

# THE SURFER'S PATH

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MIKI DORA RIP COOL EUROPE WILD AFRICA INDIAN OCEAN ISLES

# All Pigs DODGING BOULDERS Go To ON A SMALL ROCK Heaven IN THE ATLANTIC

STORY & PHOTOS BY WILLIAM HENRY

**LUCKY FOR US, TODAY IS ONE DAY WHEN MOONA** isn't driving. Magnus Murray a.k.a. Moona, Scottish skateboard rat turned hell-bent surfer, is sitting in the back seat of the small rental car, and deservedly so – his reputation as a crazy driver is already well-known on the island. Next to me is Australian strong-arm Angus Opie, 35 years-young, ruddy-faced and built like iron, and to date the bravest surfer yet to be seen in these waters. I am at the wheel today. I am taking my own sweet time.

I wouldn't really say that I have a fear of heights, at least not more than the average person. But the topographical layout of this small Atlantic island would give vertigo even to a hang-glider. At the moment we're following a narrow switchback that is literally carved into the steep lava cliffs. One thousand feet below us – and I mean directly below us – is the village of Porto Moniz, looking like a small set of Lego houses with red roofs. Even from this high up we can see that there's swell, but I don't want to pry my eyes away from the road ahead of me. "Looks glassy," says Angus in his patent Aussie drawl. Moona pipes up from the back seat in song-like Scottish brogue.

"Hoory up, man. Madonna's cood be crackin'."

Like a giant hunk of igneous rock, this rugged island towers above the sea, rimmed by vertical cliffs and perilously rocky shores. Only 30 miles long and about 10 wide, its mountains rise to a staggering 6,000-foot elevation at the island's centre. Flat ground is a precious commodity and everywhere there is evidence of the past inhabitants' sweat and toil – in the lava rock walls, terraced gardens, ancient churches and levadas, the intricate system of water-delivering canals that run to almost every square plot of land on the island.

For centuries, European explorers passed by this small rocky outpost on the trade route to Africa, but had never come ashore. It provided no safe anchorage. Dense forest covered every inch of the black lava soil. Seafaring myths talked of evil creatures that inhabited the dark forests, and sea serpents that lurked beneath its waters. The island resisted settlement for many years until a group of Portuguese sailors worked up enough courage to have a look around. And, being right-minded Europeans in the age of plunder and conquest, the early explorers did what most other God-fearing men would have done. They burned it. One year they set the forest ablaze and then returned home to Portugal. They came back a year later and the fire was still burning, and it smouldered on for another five years, obliterating all but a single tract of native growth.



High above the Atlantic ocean, on an island so steep that driving anywhere is a treacherous business. Especially when you're in a hurry to catch some waves.

As we weave our way down to Porto Moniz, our small car whines and sputters its objection to the steep grade of the road. We had never heard of anyone surfing on this stretch of coast, but who knows? The first surfers to truly explore this place had come through just two years previously, and they couldn't have turned over every stone. At the moment, we are the only three visiting surfers on the whole island.

We park near the cliff's edge and gaze out at the grey-blue Atlantic. To our left is a long stretch of rock-strewn shoreline flanked by high cliffs. A large set approaches and stands up on a reef out near the end of the point. A long, tapering wall forms and peels speedily toward us, glassy and perfect. We put on our wetsuits and run down a steep path to the lava rocks below.

Angus catches the first wave. It ledges hard on the drop, throwing a lip so thick that it gives me a sick, hollow feeling in my stomach. Two more set waves come through and Moona and I watch them pass. This place is a force to be reckoned with. From up on the cliffs it had looked fairly tame, but from here in the water it is a ferocious beast. That doesn't seem to bother Angus, though. He takes three more set waves without hesitation, which is truly remarkable given the anger with which this wave breaks.

Moona catches a wave on the shoulder and barely manages to make the drop. Now it's my turn. I look at the next wave approaching me and suddenly my body turns to rubber. I can't do it. This place scares me to death. Angus comes back out and catches the next one, another thick, ugly mutant of a wave. He makes the drop but a section of the wave throws out and clobbers him. Not good, I think to myself. He doesn't surface for a number of seconds and when he eventually pops his head through the foam, he's a good fifty yards from where he fell. His board is nowhere to be seen.

