

# Australia seeks to ride the inland surfing boom

Network of man-made surf parks aimed at helping country claim gold at Tokyo Olympics



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FINANCIAL TIMES

JANUARY 7, 2017

by: [Jamie Smyth](#) in Sydney

It is home to some of the world's best [surfing](#). But Australia is turning to Spanish technology to create the perfect wave, planning a network of man-made surf parks to help its athletes claim gold at the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo and to capitalise on the sport's popularity.

Wave Park Group, a company founded by Andrew Ross, a surfer and former investment banker, is riding a surge of global interest in artificial surf parks that has included the development of three inland centres — in [Wales](#), the US and Spain — over the past 18 months.

“We have plans to build 10 centres over the next decade with each costing somewhere between A\$25m and A\$30m,” says Mr Ross, who worked in London before returning to Australia to pursue his passion for surfing by founding WPG.

There are an estimated 35m surfers worldwide and a [report](#) by academics at the University of Oxford last year found surfing waves generated economic activity worth \$50bn a year.

# \$50bn

Annual economic activity generated by surfing waves

Inventors have [struggled](#) for decades to recreate natural surf conditions that can satisfy experienced surfers as well as beginners. Big Surf, an aquatic centre which opened in the US state of Arizona in 1969, featured one of the world's first wave pools to accommodate surfers, but is now primarily used by swimmers.

“The problem for surfers is we are beholden to Mother Nature. Man-made surf parks will do for surfing what chairlifts did for winter sports in the middle of the 20th century,” says Mr Ross.

“The sport is due to explode over the next few years as more parks open and surfing becomes a medal sport for the first time in the Tokyo Olympics,” he adds.

Mr Ross expects fundraising for WPG's first centre in Melbourne to be completed within months. WPG has already leased a 7.1-hectare site near Melbourne airport, for which it has received planning consent, and aims to open the centre to the public in 2018.

Spanish company Wave Garden has developed inland surfing technology that can produce 2.1m-high waves, at a rate of more than 1,000 per hour. The average ride on a wave lasts 18 seconds at its test facility in Spain, which is equivalent to the size of 18 Olympic swimming pools.

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Wave Park Group founder Andrew Ross

Wave Garden's technology has won over some of the world's elite surfers, including Australia's national team. “This is the first time someone has figured out how to replicate the kind of power and variation that you experience in the ocean,” says Andy King, Australia's national surf coach.

He says the quality and quick repetition of the waves is an invaluable training tool: “Three days in that pool is equivalent to three months' ocean training.”

Wave Garden's technology has already been deployed at the [NLand Surf Park](#) in Texas, a lagoon near Austin filled with 11m gallons of rainwater.

US surf champion Kelly Slater is developing a separate inland surf technology and plans training centres around the world. WSL Holdings,

parent company of the World Surf League governing body, bought a stake in his company in May.

“It [the technology] will democratise surfing and provide incredible training opportunities for athletes as well as aspirational surfers in areas with no ocean waves,” says Mr Slater.

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