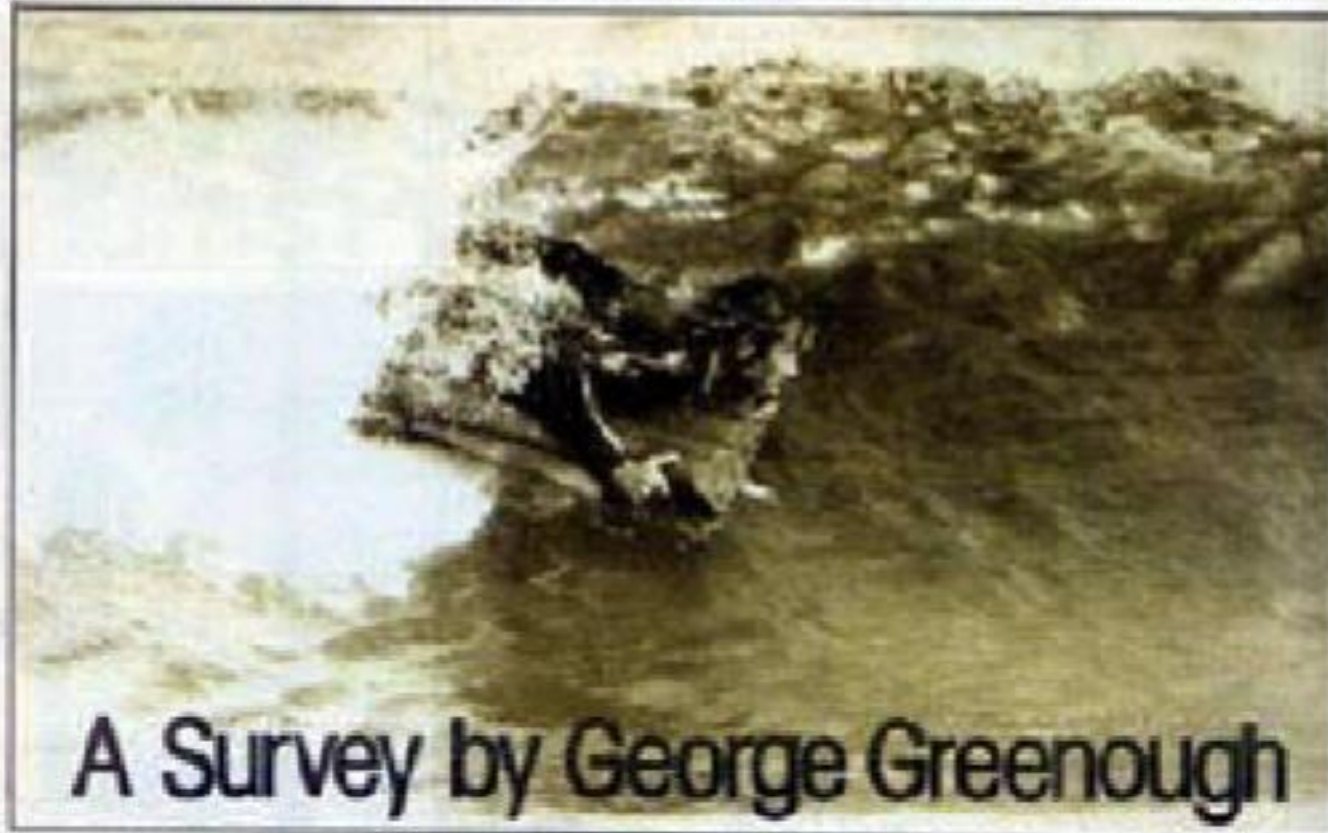


EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT SURF MATS



A Survey by George Greenough

George Greenough is (among other things) one of the world's most adept surf mat buffs, using a raft both for fun and for shooting film for his movies. When George was in Sydney recently he spent a week checking over the available range of rafts being marketed as surf mats. Although George had been hoping for some big waves in which to put the mats through their paces, the surf was only an average 2 - 5 feet; the type of surf which the average summer mat rider would be likely to encounter. If you're shopping for a mat this season, George's assessment of the mats should be of interest and assistance in making your choice.

Well, the first thing to say is I removed all removable handles and ropes. All they do is drag in the water. Okay for pulling the mat thru' a wave I guess but I've found in the past that if the wave's powerful enough, eventually you'll pop through the back of the wave with just a part of the mat attached to the rope! I've had that happen before; ropes and handles can tear off in powerful waves. So the only handles we left on were the glued on type.

Of the mats with fins, I only had an opportunity to ride them in fairly small surf and I couldn't really tell any difference between the types of fins. I surfed the O'Neill mat, which has the biggest, stiffest, heaviest fins of all of them, in some slightly bigger surf and I personally didn't like the feel of it, but I don't really care for this type of mat. If you're into one with fins then I'd say the O'Neill is probably the best of the bunch. They also make one exactly the same without fins.

