

The Philippine Factor

BY TOR JOHNSON

Today there is some development in front of the wave, and it gets national attention every year with the growing popularity of the Siargao Cup contest. Desecration, or damn good for the locals? Depends where you're coming from.

If you talk with ten surfers about their trip to the Philippines, six or seven will tell you it was the worst trip they've ever made. It's just that hard to catch the place on. But then, the other three will have a different story. It might go something like this.

We arrived in Cebu just in time to watch our connecting flight take off, leaving photographer John Callahan and me stranded on the tarmac amid the mountain of our camera gear and surfboards. The worst part of it was, there was no flight for the next few days. Unless we were willing to ride a series of boats, buses, and planes, we'd be stuck in waveless, polluted Cebu for days. John began muttering about the "Philippine Factor", according to him a mysterious force that makes every undertaking in the Philippines take twice as long as planned, and has been known to create strange and unexpected results.

Then Captain Bob appeared. "Hey, don't worry about it. I'll drop you off on my way to Tandag."

We couldn't believe it. Was this airline pilot actually offering to make an unscheduled stop with a plane to "drop us off"? Where I live, even bus drivers won't "drop you off".

Assuming Captain Bob intended to land, the dreaded 'Philippine Factor' had actually begun to work in our favour.

Captain Bob works for Seair, a seriously passenger-friendly, small local airline that runs adventurous tourists and businessmen out to exotic locations throughout the tens of thousands of beautiful but nearly inaccessible Philippine islands. The few other passengers on our flight were willing to go for the extra tour, and apparently an unscheduled stop wasn't too much to ask from Captain Bob who'd trained in the Navy on Oahu, not far from where I live.

Captain Bob loaded our gear into his jungle camouflaged plane, gave us an incredible aerial tour of the intricate reefs, sandy tropical islets, and lush high mountains that make up the stunning central Philippine Visayan region. Captain Bob even buzzed the break at Cloud 9 so we could check the surf. The moment we roared over the peak, a perfect four-foot set boomed on the reef below us in water so clear it was hard to make out the wave. The spit blasted up at the underbelly of the aircraft as we raced past.

We glimpsed the thatched contest headquarters that had been set up on the reef right next to the peak as we banked around the peak. In order to promote tourism, the Philippine Department of Tourism was sponsoring the 6th Annual Siargao Surfing Cup, a contest to be held in the next few days.

Recent kidnappings far in the southern Philippines have nearly killed tourism, even in the peaceful islands to

the north, and the fragile economy is feeling the bite. The fact is that the Christian Provinces here in the Visayas are some of the most peaceful places on earth, and we never felt threatened at all. The Department of Tourism needs to prove this, and seemed ready to do nearly anything to get people to come: host a surf contest, invite foreign surfers, even invite so-called surf journalists secretly thrilled with a free surf trip and more tubes than they can ride (like me).

From the air we could see they'd even built a nice little curving wooden walkway all the way out to the surf, so we wouldn't even have to stub our toes walking out to Cloud 9 over the reef. All of this was handy, but the best

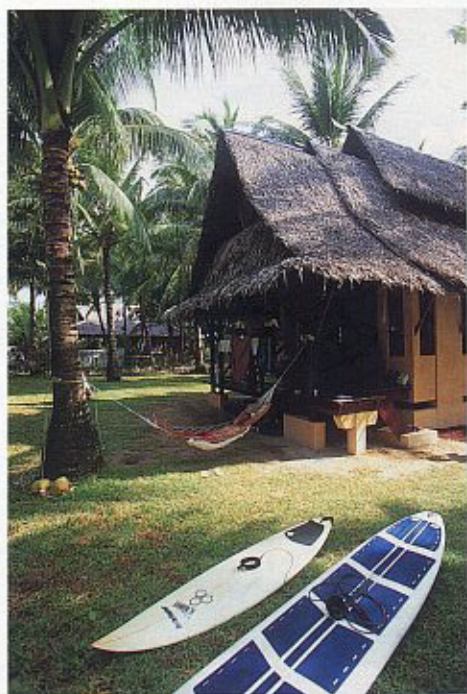
thing was that by sheer dumb luck, a monster typhoon had taken a swipe at Guam a few days before, and the notoriously fickle surf was already showing signs of a new long period groundswell.

Captain Bob was good enough to land, and once we'd bounced to a landing on the coconut palm lined runway, things looked even better than they had from the air. The swell began to show signs of serious power, and Cloud 9 was doing what it's famous for – barrelling off its face. The wave breaks like a cross between Stockton Avenue in Santa Cruz and Backdoor Pipeline in Hawaii. Nearly every wave is hollow, and even the fat looking ones that swing wide off the reef somehow get focused onto the shallow, evenly-shoaling shelf. The first time I rode it years ago, I was

shocked to be suddenly standing in the tube on a wave I thought I'd end up cutting back on.

