



The surf doctor

AUSTRALIA BOASTS SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST BEAUTIFUL BEACHES. CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, THE GREATEST BEACH DANGER ISN'T SHARKS, IT'S RIP CURRENTS. DR ROB BRANDER TELLS US HOW TO STAY SAFE

WORDS | KATHRYN CLARK



Have you always loved the sea? How did you come to be "Dr Rip"?

My family always went on vacation to Cape Cod, so my love of the ocean is wrapped up in wonderful memories. The nickname came about when I started releasing harmless dye into rip currents, which are the biggest danger to beach swimmers, as part of my research on Sydney beaches. The local lifeguards started calling me "Dr Rip". In Australia, it's only a matter of time before you get a nickname!

You are Canadian – what brought you to Australia? How do you like living in Sydney?

When I was studying in Toronto, my beach experiments involved scuba diving in freezing cold water, every day, for months. I started having visions of warm Australian beaches, so after graduating I headed to Sydney. An Australian friend pointed out a rip to me at the beach and I couldn't see it. I came back and did my PhD on them. Living in Sydney is like being on vacation. In which other city this size can you swim year round on pristine beaches?

What is Science of the Surf?

I started Science of the Surf to teach people how beaches work and how to spot hazards. Every summer I give free public presentations

that are visually powerful and entertaining. The programme includes YouTube videos and presentations to school kids, and I'm also developing more multimedia projects.

How safe are Australia's beaches?

Very safe if you swim between the red and yellow flags on a beach patrolled by lifeguards. But potentially dangerous if you are an inexperienced swimmer on an unpatrolled beach. Many beaches have large waves and strong rip currents. Rips are narrow "rivers of the sea" that carry the water brought in by breaking waves back offshore. Forget about sharks: rips are the main hazard to swimmers, causing up to 50 drownings a year in Australia.

How can someone recognise a rip?

Most rips sit in deeper channels between shallow sandbars. Waves don't break in the rip channel as much as they do on the sandbars so rips appear as dark gaps, like paths, heading offshore. Many people swim in rips because they look like the safest place to swim! But it's much safer to swim where waves are breaking. It's shallow and whitewater always carries you back towards the beach. When it comes to spotting rips, the rule is: "white is nice, green is mean".

What are your top beach safety tips?

Always swim at patrolled beaches and always between the flags. If you become caught in a rip, don't panic. Rips won't pull you under the water – they just take you on a ride. Stay afloat and signal for help. Other hazards include "dumping" waves that break on the shore. Never bodysurf these and don't turn your back on them. Finally, be careful of jellyfish.

How can we make the beaches safer?

It's impossible for lifeguards to be everywhere. Australia has over 11,000 beaches and only four percent are patrolled. We need to educate people about rips with pictures, brochures and videos, on planes with tourists, in coastal hotels, and with signs at beach access points.

Do you have a favourite beach in Australia?

Sydney's Tamarama Beach, a pocket beach known as "Glamarama". The surf can be challenging, but bodysurfing there on a warm spring day is perfect. But I may be biased as I lived there in the club when I was on my PhD!

What items do you always travel with?

Far too many health-care products.

Rob Brander's book, "Dr Rip's Essential Beach Book; everything you wanted to know about surf, sand and rips", is out now. 📖