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Surfing in Humboldt County

by Ingrid da Silva

If you're traveling 275 miles north of San Francisco on Highway 101 you'll probably run into it. If you're not sure then check for some of these things: granola, sunflower seeds, Birkenstocks, hacky-sack players and Grateful Dead fans. If you have seen more than one of the above then chances are you've arrived. Welcome to Humboldt County.

There are those who say that weird things go on in Humboldt. There are others who believe them. Some people are here to try and perfect their karma. Some capitalize on the firm, fertile soil by growing Humboldt County's most famous product, marijuana, giving people who can't quite perfect their karma a little help. Still others do something virtually unheard of in these parts: they surf.

Surfing is a sport that has long been associated with the sun. We imagine the sun's burning rays beating down on tan, lean Adonis bodies as they paddle on their surfboards through peaceful blue waters in search of the perfect wave.

"Eureka, I've found it!" so the saying goes... and indeed, Eureka surfers might have found the perfect wave but in less than perfect surroundings. Surfing in Humboldt goes a lot further and deeper than just hopping on a board and getting tubed. There are many variables that these dedicated surfers have to contend with that other surfers battle only in nightmares.

Cold water temperatures, rain, fog, riptides, wind and unreliable surf due to ever present storm conditions are some of them. According to surfer Dennis Wentworth, "the current is so strong that sometimes it's like swimming up a river. We have respect for the ocean up here because you can easily get mauled. We're a little tougher than most surfers: we know we have to earn everything we get."

Other factors that Humboldt surfers have to deal with are driftwood, migrating whales and sea lions. Acceptance seems to be the general attitude as surfer Karl Boettcher sums up his feelings on sea lions. "I think of them as brothers in the water. I've probably done more damage to them than they've done to me. They are like dogs, it's all in the way you come off to them. If you act nonchalant to them they won't bother you."

One begins to wonder if anyone has

ever been attacked by a "brother." Boettcher, with a degree of uncertainty in his voice said, "No one I know ever has."

"Help, Mr. Wizard, get me out of here!"

According to James Gast, oceanography professor at Humboldt State University, the surf in Humboldt is mostly influenced by storms originating from the Gulf of Alaska, southeast of the Aleutian Islands.



Secret entrance. Photo: Jim Metyko.

Consider this fact: Humboldt County protrudes farther west than any other place in the continental United States.

According to surfer Craig Spjut's theory, if you connected the Aleutian Islands, the North Shore of Hawaii and Humboldt County, you could draw a perfect triangle. The same swells that affect Hawaii affect Humboldt County, and in much the same way as far as consistency and size are concerned. Concluding that if the North Shore of Hawaii is getting big waves you can bet that the waves in Humboldt County are pumping too.

Big waves are what legends are made of and Humboldt is no exception. There are tales of people riding huge 20-foot waves that even pro-surfers would have

a hard time with. Surfer Craig Spjut said once he rode a wave that was so big he could drive a school bus through the tube.

Humboldt waves are very unpredictable. A swell can pick up within a short time and can get so big that it gets out of control. A hot, local surfer of the Harbor Entrance, a surfing spot long famous for its kamakazi size of waves said, "Sometimes when I make a bad judgment about a wave I feel like saying, 'Help, Mr. Wizard, get me out of here!' because the wave is so powerful."

To avoid getting caught in changing tides, a bad situation to be in at some surf spots, a Humboldt surfer is never without a tide book for reference to high and low tides. According to Karl Boettcher, "Without a tide book up here you are lost."

Tides, wind, swells and trades are all variables that affect the surf, but this is Humboldt County where it rains so much that periodic floods and landslides cut off the county from the rest of the state.

While some of us would rather be inside on a rainy day drinking hot chocolate and eating chocolate chip cookies instead of surfing, one does wonder how all this rain affects a surfer's attitude. "When the weather is worst, the surf is best, so I don't mind the rain," said surfer Keith Newcomer. "The rain is like a freshwater shower from the sky the way it pitter-patters on the water. It keeps you warm." Surfer Nan de Malleville, one of the few woman surfers in Humboldt said, "As long as you're out in the water and wet anyway, what's a little rain?" Surfer Jay Sennewald said, "As long as there are waves and light to see by, I don't care how bad the weather is or how hard it's raining." Subject closed.

Baby you can drive my car.

Drive is what keeps a Humboldt surfer going when he has just wiped out on a ten-foot wave, while another set of waves coming in prevents him from paddling out, on a day when the wind chill factor is near zero and it has just begun to hail.

Driving is what Humboldt surfers have to do in order to keep surfing good waves, because, according to surfer Kirk Johnson, "it's always a perpetual search for surf up here. Down south every morning you can surf two-foot waves;

here you have to search for them."