I watch from the safety of the channel as Angus takes wave after wave on the head. Eventually he swims in and climbs up on the rocks. Moona and I decide to head in before something else happens. We begin the long paddle back towards the channel. Angus clammers along the rocks inside of us, clutching what remains of his broken board. When we reach the channel we instantly notice that things have changed. What was once an easy entry into the water is now a boiling cauldron of current sucking straight out to sea. To top it off, the waves are funnelling into the channel with a frightening consistency. Each swell stands up suddenly as it approaches the shore and heaves onto the boulders with incredible power. The sound is deafening as the lip lands and sends large stones catapulting towards the cliffs. Angus shouts to us, but we can't hear a word. We put our heads down and paddle hard for the shore.

It seems almost hopeless, nearly impossible to fight the speed of the current. But after five minutes of struggle, we are gaining some ground. Almost there. Angus

frantically waves his arms. "No," he shouts, "not yet!" A massive set looms behind us, passes underneath us, stands up and thunders onto the shore, tossing thirty pound rocks as though they were crumbs on a napkin. The set passes and there is a brief calm. Angus waves us in.

"Now!" he shouts. We dig deep and fight the chop of the current. A small wave pushes us both onto the rocks at the same moment. I scramble up the steep pile of loose boulders with little regard for my tender feet, jamming my toes into the rocks and falling all over myself until I am out of harm's way.

We all look at each other with wide eyes but say nothing. We are scared speechless by the fury of the sea.

#### MY SLUMBER IS DEEP AND COMA-LIKE, INDUCED BY

invigorating surf and too many cervejas at Joe's Bar, but my conscience is abruptly startled into action by a shrill squeal coming from below the shuttered windows of my room. The sound is both high-pitched and guttural, filled with panic and I recognise it as the fear-struck cries of a porco being dragged to slaughter. That's right, I remember, today Cecelia will kill her pig. Christmas is a week away and every day since last Sunday at least one pig has gone down.

Out in the alleyway between the houses a group of men struggle with the frightened beast, finally pushing it onto its side and pinning it to the concrete with their knees. I look at its eyes as they roll in their sockets. It seems to know what is about to happen. The men are sombre. They pass around a carafe of vinho tinto, the tannic, blood red wine made here in the village, and they drink heartily and wipe their soiled sleeves across their mouths. A long knife blade appears and hovers over the pig's enormous chest, and the man who holds it hesitates, swallows nervously, and plunges it deep into the soft flesh of the animal. Blood pours upon the concrete and flows like a small river into the gutter as I watch the life slowly slip away. Its eyes become glassy and empty, and the men turn away and head back to the bar for another round.

Later that day, the huge pig hangs in Cecelia's kitchen dripping blood into a bucket, pink and hairless, as I struggle to ingest the food in front of me.

"Muito grandhe, o porco," I say in my broken Portuguese – "big pig," and Cecelia laughs at my obvious skittishness.

"Nao gosta o porco?" she says, and I smile at her.

"Sim, gosto," I say, "yes I like pork", but I don't know how to tell her that I'd prefer not to have it staring at me so shortly before I eat it.



Opposite: The village, until the 1970s there were no roads down here. You had to walk where ever you needed to go. Steep drop. Above: Christmas dinner sacrifice.

**CECELIA SUMARES IS MY HOSTESS HERE IN JARDIM** do Mar, a tiny village on the remote western end of the island. She rents the rooms of her house to travelling surfers and has turned what was once a difficult existence based on farming and fishing into a lucrative tourist business. She is a tough woman, hardened by many years of physical labour providing for her three children and unreliable husband. But she is kind too, and still youthfully beautiful at age forty. She and I have developed a friendship, although we still can't understand each other half of the time.

