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ANGUS SURF GOD

What it takes
to reach divine
status in the
outer
Indonesian
islands.

TEXT + PHOTOGRAPHY: WILLIAM HENRY



I met Angus in Kuta, Bali, towards the end of the Indonesian dry season about ten years ago.

It was in the Sari Club late at night, as most nights there tended to be, and I was at the bar sipping some strange fruity concoction spiked with a semipoisonous, megaproof rice wine. Suddenly, a big, hairy blond gorilla in surf trunks took a seat next to me. "Nice ta meet ya, name's Angus," he said cheerfully before draining his beer. I shook his massive rough hand and heard my knuckles crunch in his grasp. "So you're a Seppo, are ya?" he said with a smile. "Fraid so," I mumbled, already getting used to the label. "Seppo" is the Aussie term for an American, short for septic tank, or Yank. I could think of worse things to be called, so I had resigned to accept it.

We hit it off instantly; Angus, a big-boned, foulmouthed, rough-and-tumble Australian with massive sunburnt arms and wild blue eyes, and me, a medium-sized, milk-fed, pampered Yank, six months out of college and even longer since my last haircut. By the time Angus left the bar that evening, reeling drunk but still a mountain of exuberant energy, he and I had made escape plans for the next day—we would flee from Kuta Hell, as we called that nightly whirlwind of bars, happy milkshakes and disco lights that was inevitably followed by horrible Arak hangovers and bodies unfit for surfing. There is no bottom to the depths of depravity that a surfer can sink whilst mired in a Kuta Beach flat spell. Kuta is like a Balinese Las Vegas; it seems to exist for the explicit purpose of separating tourists from their dollars, and it has every conceivable form of sin to make sure that that is exactly what happens. The difference here of course is that there's no Vegas flash, no



panache, just a hefty dose of third world reality. Everywhere there are vendors, scrapboard shops, people selling every worthless plastic trinket imaginable. The main street through Kuta makes an LA freeway at rush hour seem downright civilized. Horns blare, motorcycles whine, cows moo, and tourists try not to get run down on their way to the next shop or bar. Yet the Balinese carry on without a care, and you rarely see a hot temper. I, on the other hand, was feeling as though my head were about to explode, and needed an escape desperately.

The boat left early the next morning from Samur. We negotiated a price right there on the beach with a skinny, bespectacled skipper who assured us that he was taking us to a distant island where very few other surfers traveled. When we protested the price, he added that we would be the only people in the boat, and hence he could not settle for less. We tossed our gear on board the small, weathered wooden vessel and settled in for the journey. As the diesel engine coughed and roared to life, enveloping us in a plume of toxic blue smoke, a troupe of Balinese people scattered out of the jungle and down the beach, piling into the boat and quickly occupying every last bit of deck space.

We set out over a calm ocean, with neither a breath of wind nor a hint of swell to hinder our journey. Nevertheless, twenty minutes into the trip, half the people in the boat were doubled over the side, or sitting in misery clutching their stomachs, and a familiar putrid smell surrounded us. Angus adjusted his straw hat in the sun. "Looks like we brought a bit of Kuta along with us, eh Seppo?" He looked around the boat. "Go figure."

The island was as promised: a tropical paradise. There were no Hiltons here. Only rickety wood and concrete structures haphazardly strewn along the white sand beach, the dense green jungle, and the turquoise blue, shimmering ocean. We found a losmen in which to stay, a concrete room with two beds and no electricity, and one open, unscreened window.

Our first night was eventful, to say the least. The local dogs barked and fought with incredible persistence, with one snarling melee culminating in the alley outside our room. We threw rocks in the direction of the noise and eventually both dogs ran off howling. **A few more hours of fitful, chloroquine sleep were interrupted again by a cat in heat, a piercing, howling whine that sounded a lot like the cry of a human baby on helium,** and once again we were both at the window hurling objects into the night. It was about that time that the roosters started crowing. And crowing. "It's the middle of the damn night," I whined. "Dawn's not for another three hours."

"So much for peace and quiet," said Angus, laughing. I heard a rustle, then the distinct sound of a cap being removed from a bottle. "Cheers, mate," he said in the dark.

The days passed slowly, some filled with surf, others flat.

