world to be incorporated into an urban environment. The 2.67-acre lagoon built by Wavegarden can create more than 20 types of waves—from 1 foot to 6 feet tall—and has the power to generate up to 1,000 waves per hour.

This sounded daunting at first, more like a storm than a sea. While we practiced paddling and popping up on our surfboards on dry land, I studied the beginner "cruiser waves"—slow-moving white water that looked more than a foot tall to me. Then it was time for our group to hit the water.

I started out in survival mode. My brain turned off as soon as the swell arrived, leaving my body in charge of the motions. I told myself, *I have been standing up every day for decades; this should be second nature.* My mind clocked back in when it was time to jump off the board closer to shore (or when I inadvertently toppled over).



Clockwise from above: Professional surfer Camden Hoover catches a picture-perfect wave; the Atlantic Park district is situated on 10 acres between 18th and 20th streets; a surfer takes in the view from the edge of the surf park.

Surfing is not effortless or intuitive to creatures of the land; surfers just make it look that way. Once I began to concentrate in the split seconds between paddling and feeling the crest of the wave, I silently repeated a checklist: *toes on the back of the board, pop up while paddling and swing left leg up front, make sure feet are perpendicular to board while standing, keep knees bent, balance, ride it out.* Two instructors—one at the start of each wave and another at the end—gave me personalized suggestions with each turn.

All six of us caught about 10 waves in the hour, which turned into a true full-body workout. My lungs burned while paddling back through the swells to line up for my next turn. Tiny muscles I was previously unaware of started screaming for attention.

The surf lagoon was somehow both easier and more challenging than ocean surfing. In the ocean, learning to surf carries an element of survival: Find a wave, hope it has enough momentum, paddle, hop up, flail, crash.

But in the surf lagoon, the waves are predictable and exact, meaning each swell is a guaranteed chance to build on something you learned minutes earlier. (A technician in the lifeguard stand sets up

wave programs for each session like a music playlist.) Taking away all the chaos of the ocean raises the bar; there's no risk of drifting out to sea, no creatures or rocks to worry about, no other surfers to avoid—in other words, no reason not to improve each time.

When I stood up and sailed along, I heard cheering and realized we had an audience. Among the observers was former professional surfer Jason Borte, who is also an author of surfing books and the director of surf coaching at Atlantic Park Surf.

"Up until now, Virginia Beach had the surf culture but no consistently big surf," Borte told me as we lounged on the Astroturf after the lesson. "This changes everything. Now all of a sudden, we have the best waves on the East Coast."

The key, Borte said, is fine-tuning the waves. "Normally in the ocean you ride a wave and move on to the next one," Borte said. "But here, I'm trying to figure out if the wave is doing what it's supposed to do, and I convey that information to the techs so they can make tweaks to get it right."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY ATLANTIC PARK; PARAS GRIFFIN/GETTY IMAGES; HILLARY RICHARD

THE PERFECT WAVE

Virginia Beach became the East Coast home of surfing in 1912, when local James M. Jordan Jr. received a 12-foot redwood surfboard as a gift from his uncle, who had bought it in Hawai'i. As others saw him surf in the Atlantic, the sport picked up in popularity—but it boomed in the 1930s and '40s as the oceanfront became a more popular hangout and lifeguards began surfing.

In 1963, the East Coast Surfing Championships (the second-longest-running surf contest in the world) moved to Virginia Beach, solidifying the city's surf reputation. Over the years, the Virginia Beach surf culture evolved, but one major conundrum remained: The waves are notoriously unpredictable, and often small. This pushed surfers to the Outer Banks and other surrounding areas to get their fix. Today, the surf lagoon has piqued the interest of many of Virginia Beach's former or occasional surfers with the promise of the perfect wave. A bonus is that Wavegarden's proprietary technology is considered the most energy-efficient in the world.

When I arrived in town the afternoon before the lesson, groups of surfers in board shorts, flip-flops, and zipped-down wet suits carried their boards along Pacific Avenue and placed them onto racks in their SUVs or truck beds. But they weren't coming from the ocean two blocks away. They were coming from the surf lagoon.

Looking off the balcony of my room at The Sitio, the district's upscale boutique hotel, I took in the restaurants, shops, and apartments that now make up the 10-acre development. It's hard to imagine that all of it used to be two parking lots. But without a doubt, the surf lagoon and the action involving advanced surfers garnered the most attention from locals and visitors alike.

A crowd formed, watching intently as the surfers disappeared under curling waves and popped up shortly after, or decided to jump ship and fly off their boards. It was a reminder that no two waves are ever truly the same—even if they're objectively perfect.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY KNEAD HOSPITALITY; COURTESY ATLANTIC PARK SURF (4); PARAS GRIFFIN/GETTY IMAGES; HILLARY RICHARD

BY THE NUMBERS



Starting cost of a 55-minute surf session, depending on the skill level and season. Coaching staff provide lessons and support during beginner and novice sessions.



