

RIDING THE MAGIC CARPET

a surfer's odyssey to find the perfect wave



tom anderson

RIDING THE MAGIC CARPET
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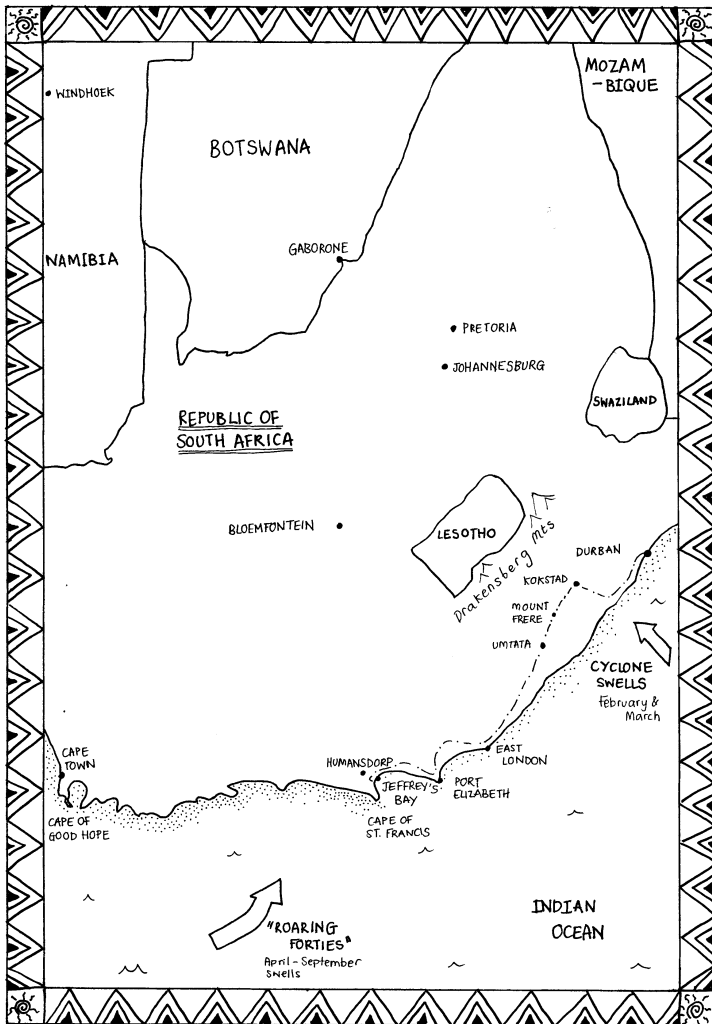
For Rob Middlehurst, Meic Stephens and Breige

*'On the forest track
By chance I meet an old man, and we talk
And laugh, and I don't think of going back'*

Wang Wei, 'Zhongnan Retreat'

*'If they but knew it, almost all men in their
degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the
same feelings towards the ocean with me'*

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*



1.

Taking Off

Are we in Durban or Alcatraz, man?’ asked the Kiwi standing next to me. ‘Look at this place! What are we doing?’

‘It’s the beginning of something.’

‘It’s a prison, man.’

‘No, it’s a start.’

Although there were still over a thousand kilometres left to travel, J-Bay already felt close. Nine thousand down, one thousand to go. But before that, two crucial months of ‘preparation’ on the Golden Mile of Durban beach breaks that starts at South Beach and continues to the Snake Park. Here was where it would begin; ‘Alcatraz’, or was it some characterless backpacker hostel a few blocks in from Dairy Beach? You just can’t tell in South Africa, the land of the reinforced door, window, gate, car – whatever it is, they’ll easily make it burglar-, hijacker- and rapist-proof. Functional perhaps, but none too settling when you have to negotiate two perimeter fences just to arrive at the reception of the first place you plan to stay for the night. Were those the demented drawings of a ‘lifer’ surrounding the window bars above

the pool table and being trespassed upon by an unfriendly cockroach?

No, it was simply the usual cartoon drawings of 'The Big Five' that signalled one's arrival in the fragmented reality of the southern African backpacker circuit. Either way, it was only a start, and, I was hoping, a brief one at that. It was time to go for a walk, find the waves – oh, and an apartment too.