Cloud 9 has an appetite for surfboards, and it ate mine for breakfast. Fresh off the plane, I grabbed my brand new board, ran out the boardwalk, jumped in to the surf, pulled into a tube, and immediately snapped my board in half on the first wave. Lamenting the waste of a magic board, not to mention the cool hand-paint job, I rushed back up the pathway for my back-up. For some reason the old beater stayed in one piece, and in the next hour I probably got more barrels than I'd had in the last year.

The wave has a fairly easy drop, considering how hollow it is. As you paddle, it grabs you from behind, and sort of throws you down the face. It's a "textbook tube", and all you've really gotta do is stand there, look pretty, and hope you come out. The reason it eats so many boards is that the tube sometimes runs away too fast. And it devours any board that's left in its path when surfers caught inside toss them and dive for the shallow reef.



JOHN CALLAHAN

*This: Chill out zone
Opposite: The author,
for Johnson happily
tucked in, this time without
breaking
his board.*

But board-eating Cloud 9 isn't the only show in town. There are other waves on Siargao Island – long rights perfect for high performance surfing, hollow lefts, everything you could want, as long as there's swell. The vehicle of choice for surf sessions is the 'pump boat', the Philippine equivalent of Mom's station wagon. Quick and shallow of draft to make it over the labyrinth of reefs, these frail craft have only a few inches of freeboard showing above water. A single light, narrow, sleek centre hull has two bamboo outriggers lashed on with monofilament fishing line. Skimming over crystal clear lagoons on your way to a warm tropical wave sounds idyllic, and it would be if not for the ear-splitting din of a completely un-muffled gasoline engine blasting in the middle of the craft. If you are unlucky enough to be the one who has to sit behind the engine, you get the fumes blowing in your face as well as the noise.

Well, when I was a kid...

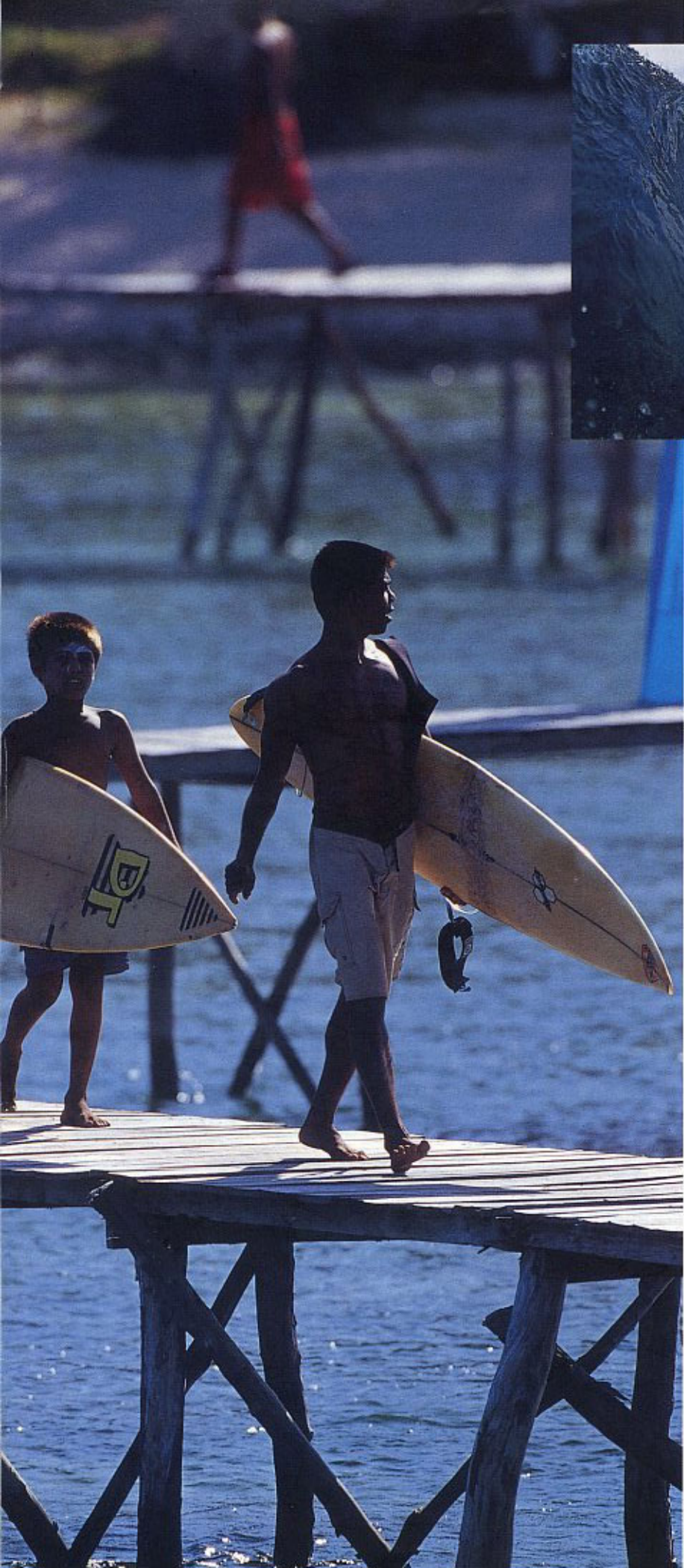
Nearly ten years ago, John Callahan came here with Taylor Knox and Evan Slater to look for surf. The area was all jungle at the time, and they searched for waves for several days, chartering boats from the nearest town, or hiking in through clouds of mosquitoes in ridiculous heat. They scored perfect waves, and at the end of the day, they'd drink warm Coke and eat melted local candy bars called 'Cloud 9'. John labelled the photos of a certain hollow right he found on that trip 'Cloud 9', and they dragged that wave into the limelight of the surfing world. Sometimes called 'Crowd 9' now, the right reef at Tuzon Point is probably the best known Philippine surf spot. But has that been a good thing? Depends on who you ask.