On a "N.W. day," meaning "no waves, or you didn't search far enough," says surfer Craig Spjut, it's not unusual for a Humboldt surfer to drive 200 miles in search of surf. Since the coastline from Shelter Cove to Trinidad, the two farthest points in Humboldt County, covers 104 miles, it is a regular drive for these surfers. As a joke, surfer Tom "Sprout Man" Floyd said that the Humboldt surfers should start a Surfaholics Anonymous where "we can wear ourselves from driving 200 miles every weekend."

"Who is this guy anyway?"

In a telephone conversation, plans are revealed to Craig Spjut that an article titled, "Surfing in Humboldt County," was in progress and would he like to contribute any information to help the article along?

"I need to know a few things first," he said. "Have you ever surfed before? Does your family have any surf history? Would you marry a millionaire for love or money?" I say that I'm the one who should be asking the questions, all the while thinking, "who is this guy anyway?" "You don't seem to understand," he said, "before I will talk to you, we must get one thing straight, I am Craig Spjut."

Okay.

Spjut was born and raised in Eureka. A hard core surfer who thoroughly enjoys riding huge waves. Spjut is often seen surfing with only 15-foot-and-over waves for company. According to Tom Floyd, "the bigger and gnarlier it gets the better Craig does."

Spjut claims to have ridden most of the surfable spots in the area, and remembers his brothers making surfboards in the early 60s. He recalls standing on a board in 1964. This feat does not sound like a small miracle unless you take into account that he was born in 1955 making him a nine-year-old at the time.

Spjut's Point, a perfect left that peels out from the North Jetty was named after him. It was Craig Spjut who once had two pet harbor seals named Cecil and Diesel. And it was also Craig Spjut who took a curious writer who has never surfed before into the cold Humboldt waters and made her surf the powerful waves. "How can you do an article on surfing in Humboldt County when you've never surfed before?" he asked. "You're going surfing with Craig Spjut, the

greatest." Wonderful.

After wiping out on a wave, and getting purple eyeshadow and black mascara into my salt-filled eyes I got out of the water. Although chilled and exhausted I knew Spjut was right. I had a different perspective on surfing.

Later, after an unsuccessful surf check off Highway 101, Spjut stops to chat with some surfers. Time goes by and eventually Spjut says goodbye. I mention to him that he seems to be very friendly. "It's part of the Spjut image," he said. "I try to be the world's nicest guy."

His motto is, "There is never a day I can't surf in Humboldt County. I just have to be willing to drive far enough." Testing his motto and himself, Spjut takes us on a surf safari in search of the perfect wave.



Awestruck. Photo: Mikal A. Moon.



Northlands size and power. Photo: Metyko.

It is a crisp autumn day as we head north on 101. We drive past towering redwood trees and stretches of unspoiled coastline. We check many possible surfspots but go for none because for Spjut, they are not the perfect wave.

At Brookings, near the Oregon border, Spjut spots some clean, hollow, six-to-eight foot waves that eventually allow him to barrel through tube after tube alone.

This exhibition of excellent, experienced Humboldt surfing was to be only surpassed by a spectacular sunset that accompanied Spjut's fluid, smooth style of riding waves. The eminent darkness brought to a close our surf

safari and search for the perfect wave. Mission accomplished Spjut. Cowabunga.

"We call them men in gray suits."

The probability of a shark attack is something that is always in the back of a surfer's mind and Humboldt surfers are not different. "I've rehearsed hitting a shark in the nose a million times," said surfer Karl Boettcher. Surfer Scott Friel said, "No one has to say that there are sharks out in the water because everyone is conscious of them, you know they are out there."

Well it's been documented even by sources other than Jaws I and Jaws II that people really do get eaten by

sharks, so a surfer's fear of being eaten by a human garbage disposal is well founded. Take surfer Curt Vikan for example, who narrowly escaped an attack by a 15-to-20 foot Great White Shark.

It was a case of survival for Vikan, he recalls, as he talks about the attack that happened at Moonstone Beach, 11 miles north of Arcata, on Oct. 17, 1980. Ironically enough, the day we set up the shark attack interview was the two-year anniversary of the date of the shark attack, making us all wonder where Rod Serling is when we need him.

"It was a sunny day," Vikan said. "The wind was blowing off shore creating bad surf conditions 100 yards from shore where I was surfing in 8-to-10 feet of water."

Vikan kept his feet out of the 50-degree water because he had forgotten his booties, an essential part of a Humboldt surfer's wetsuit. Forgetting his booties may have saved Vikan's legs. The shark bit into the tail of Vikan's 7'3 green

pintail surfboard, where his legs would have been had he been wearing his booties on that October morning.

Vikan, originally from Manhattan Beach, sits in a wooden chair in his redwood home which is nestled in a cluster of trees in Eureka. He laughs when he says that he came to Humboldt County because of the "beckoning surf." Later he attributes his move from Manhattan Beach to "continuing my education."

Vikan, at 21, has been surfing for 10 years, with surf sessions in Hawaii, Mexico and all along the coast of California.

Friendly, smiling brown eyes look up from under glasses. An Hawaiian print

shirt and Levi's 501 jeans give him a very "So. Calish" look. His "surf buddy" Kirk Johnson, who was surfing 75 feet away from him the day of the attack, joins Vikan at the wooden table. He occasionally joins the conversation.

