

Quick and Dirty Local Surf Forecasting – Ocean City, MD

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Wave Trek Surfboards

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I'm often asked, particularly by my rideshare crew, how is it that I can almost always find a wave around OC when there isn't supposed to be one. After answering this question more than I care to remember, I decided to just write it down.

Wave Forecasting

Several web sites provide fairly accurate descriptions related to forecasting local surf conditions. The best I have found is Swell Info at:

<http://www.swellinfo.com/surf-forecast/ocean-city-maryland.html>

However, regardless of how accurate a web site seems to be, there are certain things you need to know to ensure you have rideable waves when you surf locally.

There are six items to consider when you want to find out about how the surf will be breaking and where to go. These are

- 1 Swell direction
- 2 Swell height/period
- 3 Wind direction
- 4 Wind strength
- 5 Bottom conditions
- 6 Tide

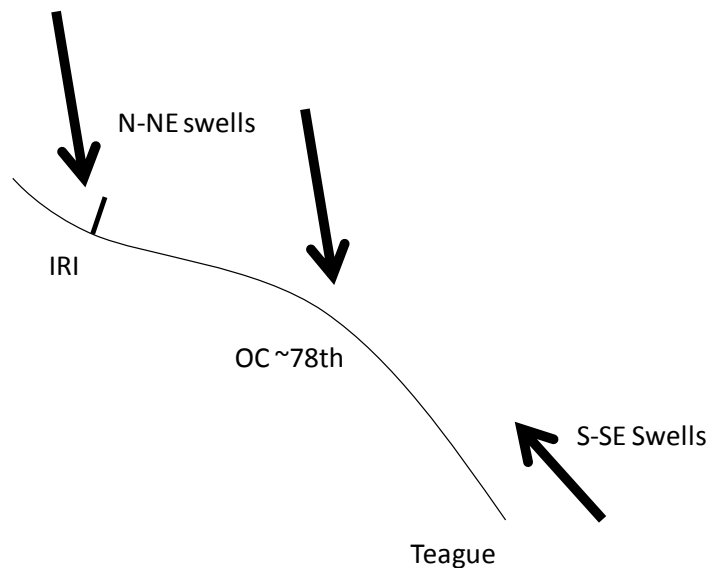
Swell Direction

Local swell directions have a major impact on where there will be surfable waves. In general, the swells out of the north break better in Delaware, while southern swells can miss Delaware all together. This is due to the slight curve in the shoreline around 78th st. That is also why the waves near 78th used to be clean in either direction before the sand was dredged out. There is also a slight curve at the DE/MD state line.

When we have competing swells, depending on their strength, there can be a lot of chop and almost anything can happen. That's why we also get wind swell generated chop when the land heats up in summer and the wind starts to blow out of the east onshore. It interacts with the summer south swells causing chop.

Swell Height/Period

Longer period swell means larger waves. Official weather buoys are the most accurate place to find period information.



<http://www.usno.navy.mil/FNMOC/>

In OC, anything above 8 ft is dangerous. Assateague can handle larger waves but you may have a difficult time paddling out. The Indian River Inlet and Cape Henlopen in Delaware can also handle larger waves, but they can become crowded. Also, as the waves get larger, the shorebreak tends to become dangerous for inexperienced as well as experienced surfers.

Wind Strength/Direction

Wind and buoy wave height/period conditions can be found at:

<http://www.usno.navy.mil/FNMOC/>

or

<http://www.windfinder.com/forecasts/>

In the DELMARVA area, early morning is when there is considerably less wind. Therefore, try to get in the water by 7:30 am for the best conditions on any given day. Also, when the water temps get warmer and the land heats up, the winds tend to blow earlier. If the wind is from the north or even slightly onshore, conditions deteriorate very quickly.

Onshore (out of the east) winds above 10-12 knots trash the surf. North wind above 10 knots usually causes rough surface conditions that continually get worse. Other wind directions will impact the place you chose to surf. The coastline starts to swing towards slightly south facing when you go farther south than around 78th street in OC. Winds out of the south or southeast will hamper conditions unless you go towards DE. Likewise, winds out of the northwest mean better conditions as you head south. Offshore west wind below 12 knots is rideable but it starts to get difficult for surfing longboards with wide noses much above that wind speed.

Tides

Check the tide chart for the day you want to surf at:

http://www.beach-net.com/TidesMD_july_december.html

or

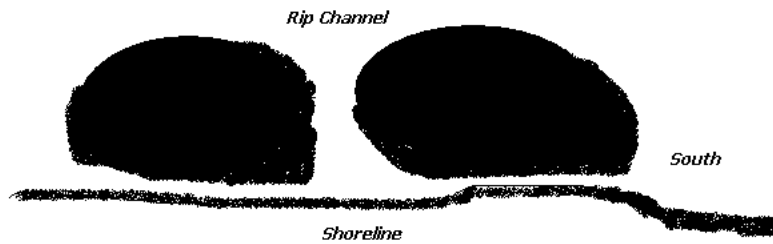
http://www.beach-net.com/TidesMD_july_december.html

Low tides are usually fine for most breaks under waist or lower conditions. Assateague or Indian River Inlet normally break better than OC when tides are super low. OC can close out quickly at waist and higher swells. For higher tides, unless there is a good swell running, stay clear of Assateague as it won't break well at tides much above 2ft+. When there is a slight swell or larger, head to Delaware beaches if you can't surf due to the time or can't find good waves in OC.

Bottom Conditions

In general, beach breaks are best for smaller swells while points and jetties are better for larger waves. Sandbars are best all around for all tides and smaller surf. When the swell gets too strong the bars can be dangerous, particularly at low tide. Where you have sand bars, such as mid-town OC, you also have rip tide channels. These are great for breaking up the waves with rideable shoulders, plus paddling out in the rip is much easier. The drawing shows what the mid-town bars are shaped like. I've found this out by giving lessons on the bars at low tide over several years. This particular bar is at 39th St.

Notice that in the OC area, the bars then to be oblong with steeper more direct channels out on the south facing sides. I believe this



is due to the south swells we get in the summer months, plus this is also the reason why there are often better lefts that rights when rideable conditions exist.

When There are Ankle Slappers

Ankle slapper days are when projections say nothing will break. This isn't always the case if you know what to look for. If both the wind conditions are slow and the tide is low, it is possible to find small breaking waves at the multiple small sandbars that exist along OC's shoreline between about 50th and 20th streets, and also around the DE/MD state line. If you do go, simply stop and check out each break until you find one that is surfable. Go early because often these sandbars become crowded on nice summer days when no other place is breaking.

When there is Hurricane Surf

The largest and cleanest waves for local surfing hit in late summer and fall when hurricanes exist off the coast. If the hurricane is far enough out in the ocean, the wind from the hurricane won't bother the waves, and if there is no local wind the surf will be clean. The problem is that a hurricane represents a low pressure area. If it is too close to us, the wind will be hard offshore. Hard offshore in even medium size waves makes it hard to paddle in with a wider nose board.

Best Local Forecasting

The two local sites that have the most consistent forecasts are:

<http://www.swellinfo.com/surf-forecast/ocean-city-maryland.html>

and

<http://www.malibus.com/surf-report>