The Aussies and Americans who'd quite understandably rather surf the wave unmolested and uncrowded might tell you it's definitely bad. On the other side of the coin are the Filipino families whose entire lives revolve around surfing. The guy who built our bungalows has six kids. His wife cooks at a restaurant, and the kids all help out if they aren't out in the water themselves. Wages are ridiculously low: skilled carpenters make 250 pesos a day, the equivalent of US\$5. The exchange rate was 50 pesos to the dollar when we were there, but wages were about the same in pesos as they are in dollars back home. That's 50 times less. Without the surfers, they'd be husking coconuts or fishing to survive. Worse yet, they'd have to leave this paradise for the slums of Manila, or leave their families to work overseas like millions of other Filipinos.

It's easy to understand the desire to ride uncrowded waves. There are a few foreigners who'd like to keep the line-up all to themselves, and shut out everyone else, including the local Filipino surfers. These guys are in for a surprise. They might as well find somewhere else to surf, because the locals are starting to take what's theirs, and the days of the foreigner-dominated line-up are numbered.



JOHN CALLAHAN



TOP: JOHNSON

Cloud 9 Boys

Surfing at Cloud 9 has been around long enough now that a whole generation of Filipinos have begun to ride it, and like locals at any break, they ride it very well. Cloud 9 is basically a tube ride, and none of the visiting surfers from throughout the Philippines could come close to the specialised wave knowledge, timing, and guts of the local boys. A frequent sight is Aussie shaper and ripper Stuart Cadden who's long been a strong supporter of the local surfers and many of them were on his boards. Some of the surfers such as Anthony Luebans from La Union in the north, went after long waves to rack up plenty of turns, but it really fell to the Cloud 9 locals to catch the scary, hollow 'bombs' from deeper in the peak.

Four Aussie pros on the WQS circuit, Steve Clements, Drew Courtney, Kurt Nyholm, and Ty Arnold, showed up for the International Division of the contest. There were some worries among their relatives who'd seen more than their share of news coverage that extremists might kidnap them and hold them for ransom. Fortunately, like us, these guys had braved unfounded fears of hijacking and made an incredibly good call, considering the waves we all got. And despite the Philippine Factor; the contest had two competing contest directors, droves of dignitaries, packs of politicians, and a Hawaiian fashion show, the waves were so good that none of that mattered and the contest was a huge success.

Even among a pack of hot Aussies, Steve Clements stood out as an incredibly talented surfer. I was paddling up the shoulder as he came around a section on a powerful overhead wave at speed, pumping for even more speed at the bottom. I was looking up at the lip, as you would, to see what he planned to do with all that speed, when he gave it a last pump, went straight up the face, hit the lip upside down, and snapped a full-speed 360. No sliding, just a sharp 'crack!' as he hit the lip and landed with his board in the trough, ready for the next turn. It's not a move you see often, and you'd be lucky to ever see it done that well.

The Aussies who showed up for the event were far and away the best surfers around, so they basically assumed



Opposite: Not surprisingly the local kids have tuned into the delights first discovered by Callahan and crew. They don't mind a coral-free walk over the reef and since this wave is almost always a barrel, they're as lucky as locals could be.

This: Says it all.



