Nature's Nastiest Staircase

Shipstern Bluff, Australia

In the far southeast corner of the Tasman Peninsula, beneath a towering stern-shaped bluff, a series of boulder-strewn plateaus descend like a staircase into the seething ocean below. Just a few meters out from the base, you'll find a wave so malformed that most wouldn't deign to call it a surf spot at all.

It's exactly because of its many mutations that Shipstern Bluff—known locally as Shippies—has become one of the most iconic big waves on earth. Its "steps" as they're known, are a sequence of ledges that emerge sporadically throughout a ride, frequently sending surfers airborne and cartwheeling into the trough.

Despite conflicting tales of who exactly saw and surfed the wave first, most agree it was pioneered by a Tassie guru named Andy Campbell in the late 1990s. For years, he'd make the long two-hour hike through the dense bush and spend an afternoon packing lonely tubes purely for the thrill of it, with no cameras or jet skis in sight. Around the turn of the millennium, Campbell invited a few Aussie pros to join him, and in 2001, the wave was unveiled to the world via a photo splash in Tracks magazine. Among the crew on that trip was Hawaiian charger Kieren Perrow, whose baptism of fire began by splitting his lip while jumping in off the rocks. "Not ideal," he recalled, "given how sharky the place is." However, things improved quickly from there, and the photos of the session sent heads spinning across the surfing world.

While Campbell moved away, eventually trading his board and backpack for a camera and bullet-proof vest in Syria, other locals were ruling the spot by the end of the decade, most, like their predecessor, working day jobs and charging for the love of it. According to photographer Stu Gibson, hospital orderly Mikey Brennan has been a perennial standout—not only for his incredible tube riding but his playful mastery of the wave's scariest feature, busting rail grabs and 360° spins during periods of forced mid-wave flight. ~