I choke down the remainder of my lunch and thank Cecelia. I walk out into the sun, passing through flower-lined gardens as I head down the stone alley through the village. A levada runs to the side of the path, filling the alley with the gurgle of water flowing over stone. I nod hello to an old woman tending her garden and then wave to her husband who is dragging a hoe through the neat rows of his field. I enter Joe's Bar for an afternoon

Chinese, a thick cup of Portuguese espresso cut with a smidgen of milk. Joe greets me in English, still sleepy-eyed from his noontime siesta.

"Has the paper come in yet, Joe?"

"No, not yet. I don't know what's taking them so long today."

The newspapers here normally arrive with the daily mail, sometime in the early afternoon. Some visitors complain about this minor inconvenience, but villagers will remind them that as recently as 1970 there wasn't even a road coming into Jardim do Mar. The only way in and out was along a treacherous trail that wound its way from the next village up the cliffs, nearly 2,000 vertical feet above. Of course, these days the satellite television

brings the news here instantaneously, but we surfers await the paper in order to scour the weather map for any signs of storms out at sea.

"How's it look, mate?"

It's Angus, hoping as I had for news of a large swell headed our way. Many of the waves here, because the reefs are in deep water, need very large swells to even break. For this reason, there can be a long wait between good days. But also for this reason, these reefs and points can hold

perfect shape at surprising size. We had been waiting for over a week now, amusing ourselves with waves in the fur zone at Paul do Mar, but we were getting hungry for the real thing.

"Paper's late, Gus," I reply. "What do you say we go on a hike instead?"

"Yeah right, mate, good idea."

Abandoning all thoughts of surf we drive up the cliffs and into the mountains, travelling from the lush coastal gardens into the dense forests of Rabaçal. Twenty minutes later we are hiking through the island's last stands of native trees, this valley being one of the only ones spared from the great fires centuries ago. Clouds of mist cling to the mountains across the valley, and the trail is soggy underfoot. We follow an ancient footpath alongside a large levada, and the air has a mild chill as we duck in and out of the sun. We visit two of the island's myriad waterfalls this afternoon, finally cooling off in an icy pool below a fifty-foot pluming fall named 25 Fountains.

That evening, Joe's Bar is packed. Friday night before Christmas and the whole village is out. Angus and I join Moona and his wife at a table.

"Did ye see the weather maap?" says Moona with wide eyes, sliding the *Diario* across the table towards us.

Angus flips it open to the weather page while Moona sits back grinning. The map indicates an intense low pressure system off the coast of Nova Scotia, with tight isobar lines wrapped around it like the skin around an onion.

"Mate, oh mate, it's gonna get huge," says Angus, looking as though he's seen a ghost.

We order some rounds and try to control our obvious excitement. Angus informs us that he hasn't seen a low pressure system like that all year. A



Above: Waterfall stop on a forest hike. There's only a tiny patch of indigenous forest left here now. The first sailors to stop here saw to that.

Opposite: Two classic Jardim line-ups. The bar at Joe's Bar, and the point not far below.





few moments later our local friend, Duarte, arrives with a guitar and the bar soon bursts into song. We raise our glasses and toast to Portugal, to Scotland, Australia, America, and our rugged island outpost. We toast our new friends, the ocean, the rocks, the sun and the air, and when we run out of toasts we all crawl home to bed and await another enchanted day in Jardim.

**THE NEXT DAY BRINGS US CLEAR SKIES AND A** moderately-sized swell, and we walk down to Ponta Pequena together, just fifteen minutes along the boulders from Jardim. We hop from rock to rock, trying to choose the ones that look stable so as not to lose our





Above: Heavenly mountain path  
Opposite: South African visitor Cass Cotler finding exactly the right line for the first section of a long Jardim wall. This is a medium-sized day, certainly not big.

footing. The stones are nearly perfectly round, sculpted by thousands of years of relentlessly pounding surf. They're big enough to be too heavy to lift, but small enough to shift under our weight, and as we clamber across them I feel as though I'm walking over a sea of dinosaur eggs. About halfway there, we notice that a new rockslide has come down from above since we last walked this route and tens of tons of earth and stones now block our path. I look up. The cliffs above are so high that they make me dizzy trying to see the top.