Tor and one of the hot Philippino surfers from Samar compare notes over marine charts. Not long ago these guys were scrounging for every scrap of info they could find. Now they've got substantial knowledge of their own, some of which they're willing to pass on, but not all.

that they would take the first four places at the Siargao Cup without breaking a sweat. But as everyone knows, in a surf contest, 'it ain't necessarily so'. The Aussies were shocked when local boy Fernando Alipayo edged one of them out for fourth place in the final. To their discredit, the Aussies began to cry foul and favouritism. They had a point when they complained that the judging wasn't exactly world class, but regardless of why 'Yok -Yok' (as he's known locally) won, it was the first time a local had ever placed in the international final, and thus a great boost for local surfing. Besides, the prize money will go a hell of a lot further in the Philippines.

Samar's New Locals

Carlos, Jerome, Abdel, and a few of their friends from the island of Samar showed up at a welcome party for the Siargao Cup. Samar is in the central Philippines, a new and virtually unknown surf zone with some incredible waves. In the past years, John and I have done quite a bit of exploring in that part of the Philippines, and the resulting new spots have appeared in the major international surf mags (of course with no directions, maps, or names). In the past two years, locals like these guys from Samar have started surfing some of the remote areas we'd explored.

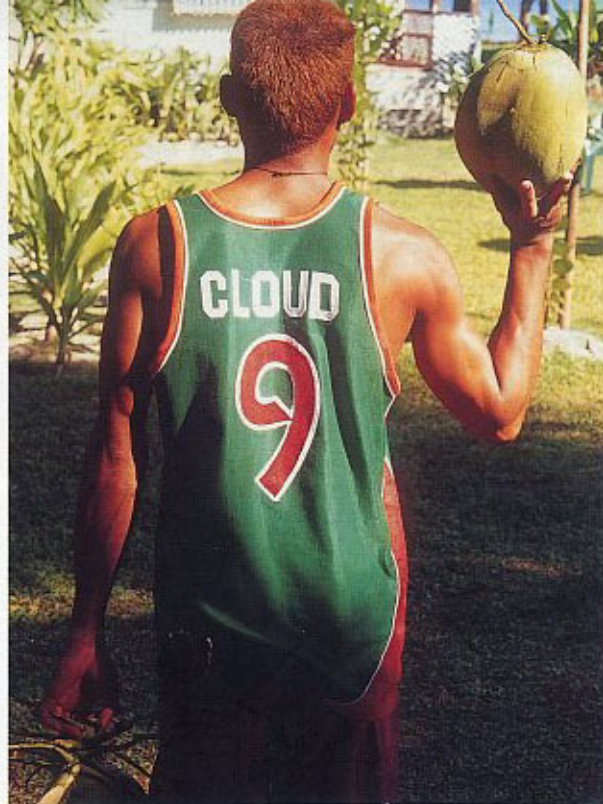
"We used your articles to find waves", they said. "We went to villages and asked fishermen if they had seen a boat full of American surfers."

They also searched for landmarks like rocks or points that they'd seen in the background of the photos. We accused them of using 'counter-intelligence' on us.

"We know all about counter-intelligence" they said a bit darkly. Samar has a reputation as a stronghold of the Communist NPA rebels who for many years resisted Manila's domination, so the allusion wasn't lost on us.

We joked that we couldn't tell them any more about the spots we'd found, because if we gave them all our priceless information, we'd "have to kill them". After a few minutes, though, it became clear that these guys already knew about nearly every wave we'd uncovered anyway. Armed with a few magazines, crucial local knowledge, and only a rough idea of where to go, they had spent days on butt-numbing bus seats, interminable boat rides, and long, sweltering hikes to find these places. They must have been stoked when they finally found some of these world class breaks, "just like in the magazines".

During their search, the Samar boys had even met up with some of the same people as we had years earlier. The worst of these was 'Pirate Pete', a Conrad-esque character who'd set up a queer set of Lord Jim style bungalows on a feeble and rarely rideable wave in Borongan, in central Samar. He didn't like the local surfers, and he'd apparently punched a local kid in the face, saying they were not allowed to surf 'his' spot. This is a foreigner, moving in and taking ownership of a surf



TOR JOHNSON

spot in a country where he is a guest! We heard through the grapevine that Pete was on the run from the law back in California, where, rumour has it, he'd been convicted of and served time for trafficking in child pornography. Philippine society is famously tolerant, but even the legendary hospitality of the Filipinos has limits.

Late that evening the boys finally pulled out some of their own photos. Grainy and distant, their snapshots still showed what appeared to be some excellent right points, and some obviously long hollow lefts.

"Where's that???", I asked, amazed at a shot of what looked like a world class right pointbreak.

"We can tell you", they laughed, "but we'd have to kill you."

Maybe next time we go exploring, we'll be asking the local fishermen if they've seen a boatload of Filipino surfers.



JOHN CALLAHAN