The Kiwi standing at the counter of 'Banana Backpackers' with me was Adam. Another fresh arrival in Durban and, given the accent and tightly clutched boardbag, proof I was in the right building. The main difference between us, though, was that Adam had already been to J-Bay. His attempt to surf the world's best right-hand point had already failed. He'd hired a car, driven up from Cape Town, missed the season, missed any rare off-season action too, missed the essence of J-Bay, and now he was counting out the last weeks until his flight back to 'home' and 'work' (words of serious consequence, judging from the way he mimed the inverted commas with his fingers).

'J-Bay was nothing like what I'd expected, man,' he rued. 'It was sunny, dead flat, boring. I was sitting there going, *Where the fuck does it break, man? I can't even tell. The point doesn't look very long, does it! Are you sure this is J-Bay?* But it was, and there was nothing I could do about it, man. I was sitting there, praying. Praying for a freak swell. But with all that calm, I just knew it was never gonna happen. Gutted. I'm spewing, man.'

Sunny, calm and flat? Not the J-Bay I'd read about, heard about, and hoped to find. The J-Bay I wanted to experience was a place where harsh elements combined to make one of the most spectacular forces of nature a surfer could ever dream of seeing in person. Jeffreys Bay: the fantasy. The myth. The legend. The history.

Adam continued. 'I'm coming back, though. I'm gonna do it right – get the season, man. Like you are now. You

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bastard. Where are you from anyway? As long as you don't run out of money, or get killed, you're *definitely, one hundred per cent* gonna have surfed J-Bay by the time you leave. It kicks off around April, man. You bastard! Any natural foot who doesn't dream of surfing there must be a sissy. Or at least in need of having his head seriously read, man.'

Phew! That meant I was free from the need for any appointments with a shrink for the time being. Yes, indeed; what natural-foot serious about surf travel wouldn't dream of making a pilgrimage to that little stretch of coastline just beyond Humansdorp? This trip for me had begun over ten years ago, with a decision. A promise. An oath. Thou shalt surf J-Bay once thou hast grown old enough to travel there and once thou surfest good enough to make it count. And how best to make it count? By going there early in the season, before the hungry masses, before the Association of Surfing Professionals brought its circus into town for June's Billabong Pro, and, most importantly of all, not after a winter of eating fish 'n' chips and drinking heavy beer back in Wales. So this was the start. The start of a meticulous plan. Two months in Durban training, then the final journey. This was going to be done properly.

'All I've got to look forward to is a fucken stint in this Alcatraz shit-hole,' my new acquaintance went on. 'Oh well, at least we might get some swell. Hey man, have you heard what Durban gets like in cyclone season? Fuck man, let's go check it. I think the breaks are down that road, that way. You up for it? Mind you, it's meant to be flat at the moment. Nothing out there. Worth looking, though, just in case...' Adam paused for a second, completing a thought pattern before making up his mind: 'Aw, fuck it. Come on then, man. Let's go and check the surf.' He seemed a highly-strung character, but at least he was keen to get in the water.

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The Golden Mile was indeed about three blocks away, as the frantic New Zealander had predicted, although those three blocks hardly contained the kind of Manhattanesque splendour that the term 'Golden Mile' may have implied. First impressions were of a grubby city, filled with old, poorly maintained buildings and a spirit-crushing humidity that was as far removed from beach life as you could ever hope to imagine. Faces showed the air of economic depression, as the once mighty South African rand dropped more and more in value. Fast-food buildings, shops and offices derelict, as if the heat had evaporated the finances and the tramps driven out all the businessmen. Compared to the bumper-to-bumper traffic of most major cities, the roads were depressingly quiet. The bubble had burst for this once wealthy port town, as was the case for most other post-European-colonisation ventures – a bully that had lost its clout.

