

SURF COMMUNITY RISES UP AGAINST BA SURFBOARD BAN

Wednesday, 31 October 2007

This isn't really snowboard related, but it is related to board sports. I personally think everyone who enjoys board related sports should sign up and voice their opinion on the BA ban.

Since British Airways (BA) announced a ban on surfboards on all flights (effective from 6th Nov), the surf community across the world has been reacting to the shock new position and taking decisive action to push for a reversal on the decision.

In hoards, surfers from across the globe, including the World Number One, Mick Fanning, have been signing up to a global petition created by the British Surfing Association (BSA) and international governing bodies, key surf brands and thousands of individuals have been issuing statements and joining a group on the social networking site, Facebook.

Until now BA has had a reputation for being one of the most surfer friendly airlines but last weekend their new ruling stated that surfboards, alongside other items such as hang gliders, windsurfing boards and sails, kayaks or canoes, pole vaults or javelins, will no longer be accepted as baggage on any flights on the extensive BA network.

At the same time, BA proudly announced that it would be loosening any restrictions on their carriage of skis, snowboards, cycles, diving equipment and even guns, amongst other items. At the recent Ski and Snowboard Show in London, BA was advertising its allegiance to snow sports and pushing its free carriage of snow related equipment on all flights.

They have also just stated that they 'will continue to accept items by special arrangement when bookings are made through one of the specialist tour operators (they) work with.' Further to this BA has attempted to justify its surfboard decision with some extremely brief statements saying that it is 'working with a number of freight forwarders to find an alternative way for customers to carry surfboards and other larger items. Until this solution is in place, (they) will continue to honour bookings.'

However when pushed by journalists on the fact that they will still carry skis and golf clubs, which can be as heavy and cumbersome as surf boards, they said, "We carry significantly more items such as golf bags and skis, which means we are able to put more robust processes in place to handle them."

The announcement and subsequent statements have caused uproar amongst surfers who see the new decision as a marginalisation of the sport and of all those within the global surf community. The UK has over 500,000 regular surfers and nations such as South Africa, France, Australia and the USA have a much larger surf scene.

Hundreds of thousands of global surfers travel each year to enjoy and develop their pastime and in response to the ban, a group of motivated British surfers immediately started a Facebook group which now has over 7,500 members. Additionally a global petition, created by the BSA currently has over 4,500 signatures from all over the world.

World Number One surfer Mick Fanning of New South Wales, Australia, has backed the campaign and signed the petition. He says, "As a British Airways 'Platinum One World Frequent Flyer' and an athlete on the World Professional Surfer's tour, it's really hard to understand why people who have been so loyal, and spent so much money with BA have been dealt this blow.

I personally travel only with BA through Europe because of the friendly staff and quality of this service. If BA continues to go ahead with their policy not to carry surfboards from the beginning of November 07, I will not be able to compete in my World Tour Events."

Newly crowned European longboard champion and English champion Ben Skinner is also behind the campaign saying, "As part of the British team I have always traveled with BA. I think it's a disgrace that they have thrown this ban back at us. BA seems to have totally underestimated the amount of business they stand to lose. I feel that as our national airline they should support British surfing."

Surfers from as far a field as Australia, USA, South Africa, Canada, Singapore, Abu Dhabi, Russia, Costa Rica and all over Europe have been signing up and leaving messages of concern, surprise and in many cases, disgust. Across the UK there has also been concern from tourist boards and local councils where surf tourism forms a key part of the local economy.

If the ban goes ahead, hardest hit could be Jersey where surfers, wishing to travel abroad, currently only have the option of flying directly to foreign destinations with BA. Assistant Economic Minister for Jersey said the ban was a blow to a small but important sector of the internal tourism industry as well as residents who pursued their hobbies abroad.

Regular Jersey surfer Andy Cummins said, "I have a trip planned to Barbados in November, I have had quotes from freight companies to get my boards there for between £400 and £700 pounds which is absolutely ridiculous. BA has obviously

not thought the policy through and don't seem to realise how many people this will effect. It means that I simply will not be flying with BA for any reason again unless the ban is lifted."

Other British surfers will now be effectively 'stranded' if they want to fly with their boards as some, such as those based on the outlying islands, are mainly serviced by BA flights. Rodney Jamieson from Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis off Scotland said, "From an islanders perspective this ban is ludicrous.

British Airways is the only main airline to service these islands, which means surfers wanting to travel to and from the islands will now have very little choice but to take a car on the ferry. Then once they get to the mainland they then have to drive to one of the mainland airports such as Inverness, Glasgow or Edinburgh and pay for parking, adding more expense and at least half a day traveling time to their trip each way.

I have a trip planned to Indonesia in February and since news of the ban I have no idea how I am going to get there with my surfboards." Surfing is ever growing throughout Scotland and many others will now find themselves in this frustrating position.

Karen Walton, National Director, at the Newquay-based BSA, says, "In the last week, news about the ban has spread though the global surf community by word-of-mouth, through the Internet and through the international media. Without a doubt, the reaction has been one of disbelief, shock and anger."

From BA's scant statements and comments to journalists it appears that they think that the surf community is just a tiny part of their customer base, and that therefore these hundreds of thousands of traveling surfers don't matter. We think that they have seriously underestimated how large the surf community actually is."

We also think they have underestimated the invaluable spend that the global surf traveling community provides for their airline and for all of the surf communities that they service. Mick Fanning is one of just many of the surfers who are members of the BA loyalty scheme and they stand to lose considerable business if they proceed with the ban."

Mrs Walton continues, "They are saying that there are alternative freight companies that can ship people's boards instead, however this just isn't a viable option. We checked with TNT as an example and to get a board from Newquay to Hossegor in France it would cost in excess of £200 each way and take six days to get there and another six to get back."

This type of situation will just not work for leisure or professional surfers who simply will not travel without their boards. It is essential that BA realises just how strongly they are alienating the global surf industry and reverses this ban and it is critical that other airlines understand that this is not an example they can consider following."

Dave Hitchens part for the group who set up the Facebook 'BA Surfboard Ban Group' says, "I honestly think that the Facebook group and the BSA petition are the tip of the iceberg. The Facebook group has grown by almost a thousand people a day over the last week.

Most members are from the English speaking world - every part of the UK, US, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, but there are people from places as diverse as Morocco, Israel, Japan and Chile. The common theme is anger, disbelief and confusion about how the ban will be implemented."

Dave continues, "It just seems that BA is out of touch with tomorrow's market. Surfing is an aspirational sport, it is a pastime that all manner of brands have sought to associate themselves with - from that great Guinness advert to major car manufacturers like Renault and Vauxhall and even the BBC. Why is BA going the other way?"

"Surfers are young and old, male and female. They are professional athletes, students, teachers and businessmen. They all love their sport though, and the ability to escape to a far off country with their boards is a huge part of that love. I hope that we can make BA see that and change their minds."

The BSA is continuing to urge everyone who surfs to take five minutes to go online and follow their recommended action steps. The BSA is planning to deliver the petition to the management of BA in person next week, alongside the supportive statements from other organisations.

Surfer action steps

- 1) Go onto www.britsurf.co.uk and click the 'SIGN ONLINE PETITION OF PROTEST IN THE NEWS SECTION ON THE HOME PAGE'.
- 2) If you have a Facebook account, join the Facebook 'British Airways Surfboard Ban' group
- 3) Click this link http://www.britishairways.com/travel/custrelform/public/en_gb and register a complaint with BA directly
- 4) Encourage all other surfers to follow these steps

www.britsurf.co.uk

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