The Rolling Stones' "Beast of Burden" is heard from the stereo as Vikan continues his story. "When the shark bit into my board I thought I was next so my reaction was quick. I knew I couldn't swim away from my board because I was wearing a leash."

"The shark was making quick 180-degree turns. I didn't want him to bite me on his next full turn so I grabbed for his tail," said Vikan. "So you would be that much further from his mouth?" Johnson asked. "Yeah, yeah, right," said Vikan, not skipping a beat, but glad for the input by Johnson. "Apparently the shark didn't like the taste of my board because he left right after he bit it," finished Vikan.

The board which has a large chunk missing from it rests next to a hammock stretched across the living room. Vikan also has a shark's tooth which was extracted from the fin of his surfboard; he keeps it in an empty aspirin bottle. He said, "If you took a chisel and drove it into the fin of my board it would not have come close to the fierce damage the shark did."

How soon after the attack did Vikan surf again? "The very next day," he said. "I've never been back to the same spot, though, not because of sharks but because there haven't been any good waves."

Doctor my eyes have seen the years

A legendary surf figure among the Humboldt surfers is "Doc" Ball, who has been surfing for more than 50 years.

Giggling with excitement, Doc rides a skateboard down his cement driveway, looking more like a ten-year-old boy than a 75-year-old man. He leads us to believe that the Geritoli people were right all along, "You're only as young as you feel."

Doc sits on his living room couch, frequently leaving the room to get some of the many mementos he keeps of his active surfing days. Among his prized treasures is a photo album of pictures he took in the late 30s and early 40s.

A premier surf photographer in his time, Doc's surf photos have graced *National Geographic*, *Modern Photography* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Although Doc's pictures are ancient

relics when you compare them to today's high technology surf photography, they are quaint and allow us to see some surfing history, or rather a glimpse of it as seen through the eyes of Doc Ball.

The telephone sounds off in another room but Doc is so deeply absorbed in a story he ignores the sharp, piercing ring as he continues to recall the past. Back to when surfboards were made of redwood, were 14 feet tall and weighed 125 pounds. Back to when wetsuits had not been invented yet. Back to when Duke Kahanamoku wasn't just a surf contest, but a real living and breathing person, a close personal friend of Doc's.

Back in the 1930s when Doc lived in Southern California, he was a member of the Palos Verdes Surf Club. One of the

said Doc. "Shelter Cove was in primitive condition and I still loved to surf. I even remember going out once in a blizzard, I was that surf hungry."

"The last time I went surfing was two years ago," he said. "A fellow keeps calling me and asking me to go surfing with him and I just might go." Pausing to reflect on his long, active days as a surfer, he said, "When you get the surfing bug you never get rid of it; it's just too hard to shake."

Lost waves, hidden peaks, only await surfers who seek.

After living and breathing surf for nearly three weeks, waking up at 7 a.m. for "surf checks," getting totally soaked by a freak wave and in general thinking about surf 24 hours a day, one should basically begin to wonder, "What exactly does surfing mean?"

"Spiritual fulfillment," said surfer Dennis Wentworth. "A lot of people don't realize that surfing releases a lot of pressure; for me it's like going to church. When I come out of the water, I am cleansed." Surfer Keith Newcomber said, "Surfing is an individual expression. To me it's an art form, a dance in relationship to your element which happens to be a wave."

Lack of crowds and camaraderie, or brotherhood among surfers as someone put it, were the top answers given to the question, "What do you like best about surfing in Humboldt County?" Surfer Karl Boettcher said, "No one has a superior attitude because you always get put back in your place around here. There is not much aggression toward other

surfers in the water. Our attitude is not, 'this is my wave, get off!' I get into watching people surf as much as I enjoy surfing myself."

Surfer Keith Newcomber said, "It's not so dog-eat-dog up here. The attitude of surfers is different, not as cutthroat. There's a lot of camaraderie. We share rides to the beach, we critique one another, it's a good way to see what's happening."

"The greatest thing about surfing in Humboldt County," said surfer Kirk Johnson, "is the idea of getting good surf with just you and your buddy. If you combine that with the aesthetic value of the scenery, which is incredible, you'll see that surfing in Humboldt County is just beautiful." **2**



Northern California local. Photo: Metyko.

things the club wanted to accomplish was to "promote surfriding." Feeling that it was as responsible as anything for getting surfing started, he wishes that the Palos Verdes Surf Club had kept its mouth shut. Why? "Now there are so many surfers," he said, "that you can almost walk the boards across the water."

Although surfing occupied a lot of Doc's time in those days, he still managed to graduate from USC, marry "my surfer gal," serve in the Coast Guard and establish himself as a dentist.

In 1953, with his surfboard in tow, Doc moved the Ball family, which now included two children, to Garberville. "That was the first time anyone had ever seen a surfboard in Humboldt County,"