The depression gave way, though, as we arrived at the beachfront and that familiar breeze kicked in – the beaches were the city's main hope for a brighter future. *More like it*, I thought. It looked little more than your average stretch of Indian Ocean-facing beach. Three piers, one jetty and a fourth groyne of rotten wooden pilings. But looks can be deceiving. This particular stretch is home to some of the most high-performance surfing on earth. Few spots are surfed as efficiently on a day-to-day basis as the peaks at Durban's New Pier and North Beach. Good surfing is in the air, the water, the food. You cannot avoid catching the virus. If they weren't so unfairly disadvantaged by the fiendishly low value of the rand, a fair proportion of these guys would probably be pro surfers, known well beyond the confines of this one province. And why not? It has the perfect incubation conditions for surf talent. A stifling city on the beach, warm water, consistent surf of all varieties – big and small, messy and clean. Add to that the crowded,

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competitive line-ups, right in the heart of a nation that lives for sport, and it's easy to see why Natal surfing is so revered.

'What a load of shit that looks like,' said Adam surveying the small peak inside of New Pier, known as the 'Dairy Bowl' to the schoolkids who were quietly using it to turn themselves into some of the hottest surfers on the planet. It was breaking at about waist-height, and trickling along a sandbar that was absolutely crammed with jostling surfers. 'I'd heard it's been flat for a while,' he went on. 'What a bummer.'

If you want to see flat, come and see South Wales in summer, I felt like saying, but kept schtum.

We watched it for about ten minutes. There weren't huge numbers of waves coming through, but the odd one looked rideable. Adam was unimpressed. Then a slightly bigger set came through, each wave being picked off and torn to shreds by youngsters in peak condition. 'This'll do fine,' I mumbled to myself. 'Just fine.'

The right-hand point at Jeffreys Bay, about an hour south of Port Elizabeth on South Africa's east coast, is one of the surfing world's most exciting finds, and from about the age of twelve it had been my life's purpose to one day surf there.

I'd had a surf-free first decade on this planet, doing just what most other Welsh kids do at that age; following an often hopeless (but occasionally brilliant) national rugby team and a better English football club. Even then my desire to do something just that bit different from the others was emerging – not necessarily the best of ideas when you go to a private school that is located, believe it or not, directly in the rough epicentre of Ely, Cardiff; a place where a low

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profile is key to survival – especially if you're one of the kids from the 'posh' school. Everyone in my class would wear either a Manchester United or Liverpool shirt on the charity non-uniform days, while I'd turn up dressed either in a shameful Watford strip (my birthplace, alas), a rebellious Arsenal one, or that of some obscure country like Uruguay, or, in *soccer* terms at least, the USA. Naturally, it all led to some severe piss-taking from my classmates – until the day I wore an Ocean Pacific surf T-shirt.

Surfing, I suddenly realised, could be a way out of being crap at football, and from supporting odd teams. Sod *following* the football and rugby crowd, I realised. It was time to become the first surfer in the class.

To be perfectly honest, the main reason for starting was because I figured my chances of being good at it were higher than in any other sport. The logic behind this was simple: my father had been a top competitive surfer in his day, and he too was crap at football – so genetically the odds were in my favour. Unlike a lot of people who claim to remember their first ride as a key moment in their life, I don't. I just remember following the old man down the walkway to the nearest beach in Ogmores-by-Sea time after time, until one day it was proclaimed that I could surf. Being still a child and able to ride waves automatically made you fairly good then, by Welsh standards at least. Back then there were about ten kids my age on the whole coast who stand-up surfed. I later came fifth out of five in the under-14 division of my first National Championships.

As time went on the 'sport' grew, and after I incurred a harsh and seemingly motive-less kicking walking from school to the bus-stop one day, my family decided it was time for a change. A decision was made to move closer to the beach, and I was duly enrolled in a new middle-class state school, Porthcawl Comprehensive. Here I was no longer the only one to 'have the surfing bug', although

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most of the others my age practised what we 'stand-ups' believed to be the lesser art of bodyboarding.

