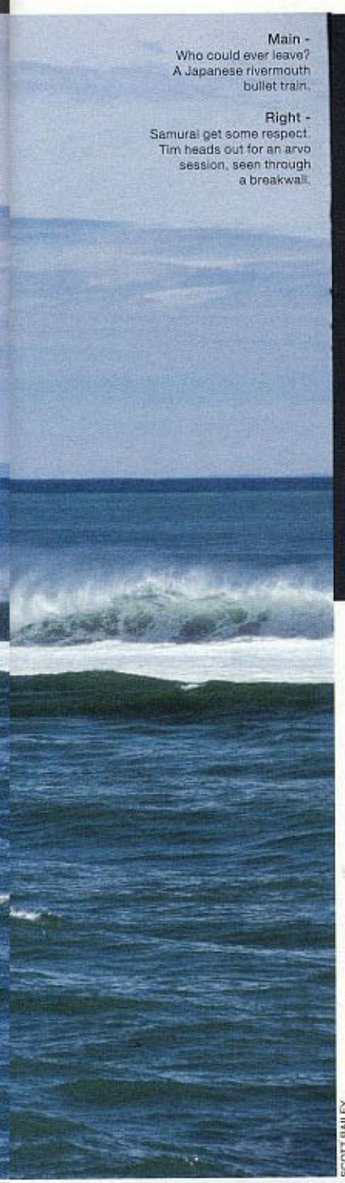

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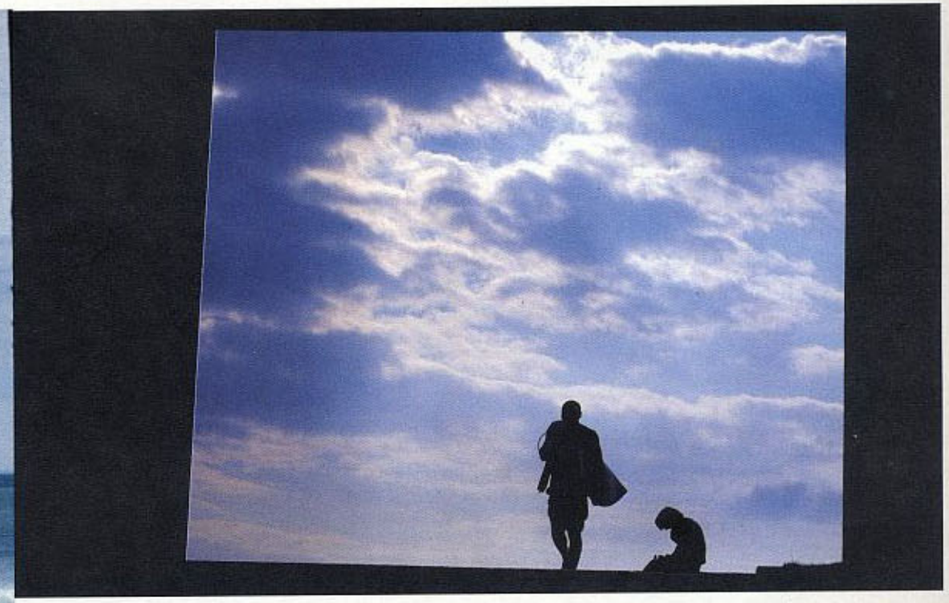
Main -
Who could ever leave? A Japanese rivermouth bullet train.

Right -
Samurai get some respect. Tim heads out for an arvo session, seen through a breakwall.



The Gaijin Local

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A SURF TRIP BECOMES YOUR WHOLE LIFE? WANDERING AUSSIE TIM GILDER BECOMES A NEARLY-NATIVE SON AT ONE OF JAPAN'S SECRET RIVERMOUTHS.

Words and Photos* by Tor Johnson
**unless otherwise indicated*

Twenty years ago, Tim Gilder moved to Japan, and never left.

A quiet Australian from Byron Bay, Tim had a six-month plan to save money for his next surf trip by teaching English. As for the surf, Tim fully expected to be condemned to some form of gutless beachbreak purgatory. Much to his shock, he discovered the sparkling jewel of what may be the best rivermouth surf in the world. Then there was something else about Japan, something in the culture that resonated with him. Japan began to rub off on Tim, and has gradually become such a part of him that now his local friends describe him as "very Japanese". In an insular society like Japan's, that's a compliment rarely bestowed on any 'gaijin' (foreigner).

But Tim says the main reason he's stayed so long is simple:

"Pits! Pits that Kirra, the Superbank and even places like (the Mentawais') Hollow Trees or Jeffreys would be outclassed by when it is on. Empty pits that leave you wondering where everyone got to ... "

Any rivermouth surfer knows the feeling of watching the river flow relentlessly during a strong rain, watching a brand new surf spot created right before their eyes like magic, with a perfect bar lying in wait for the right day, the right swell and wind. What makes Tim's river different is the scale of the place. One of Japan's cleanest, the massive river shoves a bar made of fist-sized pebbles far out to sea. Under the right conditions, the bar gets big enough to handle 10-15ft surf, Hawaiian scale, over a less-than-lethal pebble bank. There's an immense bridge that spans the river at the mouth, which affords a bird's-eye perch. You couldn't get a better surf check if you rented a helicopter. I still remember my first view from that bridge, watching transfixed as 6ft waves thundered along the bar below, completely empty.