Number of one-of-a-kind surfboards in the lobby of Atlantic Park Surf. Each one was made by an artist using raw materials found on the site, including wood, steel, and glass.



Starting cost of a daily beach pass for those who aren't surfing. The lagoon has a "beach" with lounge chairs and cabanas for onlookers. The beach is also used for events.



Cost of creating Atlantic Park, whose partners include Virginia Beach native Pharrell Williams (pictured). The musician and record producer has been a steward of the project.



Number of restaurants in the district: The Grill, Nami Nori (Japanese hand rolls), Mi Vida (upscale Mexico City cuisine; pictured), Milk & Honey (Southern-inspired dishes), Wiseguy Pizza, The Sunroom at The Sitio, and The Sweet Spot.

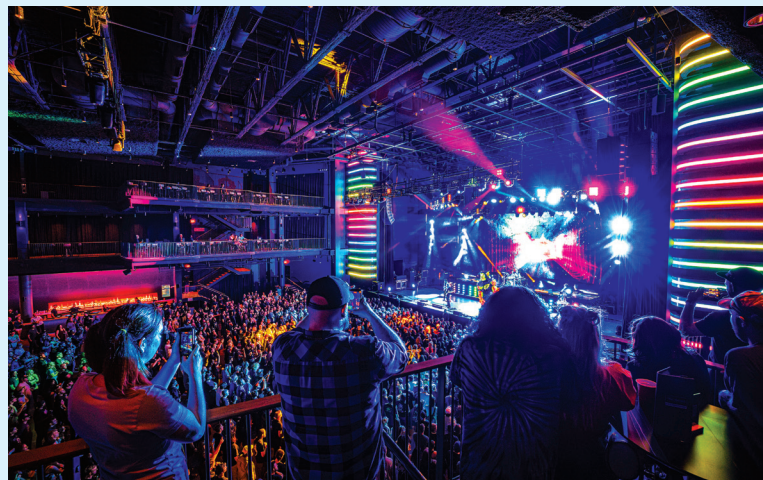


Number of Wavegarden surf parks worldwide: four in Europe, three in Brazil, two in the U.S. (Virginia Beach marks the first in North America; the second one opens in California's Palm Desert this summer), two in Australia, and one in South Korea.

"THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING. NOW ALL OF A SUDDEN, WE HAVE THE BEST WAVES ON THE EAST COAST."
—JASON BORTE, DIRECTOR OF SURF COACHING

FOR THE LANDLUBBERS

Not into surfing? No sweat—Atlantic Park has plenty to keep you occupied on dry land. Here are three highlights.



THE DOME BY RUTTER MILLS

The Dome was a landmark geodesic music venue in Virginia Beach from 1962 until its demolition in 1994. Countless acts played there, including The Rolling Stones, The Who, Grateful Dead, and Jimi Hendrix. In May 2025, a reimaged version of The Dome (now operated by Live Nation and the Oak View Group) debuted in Atlantic Park with a performance by Three Dog Night. The indoor-outdoor music venue no longer has a dome, but its six 25-foot-tall retractable hangar doors allow it to convert from a more intimate indoor venue to an outdoor amphitheater. It can hold 3,500 people indoors and 5,000 with the outdoor expansion.



THE SITIO

This coastal-inspired boutique hotel has 20 guest rooms with colorful artwork, custom surf racks, and locally sourced design touches (like the key fobs, which were handmade by local crafter North End Bag). With high ceilings, cozy neutrals, and natural materials, it feels like a cross between a beach house and a trendy inn. The Sunroom restaurant opened in March and pairs Virginia Beach's seasonal ingredients with flavors from surf destinations around the world. Outside, a deck with an infinity pool and firepits overlooks the surf lagoon. *July rates start at \$569, plus a nightly \$35 resort fee.*



VIBE CREATIVE DISTRICT

Atlantic Park is adjacent to the ViBe Creative District, a creative hub that's home to more than 500 public artworks, including sculptures and large-scale art. You'll also find farmers markets and flea markets, restaurants and coffee shops, art galleries, retail stores, performing arts venues, and free annual events like the VB Street Art Festival in May and the ViBe Mural Festival in October. Free walking tours are also available.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: FRESH LOOK PHOTOGRAPHY; LORI GOLDING PHOTOGRAPHY; COURTESY THE SITIO; COURTESY LIVE NATION

HILLARY RICHARD is a New Jersey-based writer and adventurer who has reported from all seven continents. She still harbors dreams of the surf life.