Tales of death from falling objects are commonplace on this island: just last year, a whole family of tourists was killed in their rental car as they entered a tunnel along the autopiste. We'd heard the boulder that fell on them was almost as large as the car itself. Most of the families in Jardim can claim at least one victim to this strange lottery of misfortune, and we are currently walking a most precarious path indeed – according to the villagers, two people have died along this stretch in the past thirty years.

"Don't look up, man," says Moona, his beak-like nose casting a shadow across his face.

Angus cranes his neck, nervously eyeing the cliffs above. "Just be glad it isn't raining."

Once out in the water we can relax, as more distance lies between us and the cliffs. In the light of the sun, the towering rock face seems more colourful than a rainbow, with splashes of brown, black and beige rock, velvet-green grass and yellow bamboo clinging to the precipices. The water below our boards is smooth, turquoise blue and lucid. We have a great session in overhead conditions, and walk back to Jardim for lunch.

The swell builds all day. In the evening we surf Pontinha in the village of Jardim, which has become known as one of the world's greatest pointbreaks. Pontinha doesn't even start to get off the rocks until it's

at least 10 feet on the face, and it can hold practically any size. Rumours are that even at 50 feet, it holds perfect shape. The only drawback is, once again, the rocks. At Jardim there is no easy channel, and on a big day the entry and exit to the water can be more death-defying than even the wave itself. One false move can be like going through a meat-grinder. Today, thankfully, is fairly tame, and we trade off on the long, glassy walls as the sun sets over the ocean.

#### A STORM IS RAGING OUTSIDE MY WINDOW, PELTING

the glass with heavy drops of rain. It has been storming now for four straight days. Every stream, every small rivulet that once ran down the cliffs visible from my window is now a raging plume of red-brown water cascading from above. In the faint early morning light I can see that the swell has come up. It looks big.

I throw on my rain jacket and run down to Moona's place. He appears at the door almost instantly, his bright blue eyes shining from the shadows of his room.

"I couldn't sleep either," he says. We make coffee and explore our options. Outside, the wind is onshore, which means that the north shore may be our only choice. We wake Angus and run down together to look at the waves at Pontinha. Huge. Straight west swell, maybe even south-west, and totally closing out from the peak to the boat ramp. Angus is incredulous.

"Mate, I've never seen it do that before."

We strap the boards onto Moona's car. Up the road we climb. The small car whines along in first gear. Rocks litter the road, some as large as the car's tires. As we near the summit we become shrouded in fog. The wind is howling through the forest, spraying the road with branches and leaves. Rain pelts hard against the windshield. On top of the island, the only place where the terrain is actually flat, the fog keeps us from seeing the vertical drop-offs that we know are beside us. Moona is driving. Angus and I are beyond nervous.

The wind shakes the car from side to side. The visibility is practically nil.



Yet Moona drives as though he were a twelve-year-old kid in a Grand Prix go-cart, pushing the car to its absolute limits around every corner. As we descend from the cloud into Porto Moniz we can see a groomed ocean beneath us. About a mile out, three waterspouts have formed, swirling vortices of black water.

The road past Porto Moniz is even more hairy, especially on a day like today. Cliffs tower thousands of feet above the water and the road is cut directly into the rock face. For most of the way to São Vicente the road is only one lane, so if you encounter a tourist bus coming the other way, you're forced to hack your way through the blind curves until you reach a turning area. In some

places, waterfalls plunge directly onto the roadway. Yet we weave our way along this treacherous stretch of road with a crazy Scot at the wheel, dodging boulders, mudslides, and taking blind curves at high speed. There is nothing we can do. It's his car. We round a corner and suddenly there appears the massive grill of a tourist bus heading straight for us, engulfing the road. Moona hits the brakes hard and we begin to skid downhill, finally stopping less than a foot from its bumper.

Angus and I completely lose our cool, letting forth a verbal assault on Moona about his foolish driving. He concedes. Angus takes the wheel. A few minutes later we arrive at a safer stretch of road, and let out a collective



sigh of relief. Our desired destination is now only a few minutes ahead, a long left point that breaks only on the most massive of swells.

