



The Worldwide Joy Ride

When viewed from outer space, our earth famously appears as a predominantly blue planet, thanks to the vast oceans that cover most of its surface. But if you look closely, you'll find great swathes of that blue frequently obscured by swirls of white—marauding columns of cloud and wind that whip the ocean beneath into a state of kaleidoscopic frenzy. From that chaos, swells emerge, rolling purposefully away from the source, slowly stacking into orderly lines that take on the appearance of fresh corduroy. Eventually, they arrive at one of the land's jagged edges, where the specific geography forces them into breaking waves of all shapes and sizes. Often you'll find a huddle of surfers there. Dark figures against the blue, undulating in restless devotion, eager for a chance to be carried by a parcel of well-traveled storm energy as it spills onto the shore. It's an act so simple in its essence—shared with ancient man, seabirds, dolphins, and even the odd mollusk—but it's one that has come to thoroughly enthrall terrestrial beings over the last century or so. Recent estimates suggest there are now over 20 million surfers worldwide, fanned out across more than 150 countries.

The tales of how surfing spread, took root, and evolved in so many coastal enclaves are as varied as the places themselves. Accounts and artifacts from West Africa, South America, China, and the Pacific suggest wave riding was practiced for many hundreds of years prior to the arrival of modern surfboards. Indeed, it's easy to imagine why a child might have been compelled to grab a bit of floating wood and bounce in on the shore break, or why a canoe-bound fisherman might have sought a ride on the white water for safe and speedy passage to the shore.

As far as we know, however, it was only in ancient Polynesia that surfing gathered enough fervor to transform it from a casual pastime into a cultural powerhouse. In Hawaii in particular, it became a central tenet of community recreation and ritual. Islanders rode standing tall, on a multitude of specially made crafts, incorporating everything from courtship to gambling and status displays into their watery dance.

Modern surfing's march around the globe began in the early twentieth century, led by a pair of Hawaiians; waterman George Freeth and Olympic medal-winning swimmer Duke Kahanamoku. Over the course of a single decade, they introduced the sport to Australia and both coasts of the U.S. mainland with a series of demonstrations attended by hundreds.

New strongholds sprouted in their wake and many years later, it would be from them that surfers emanated to continue the Hawaiians' legacy, seeding the culture in every corner of the map. Propelled by a desire to discover new frontiers and uncrowded lineups—or simply to break from the humdrum of their far-flung military bases—from the 1940s onwards sailors, smugglers, servicepeople, and hippies fleeing the draft formed an unlikely alliance of global surfing ambassadors. Wherever they paddled out, their exploits drew intrigue and whenever boards were left behind, locals were quick to pick them up.

Despite an ability—and indeed a common preference in modern times—to practice the pastime in solitude, early fanatics from these emerging scenes rarely sought isolation. In almost every case, from Rapa Nui to India to Senegal, the first generation of modern surfers were powerfully motivated to welcome others into the fray, usually driven by nothing more than a desire to share the joy of it all. As the surfing bug bit, individual lives were changed overnight, altered by shifting perspectives and new aspirations. Eventually, so too were entire communities. Fresh geographies were laid over the coastline. Rocky outcrops, bits of reef, and sandy shore were suddenly ascribed new names and personalities, transformed from anonymous crags to storied surf breaks. Each attracted a pack of disciples, obsessively dedicated to deciphering their every mood under the various vagaries of tide, wind, and swell. In time, these surfers would become the custodians of their ocean spaces, ready to lead campaigns against any threat, from sewage spill to destructive coastal development.

Usually, at some point in this evolution, surf tourists would flood in, fundamentally altering the place purely with their presence, as on Bali's Bukit Peninsula, or Siargao Island in the Philippines, where once-blighted coastal plots were fast transformed into the region's hottest property thanks to their proximity to coveted waves. For some settlements, the transition to "surf destination" came with great benefits, for others with serious drawbacks and damage, and for most, a liberal helping of each.

Over a century on from the start of the sport's grand expansion, the surfing world has become one of dizzying diversity. From the teeming metropolis to the remote jungle village, the snow-covered beach to the baking

equatorial shore, it seems that now almost wherever there are waves, there are surfers. Some are dedicated to pushing their limits in watery mountains the size of five-story buildings. Others are focused on the most effortless traverse of a perfect waist-high peeler. Many consider it a sport, others an art, and some even a means of healing, empowerment, and community cohesion. But wherever you go, all remain united by its universal draw; the simple but supreme pleasure of the ride.

It has often been said that surfing transcends all politics. However, as wave riding reaches ever more distant shores and distinct cultural settings, it has become clear that it isn't always a total escape from the messy business that governs life on land. Lack of equipment, the privatization of the coast, and cultural barriers all play a part in preventing surfers from accessing their waves. It's only by acknowledging these obstacles that we can harness our collective power to help break them down. Fostering connections across cultures is one thing our otherwise beautifully frivolous pastime has always excelled in.

Modern surf culture shines in the moments individuals are inspired to stand with their fellow frothers; to donate, campaign, and rally to preserve all the things that really matter to them. Because when you're a surfer—even one from a world away—they're probably the same things that really matter to you too.

BY LUKE GARTSIDE