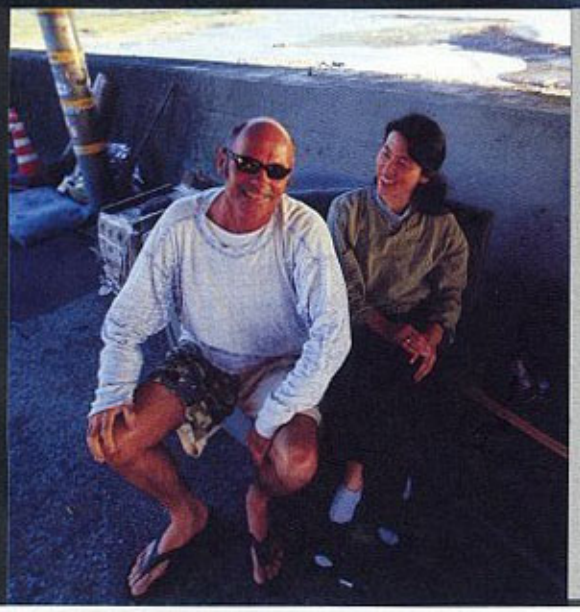
But the truth is that the waves at Tim's rivermouth are not always good. Truth is they are *rarely* good. Since the surf is generated by typhoons, those tight and unpredictable balls of fury, there is a defined season, from August to November. Outside of this season, the surf is generally small, and even during the season, it's unpredictable. That said, when the waves *are* good, they are simply world class. Tim is a master of the classic Aussie understatement, the type of guy who often describes 6ft gaping barrels simply as "good". Yet even Tim admits that the rivermouth outclasses some of the world's best breaks. Three or four tube rides on one wave are not uncommon. The wave has that peculiar aspect of flawless rivermouth surf: it seems to be standing still, frozen like one of those perfect waves you drew in your schoolbooks, yet unwinding across the bar in slow motion.

Above -
The one that got away. What to do when you've just let a perfect green 6ft bomb get past you? Grab the next one.

Below -
Maki only has eyes for Tim. Unless there are waves.

Opposite top to bottom -
Tim and his neighbours. (The infamous outhouse named "Waimea" is behind Tim); Sometimes the lefts are better, sometimes the rights. On this day they are both better; Countryside overview after a rain. Japan has a certain mystical quality.

KAZUYOSHI KONO



"ON A PARTICULARLY LARGE AND STEEP DAY, I PADDLED WITH TIM OVER AN OBVIOUSLY UNMAKEABLE, UGLY DOUBLE-OVERHEAD CLOSE-OUT. AS A JOKE, I YELLED, "GO TIM!!" MUCH TO MY SURPRISE, HE *DID* GO, SUDDENLY SPINNING AND DROPPING OUT OF SIGHT."

When Tim first arrived here, there were only a few local surfers. Now the gaijin is a local: he's in the strange position of having surfed the place longer than most of the locals. Back in the day, Tim was often the only one out, especially on those days when you needed a big board to ride large tubes that would be considered serious even by Hawaiian standards. The locals don't get much practice in big surf, and even now with a sprouting crop of new talent, there is still only a handful of locals who will charge the biggest barrels with Tim. And Tim is not afraid to charge. On a particularly large and steep day, I paddled with Tim over an obviously unmakeable, ugly double-overhead close-out. As

a joke, I yelled, "GO TIM!!" Much to my surprise, he did go, suddenly spinning and dropping out of sight. After a lengthy struggle back out across the bar, he arrived back in position. I must have been staring at him with a perplexed look, because he looked over at me and simply said in his classic understated Aussie drawl, "It had ta be done".

Whatever Tim does, he does with total focus. On any given day, he is the last one out of the water, outlasting several crews of surfers. Recently he's taken up the Japanese fine art of fishing. Of course, being Tim, he's become a bit fanatical. He actually enjoys spending a night driving to some remote harbor, getting on a boat at dawn which deposits him on some godforsaken rock in the Pacific inhabited by four birds. There he will fish all day for a strange and elusive little fish that fights like a samurai, then drive all night to get back in time for work the next day. The local fishermen, who even the Japanese acknowledge as fanatics, always smile and nod at the strange gaijin when he comes down to discuss the finer points of fishing in his peculiar blend of the strong local dialect mixed with an Aussie drawl.