We had the waves of the island to ourselves, which consisted basically of one reef break: a long, tapering left wall that wrapped along shallow coral, before finally closing out in a shore break on the beach in front of our losmen. On the other side of the small bay was another reef, too shallow to surf, a vicious, tubing cavern that broke over near-dry coral. We stayed for many weeks, slowly slipping into island mode, speaking less, reading more and eating like hungry baboons. Angus surfed like a madman, always pulling in deep, always slashing the most vertical turns in the most critical places, and always ending up with the most reef cuts at the end of the day. After a few weeks, his feet looked like Swiss cheese, but he remained as surf-stoked as ever.

We became accustomed to the sounds of the night and befriended a few villagers. What few words of Indonesian we knew were of no use to us here. The small islands to the east of Bali contain myriad native tongues, many quite different from the others, so our communications were reduced to grunts, smiles and

simple charades. Angus seemed to have a knack for communicating in any tongue, at once both firm and flexible when negotiating prices. His manner was always filled with humor, and he had a way of making the villagers laugh even though they didn't have a clue what he was saying. Our main duties were procuring food for our bellies and firewood for the makeshift pit in front of our losmen. We bought fish from the boats that came in the afternoon, if it was available, and fruit, rice, and coffee at the

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local store which had little else than that except candy bars and five brands of cigarettes—all prices negotiable.

The children in the village, a rowdy bunch of half-naked revelers, provided us with the most entertainment. They ran amok all over the beach, unburdened by responsibility. Quite often they would follow us down the beach and tease us, trying to coax us into a game of chase. If we pursued, we inevitably lost, collapsing on the beach in a panting and sweaty heap in the sticky tropical heat.

Most of the villagers' activities and daily life revolved around the sea. In the early morning the families of fishermen awoke before first light, cooking food to sustain the warriors on their fearful journey into a sometimes hostile ocean. The women of the family made the required offerings of incense and blossoms, a tradition in their Hindu-influenced animist culture. They set the offerings out on the doorsteps of their palm-thatched homes to please the gods, to beg them to allow their men a safe return and a plentiful harvest.

As the first hints of sun played upon the horizon, the boats solemnly entered the water, their engines sputtering to life, and filed out through the reef pass disappearing into open water. Other men donned their machetes and headed off into the jungle, perhaps no less brave, to face the tigers that inhabit it, to collect coconuts, fruit, and firewood. At low tide most of the women walked out onto the exposed, multicolored reef and collected a special seaweed that

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ANGUS SURF GOD

grows amongst the coral heads, a slimy green, stringy plant that they carried in baskets, then dried in the sun on hand-woven reed mats. I learned that this was the islanders' main source of income: the seaweed fetches a premium in the sushi markets of Japan. Even here in the remote reaches of the Indonesian archipelago, we could not escape reminders of the ever-encroaching global economy.

One day the swell came up huge. The reef was nearly maxed out, with big funneling walls and spitting tubes. The fishing boats remained on the beach and the men nervously eyed the water. These were seas that none of them were willing to brave. Angus could hardly control his excitement. He waxed up his big board at a frantic pace. I started a fire in the pit to make coffee, waving a piece of cardboard to stoke last night's coals. Wisps of smoke mixed with the misty morning air, and broken shafts of sunlight streamed through the canopy of palm trees above us. The fire flared into orange flame, and I stacked a few pieces of bamboo and coconut husk to draw the flame higher. I filled our blackened tin pot with water from a plastic water jug, then stirred in the finely ground beans to make a thick coffee soup—Indo style.

"You want some java, Gus?" There was a long delay before he answered. "Na. Save it for later." He picked his board up off the sand and wrapped the leprope around the tail. "I'll see y'out there, Seppo." His face wore an expression that I had not seen before, like a dog that first hears the distant howl of a coyote. He ducked into the misty morning sun and ran down the beach out of sight.

I tried to relax and sip my coffee, gently swinging in the hammock, listening to the thunder of surf on the outside reef. The butterflies were having a rave party inside my stomach. The surf was big, and while I had tackled waves of equal size at home, the conditions here gave me cause for worry. The razor-sharp reefs, the swirling currents, the lack of local surfer knowledge, and most of all the distance from any form of decent medical facility were enough to make me hesitate. Call me chicken, but I'd heard too many gruesome surf stories from this part of the world to throw caution to the wind. Still, I took a deep breath and rolled out of the hammock, waxed my board and walked out onto the beach, my knees feeling as though they were filled with Jell-O.