So I wasn't unique any more, but by then the bug had taken a firm hold, and other ambitions were setting in. News was filtering slowly into the marine-minded town of Porthcawl of two major events, interlinked: for years apartheid had led the sporting world to boycott South Africa; something most high-profile surfers had also observed. However, when on the night of 2 February 1990 it was announced on the *Nine O'Clock News* that the South African President, F. W. de Klerk, had unveiled his plans to dismantle the regime, it became 'open season' on the biggest find in the history of surf travel. Just over a week later Nelson Mandela walked free from prison, and word was out that Tom Curren was going to Jeffreys Bay. Tom Curren was *the* surfer of the time. The artistic but highly competitive son of the charismatic Pat Curren, who hailed from the perfect Californian point breaks at Santa Barbara, was in the process of winning three world titles and changing the way people rode waves forever.

I'll never forget sitting there, still only a boy, watching Curren's first ride at J-Bay on the big screen in the function room of a Porthcawl pub. All the best local guys had made it down there that night, to watch the wave of the decade. It'll stay with me forever, seeing some of the top surfers in my area (they surfed as well as I imagined it was ever possible to) just losing it as they watched the first under-the-lip fade, gasping as Curren emerged from tube number two, and then screaming and erupting into applause as he dropped out of sight and into the section they call 'Impossibles'. It was fantasy. As distant a reality as Bollywood stardom must appear to the average Indian citizen. Hard to imagine that this 'wave', this mass of water so suited to surfing, actually existed; that Tom Curren was a real human being who had gone there and taken off on

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it; that he had been so in tune with the swell that he had ridden it that well on his first attempt. The best surfer of the time had just proven once and for all that South Africa did indeed have the world's most perfect wave.

As of that moment, there wasn't a schoolbook I possessed that was spared a daydream doodle of me surfing at J-Bay. I'd made a promise to myself that night, one that took nigh-on a decade to fulfil, and one that has shaped the life I now lead. *Thou shalt one day go to J-Bay and surf it, and not only that, thou shalt go once thou art good enough and wise enough to really make the most of it and to MAKE IT COUNT.* That was the creed that started my journey to the day when Jeffreys Bay would line up a trademark 'Roaring Forties' swell in front of my very eyes.

This ambition, rather conveniently, involved doing my best to become both a decent surfer and an experienced traveller, and all of my energies were now focused on realising those goals. As a young child travel had meant little more than nauseating car and plane journeys, but now the combination of changing schools and seeing the Curren film had sent my imagination haywire. It would wind up teachers, perhaps because some of them secretly knew that the obnoxious surfers in their classes were hell-bent on getting more from life than pie-charts and quadratic factorisation were ever likely to give them.

Obviously when you're in your early teens there is only so much travelling you can do, but parents in Porthcawl were usually pretty supportive of surfing. Travelling and staying with family friends, older surfers and the Welsh Junior Team, my friends and I had seen most of the UK's and Europe's surf shores, along with the odd trip further afield, by the time we had to consider our sixth-form options.

Some were using this as a stepping-stone to becoming great competitive surfers, and others just for spontaneous hedonism (which gave way to booze and weed as the later teens set in). For me, though, it was always about progressing to the day

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when I could travel to Jeffreys Bay and make a real go of it. I'm not sure what the full set of reasons for this infatuation were – perhaps it was simply an excuse to surf and travel as much as possible, while still having some higher purpose ready for citing if needed. There's also a wanderlust gene in each of my parents. My father left school at sixteen to hitch-hike to Morocco, and used to live in San Francisco; my mother now lives in Toronto; and my first trip abroad was to Brazil at the age of eight to adopt a brother and sister.

No doubt there's an element of all of the above in the decisions I reached as a kid, and later stuck to as a young adult, but perhaps most important of all was the idea of progression. Unlike some other sports where you turn up, play, and either win or lose, surfing is all about progression – a series of personal goals and motives.

Slowly, by way of plenty of learning, a lot of pointless pleasure and the odd hiccup, a life can be forged this way. The one simple truth throughout this life is obvious. After that first ride of Tom Curren at J-Bay was filmed, a whole series of videos called *The Search* came out. One clip in particular will always stay with me. A seventeen-year-old delinquent from eastern Australia sits on a boat somewhere in deepest darkest Indonesia marvelling at the effects that getting chosen for a *Search* film has had on his life.

'What do you think of surfing?' the man behind the camera asks him.