One interesting thing you can do with a mat with fins, but without handles, is ride it upside down with the fins up and lie between them to keep yourself from sliding off the mat. Same thing with the handles – surf the mat with the handles at the back and they help prevent you being washed off the mat when you're driving along a wall of white water.

As far as rope handles are concerned, I find it as easy to grab a handful of fabric on the end of the mat but I can see that a chick might find a handle easier. One thing to look out for with the built-on handles is a situation where you're holding onto one handle, trying to go through a wave, if the mat twisted it's liable to twist your arm, even give you a sprained wrist if you're not too strong. If you hold onto both handles, you're sweet; you can even roll through waves just like you can on a surfboard, you can really get a good grip on it. I don't usually surf a mat blown up really hard so I've no problems in grabbing a handful of fabric to hold onto.



I prefer a simple design in a mat. With all the mats I found I had to juggle the air pressure to find the best performance. This usually meant letting a little air out so the bottom and rail shapes change to fit the waves. In several cases I found this really affected the performance. Generally speaking, a mat should be harder or more inflated in larger waves, softer or less inflated in smaller waves. It's something you have to do out in the water all the time and so the screw valve type of mat has an advantage over the plug in types. Two of the O'Neill mats have screw type valves and I thought that was a good point.

As far as performance of the different types of mats is concerned, while I never got to surf them in a long driving wall like Lennox or Kirra at 8 feet (which would be the ideal testing situation) I did surf them in average Sydney summer surf, 2 to 5 feet, the kind of surf the average mat rider will be going out in. All the mats seemed to go alright once I had adjusted the inflation. I really liked the Rip Curl four pontoon raft the best. It's made of really heavy duty material and it's similar to the old Hodgeman (which didn't have 5 pontoons). They were the best mats ever built. Being narrow they're easy to get out on and don't get sucked over the falls as easy as the new type which are a bit too buoyant for me. They'd be ideal for someone of 12 or 13 stone. Nevertheless, I'm still riding a Hodgeman.

There are 5 pointed nose rafts which are really quite similar (Rip Curl, 2 Merrin, 2 Palma). Of the Merrin ones, the one with fins is made of much heavier material than the others and this is reflected in the price. All of these mats rode well and I thought they went better using the pointed nose at the back, giving the effect of a pintail mat. I really liked the way these mats surfed going this way round and if you have one I'd recommend surfing it this way.

The only real bad point I could pick with any of the mats was with the large yellow plastic O'Neill

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George applies the "pump" test.

with fins and handles. It has a real ragged and sharp edge around the outside which is very rough on the arms when you're paddling. All the other mats are okay from this point of view and I don't think that the ones with the overbonded edges really protect your arms any more than the ones which are just left without it. Anyone having a problem with the plastic mats could turn back the edge and glue it, I guess, or trim it, but I didn't like that edge at all.

It's difficult to say how long any of the mats would last - this depends on the thickness, type and quality of materials used and how they fare in the salt water and sunlight. Obviously I wasn't able to test for such long term effects. You'll generally find that the thickness of the material is reflected in the price. The plastic mats (both O'Neill - one vinyl, one cotton/vinyl) are cheap but it's hard to say how long they'd last. Obviously the heavier the material used, the more stiff the mat tends to feel and I often find that heavy duty mats do feel stiff, especially when new. I often find that mats are going their best when they're almost ready to pop, all the material's worn off, they're looser and really starting to fly. It all depends on how you want the mat to feel. Again inflation can be adjusted to compensate.



All the pointed nose rafts went well and seem to be good value at the prices offered. The four pontoon Merrin mat without moulded fins or handles (2747H) is very good value at that price. It seems to me that

To sum up, I liked the Rip Curl four pontoon mat the best, altho' the O'Neill 5 pontoon without fins went really well even tho' I find the five pontoon rafts a little big. Okay for heavier people.

the Hodgeman is not really that much better than any of the heavier mats to warrant being so much more expensive. Also the Hodgeman valve, altho' it's a screw-in valve, has caused me heaps of trouble. They tend to corrode and get sand in them. The Palma mats are good at the price, especially for a lighter person.

When comparing any of the prices bear in mind the weight and thickness of the material, as this is a good indication of the strength and longevity of the mat. We did a 'pop-test' by jumping on the inflated mats and none of them burst or suffered rib-failure. Generally I prefer a simple mat, without fins or handles but preferred bonded handles to rope attachments. All the bonded fins and handles seemed to be very strong and secure.

Basically when buying a mat just take your weight into consideration, how much you want to spend and how long you would like the mat to last, and whether you want extras like fins and handles. Compare these features on the chart accompanying this report and go for it!

George Greenough