As I neared the reef I realized that the surf was even bigger than I had thought. Huge swells were heaving onto the reef, sending plumes of water high into the air. There seemed to be no lull in the sets, as one wave after the other jacked up and reeled down the reef, finally erupting into chaotic froth in the channel. The rip current was running like a river, roaring past me and then skimming the edge of the death reef to my right. Where was Angus? I couldn't imagine that he'd been crazy enough to paddle out. But then, where else would he be? I remembered the wild look in his eyes when he left me at the hut. A set of waves appeared on the outside, and for a second I saw a figure bob over the top of the first wave as it broke. Angus was out there all alone.

I spent a nerve-racking hour there on the beach, occasionally catching sight of Angus as he crested an outside wave. The surf seemed to be growing bigger every minute. Most of the village had gathered on the beach and together we watched the lone surfer intently. There was nothing any of us could do.

Suddenly Angus did the unthinkable. A huge set capped on the reef, and Angus paddled over the first three waves. On the fourth, he turned and stroked hard. The wave hunched forward and threw a massive lip, and Angus dropped in with his arms extended

above his head. His board slightly disconnected with the wave's face but somehow he kept his balance, landing and starting a bottom turn. I could see the board chattering ferociously under his feet. The wave loomed up behind him, a massive frothing tube threatening to run him over like a speeding train. He crouched low and aimed straight towards the shoulder of the wave, trying to outrun it.

He rode it like that all the way to the channel, barely escaping the madness that was erupting behind him. As the wave started to close out, Angus pruned and aimed towards the beach to my left. The lip behind him threw out and landed squarely on his back, catapulting him away from his board. He disappeared into the froth, then resurfaced and swam towards his board. But it was already too late. The rip was pulling him straight towards the death reef, where massive waves were looming up and breaking onto dry coral.

The villagers were in a frantic state, screaming and waving their arms. Angus grabbed his board and stroked hard towards the beach, but it was a lost cause. The current was too strong. He turned and paddled with the current, angling towards the death reef. It was his last chance at salvation—if he didn't get to shore, the current would drag him past the reef and straight out to sea—but it seemed a bit like ejecting from an airplane without a parachute on.

Another set loomed on the outside as he fought the current. The waves exploded onto the reef, sending massive walls of whitewater that thundered briefly along before sucking back up into the face of the next wave. The last wave of the set rolled in behind him and he gave it all he had, stroking for the last patch of reef on the island. The wave picked him up and for a moment he was suspended in the lip, clutching the rails of his board, looking down at the razor-sharp coral below him. Angus came down with the lip. He was swallowed, then surfaced, no longer holding his board. The wave spread him across the reef like peanut butter. He bounced and rolled across the coral and finally came to rest on dry reef.

The villagers ran out on the reef and lifted him up, cut and bleeding, and carried him into town. They were chanting strange songs I had not heard before. I followed close behind. Blood dripped from his wounds and splattered in the sand in front of me. They took him to a small hut and laid him on a soft reed mattress. I stood just outside the door, not wanting to get in the way, nervously chewing my fingernails. Women came and cleaned his wounds, dressing them with leaves that were covered with a black, tarlike substance, an astringent balm made from the sap of a native plant. Then I didn't know what to do. Outside, the entire village seemed to be watching. The women were surrounding the hut with burning incense and blossoms, and the men were singing a haunting song in the island's dialect.

"Is that you, Seppo?" Angus suddenly blurted out.

"Yeah, it's me," I answered.

"What's going on here, mate?"

"I don't really know, man," I replied. I entered the hut and stood by his bed. "I guess they think you're some kind of a surf god." ■

I received a letter from Angus just the other day. It's been more than ten years now since our adventure. He told me that he's been back to the island nearly every year since then. He doesn't even bother with Kuta anymore. The islanders arrange a boat for him every time he comes. They give him his own hut, cook for him, wash his clothes—treatment fit for a surf god. I hear he's even picked up a bit of the native tongue.