'Pretty good.'

'Where would you be if you didn't surf?'

'Uh, mowing lawns?' You can tell from the tone it's obvious he really means it. This isn't meant to be funny.

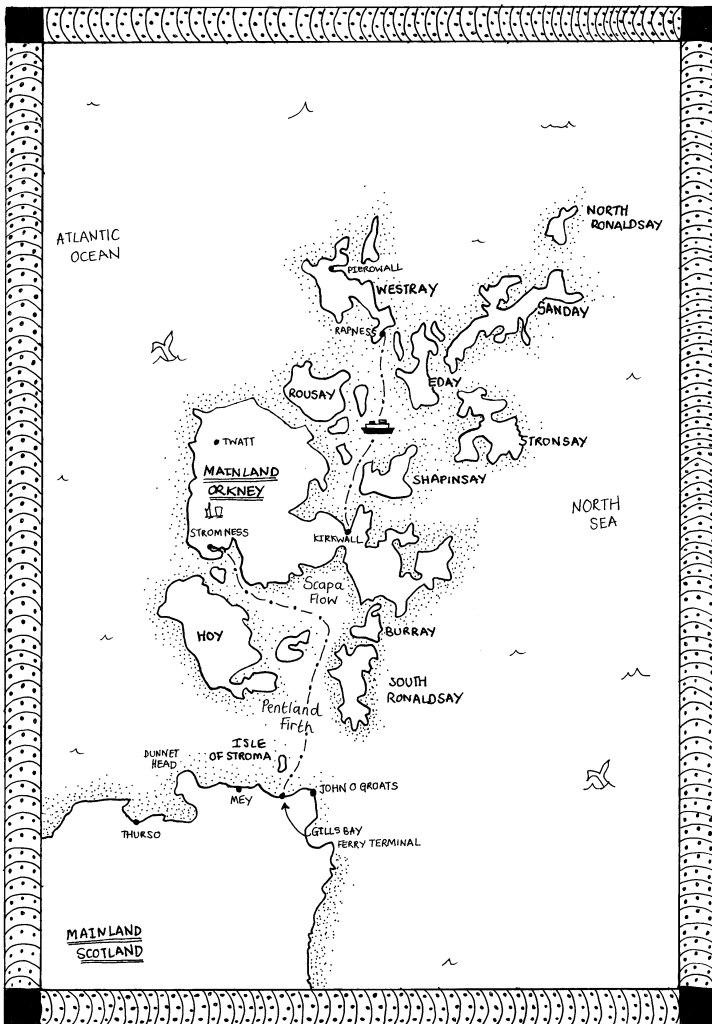
'What has surfing taught you?'

'A lot.'

'A lot?'

'Yeah. More than any school ever could.'

Like I said, it's obvious.



2.

Northern Scotland: Searching the Stromas

'If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.'

– Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Everyone always says that the Scottish drink like fish. Whisky, whisky, beer, Glenfiddich. What about Jack Daniels? 'Dan Jackiels! It's fur girls, is a soft drink, isn't it?' I like a bit of whisky too. It gives you a lovely feeling of warmth. The blood tingles and the body feels alive. The veins light up. No Jack Daniels, eh? Well, just chuck us a glass of that one there then, mate. Straight, with no ice. That seems like the only way to take it up here. If Jack is for girls then I'm not asking for Coke.

All the walls in Orkney are very thick. The slates on all roofs are cemented down – thoroughly. There are no trees,

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not one, anywhere. The air is so clean it stings your lungs. You can see orca whales daily. The islands lie on the same latitude as Alaska. There is a town called Twatt.

‘Why are you boys trying to surf here in Orkney then?’

‘Because the north and west coasts of these isles directly face and take the brunt of the furious North Atlantic. This place rivals Hawaii – except for the weather.’

‘Oh aye? And what’s wrong with our wee weather, my boy?’