We drive through the quaint town of Ponta Delgada and follow signs down a narrow cobblestone street, past the church, and finally down a small hill to park at the bottom of the point. The rain is falling so hard, and the wind so fierce, that we can see nothing out of the car windows. I open my window a crack and squint my eyes to see out of the tiny slit. What I see makes my heart pound in my chest, causes me to pull back from the car window in amazement. In that brief second, visible

through the angry tempest outside, I had just witnessed some of the best waves that I had ever seen in my life. Three waves in a row were cartwheeling down the point, deep long lines with mist pluming from the tops of the heaving lips. We all three leap from the car into the driving rain. The waves come one after the other, like a fleet of freight trains hurtling into station. They break from far outside, reeling two hundred yards down the point without a single imperfection.

Within minutes we all three jump off the boat ramp and hit the water. As I paddle up the channel, looking directly into the gaping tubes as they race towards me,





My emotions are a mixture of fear and elation. This is one of those magic moments, one of those days that maybe happens once in a lifetime. It's at times like these that we are reminded of what it means to be a surfer, to be a rider of waves. We surfers have a unique connection to one of the most powerful and beautiful sources of energy on the planet, a force of nature so raw and pure that it often defies description. To ride a wave is to glide along a thin pathway between pleasure and destruction, to feel the ocean's carnal rage and beauty at the same instant in time. On a day such as this, surfing becomes a spiritual experience.



#### WE REACH THE TOP OF

the point just as a set comes rolling in. The waves are massive, some of the biggest I had ever tackled. I turn and paddle for the first wave, determination and inspiration overcoming fear. The drop is steep and late, and my toes dig into the wax to keep my board under my feet. I make it to the bottom, then lean into a hard backside turn, my eight-foot board feeling smaller than it ever had before. The lip lands with a loud crack over and behind me. I aim towards the wave's open face, pumping and driving, barely escaping the eruption just over my shoulder. The wave never lets up. It keeps looking at me as though it might close out, but instead breaks with astounding precision. I race it all the way to the inside, never once backing off from my quest for speed. I kick out just before reaching the boat ramp. Just then, a bolt of lightning splits the sky and hits the cliff above me, letting loose a thundering clap and a boom.

After three hours we leave the water, worn and ragged by the many laps

up and down the point. The tide has come up quite a bit and the waves have diminished in quality. We wriggle out of our wetsuits, standing next to the car.

"Look out!" Angus suddenly shouts, and I turn to see he and Moona scrambling up the hillside behind me. I wheel around to look at the ocean. A huge swell is looming above me, rolling directly at the narrow promenade where our car is parked. Somehow, with the tide being so high, it had come past the inside reef without breaking. I have just enough time to duck behind the car and throw my arms over my head. The wave crashes onto the promenade and engulfs the car with whitewater. I am completely swept off my feet and pushed against the hillside behind me. Our boards and the rest of our gear wash back down the ramp and into the water, and we spend the next ten minutes fishing it out.

On the drive back to Jardim we are strangely calm as Moona negotiates the storm-littered road ahead of us. Angus rests his head on a crumpled board bag against the foggy car window, and I stare silently out at the wet Atlantic night. I think about my last two weeks here on the island, about my new friends and the adventures we've had together. For some reason my mind wanders to the pig that was slaughtered, and how quickly and easily its life slipped away, how fragile and how fleeting life can be when faced with something as small as a six-inch knife blade. Today we had willingly subjected ourselves to yet another harrowing ordeal on this island of cliffs and pounding surf, yet had walked away with our skins intact. And somehow, despite how foolish we may have been, I feel more alive than I ever have before. Perhaps much like the first explorers to have come to this dangerous outpost in the Atlantic, we three surfers can bask in the knowledge that we not only survived, but also thoroughly enjoyed, the fury of the sea.



Above: Don't fall here. Opposite: Or here. Like most of the waves on the island, this place gets scarily good. That is, extremely good, but extremely scary, too. Big rocks, horrendous rips and no one around to help you when things get out of control.