We’re at a bar, adjacent to which is a warm log-fire, surrounded by wrinkly, red-faced men lovingly caressing their own glasses of straight whisky. This is the only pub on the Isle of Westray, in the outer Orkneys, and I’m talking to the landlord (who seems to have a bit of a tavern-tan himself). At the bar is the policeman (based on the mainland), the postman, the builder and the haulier. These are the only people on the island who aren’t either farmers or ‘incomers’. It was the only place where we could find an evening meal.

★ ★ ★

The one thing that really stood out when I walked from my warm car towards the entrance of the Central Hotel, Thurso, late one September night about a week before this conversation was how very north we were. You always notice temperatures change on long drives, but never quite as much as when driving from late summertime South Wales to Caithness in just twelve hours.

A friend of mine, Joe, was waiting in the lobby. He was a good guy to go on trips with – always really stoked about everything. Early that morning he had woken me with a text message that read:

GENTLEMEN START YOUR ENGINES.

That was all. Four of us were travelling from different parts of the country, and in one case the globe, to meet up

NORTHERN SCOTLAND

for this expedition (or, as some might call it, *surfari*). We had come to a place that, besides being conveniently close to home, was also one of our planet's genuinely unexplored places (for surfers, that is) – the Orkney Islands. Joe was working in the area for the surf company the Realm; a job that guaranteed great waves across most of Europe and occasionally elsewhere too (it is not difficult to organise corporate hospitality in the surf industry). His main love in life was tube-riding, be it at some of the lesser-known reef breaks of South Wales, the spitting sand pits of France or the tepid kegs of Indonesia.

And then there was Ed and Darrel. Ed had just been looking for waves off the south coast of India and was flying straight from a temperature of thirty degrees into something more like five. This was what Ed did for a living. He explored bizarre surf zones and then wrote articles on what he found for a plethora of magazines that ranged from *Surfer's Journal* to *National Geographic*. Cornish Darrel was more from my mould, taking whatever jobs necessary as and when he had to, but his main purpose was surf trips – that was when he really lived, and when all those long hours behind a bar, a production line or numerous other work stations suddenly made sense. What we had in common: everyone had chosen to live their lives largely around surfing. Joe and Ed were perhaps a little more settled career-wise, but logging as much water-time as anyone, if not more.

'It's good to see you,' Joe told me. 'Last time was in France, eh? At the Glissexpo – bit warmer then!'

'Yeah, can't be helped.' I do actually like the cold – but only when visiting it. Come November, when I know that there's no cheap escape, I usually sink into about four months of depression. Who doesn't? I didn't have to worry about that yet, though. The South would still be holding on to the summer when we got back. We were all looking

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forward to feeling snug in brand new five-millimetre wetsuits, and surfing some good waves. The cold was going to be a novelty.

‘Orkney has to be stinking,’ Ed had said when this trip was only in the planning stages a few weeks ago. ‘Have you seen where it lies on a map? I’ve been looking on the Navy charts all summer and while Newquay and Hossegor were dead flat, Orkney was still getting hit by waves of six to eight foot! It gets so much swell it’s unbelievable. All we need is to find some points or reefs to hold it, and I reckon it’ll be easy.’ The trip was his brainchild, and its mission simple: find some new waves. He was going to try to make a film this time, and we were essentially just along for the ride.

Wave hunting was something he’d had a fair bit of success with in the past – managing to find waves in places you’d never imagine surfers wanting to go to: Lebanon, Colombia, Pakistan, Yemen, Vietnam – political instability used to be the main factor in determining where to go. ‘If it’s unsafe, and exposed to swell, then it’s probably got good surf,’ he’d say. ‘And more importantly, because most people don’t like getting shot or blown up, any waves you do find will be previously unriden.’ Now he had another fetish too: the cold.

‘Nobody likes the cold,’ was his new belief, ‘so therefore any cold place with a big enough wave fetch must have good and, more importantly, *previously unriden* surf.’ This trip to the Orkneys was meant to be a little tester before he moved into a new phase in his pursuit. If this one went well then more could follow. Norway, perhaps, or the Faroe Islands. Someone had beaten him to Russia, but he was damned if one of surfing’s last uncharted realms – the more frigid waters of this planet – would be pioneered by anyone but himself.

The sensational developments in wetsuit design from recent years had meant that you could now feel comfortable