Tim lives in a tiny village, as close as possible to his treasured rivermouth. To say that Tim Gilder lives like a Japanese is an understatement. He lives like a Japanese rice farmer of 50 years ago. Tim is not house-proud. He lives in an old Japanese farmer's home: a weathered wood structure with sliding 'shoji' doors that rattle in the wind and tatami reed mat floors.

I showed up at his house this season, hoping to mooch a few days of rivermouth perfection and a few meters of floor space. While Tim and I were drinking coffee, Tim suddenly asked me to stand up, deftly grabbed a set of chopsticks and snapped up a finger-thick centipede as it slithered across my seat on the floor. He then calmly roasted the creature alive over a gas burner as it writhed in the chopsticks. The smell of its roasting shell was particularly revolting.

Like most houses in the countryside, Tim's house has no sewer. Tim affectionately calls his outhouse "Waimea", for the courage it takes to use it. The outhouse is an experience not for the faint of heart. An overpowering smell reaches far out into the street; it is the denizen of spiders bigger than your hand, with powerful webs that catch you in the face and nearly stop you; clouds of mosquitoes breed in the depths. Tim barely notices. On the contrary, he's genuinely pleased because lately he hasn't been getting what he calls "otsuri" or "change" for his deposits – a nasty splash-back from the depths that wets your backside with an unimaginable mix from below.

Here in Japan's countryside, beachfront real estate is reserved for the dead. Graves line the coastal road, interspersed with the few cafés vying for an occasional tourist yen. The coast is a place considered too dangerous for the living by generations of Japanese threatened by tsunamis and hurricanes. Inland from the graves are the rice fields, followed by the farmers' houses clustered together at the base of the mountains.

In a volcanic land perched on the edge of an active fault-line at the business end of a tectonic plate, the threat of

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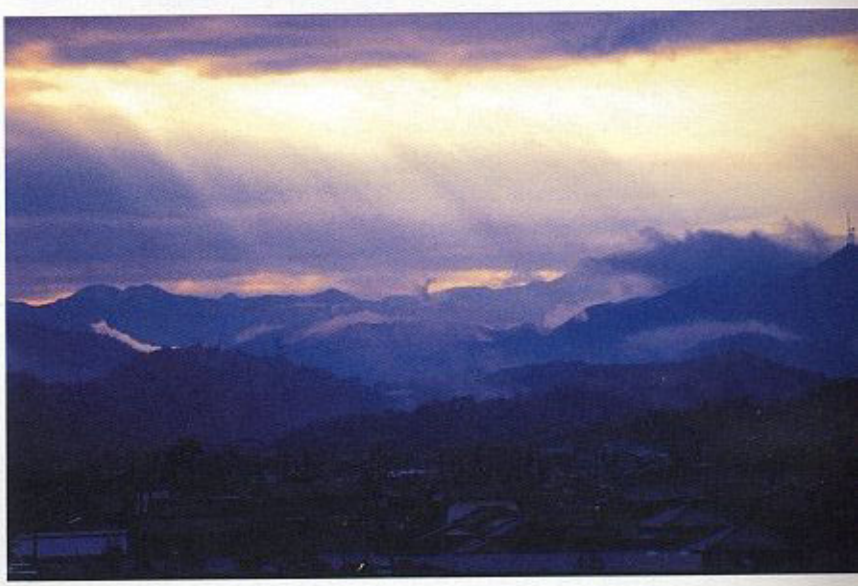


KAZUYOSHI "KAZU" KONO

tsunamis is very real. Gigantic breakwalls line the coast to the extent that a 1995 government survey found that the Japanese have succeeded in encasing an amazing 55% of their coastline in concrete. The concrete construction business is immensely profitable. Politicians are often indicted for trading projects for votes and kickbacks, and in fact are so often found visiting the same hostess bars as construction execs that it's not much of a stretch to say that they really are in bed with each other. Tim has seen surf and fishing sites disappear beneath multi-million dollar concrete harbors constructed to house a total of two fishing boats. As a surfer who loves the ocean, it's one of the saddest things Tim sees in Japan.

Japan's countryside has always carried a stigma of backwardness, and nearly the entire younger generation has moved to the cities, leaving the countryside to old folks who still farm and grow rice. Tim's neighbors are mostly ancient women, stooped to the point where they walk with backs parallel to the ground. Tim's next-door neighbor has no teeth. Somehow she always seems to know when there is swell. Tim and I were loading our boards onto his car on a bright sunny day when she came shuffling out and began tugging at his sleeve and talking earnestly. I speak Japanese well enough to work as a translator, but my skills were no match for her ancient dialect. Tim translated for me.

"She says, 'Don't go in today. There is a typhoon. It's too dangerous.'"

While we surfed, a tropical front rolled in, black and blue, and huge raindrops began bouncing off the surface of the ocean. When we came back, the old woman was waiting for us. She had taken our laundry in.

Maki, Tim's girlfriend, is a slender, beautiful woman with a grown daughter, who spends her time volunteering at a family counseling office, helping families in crisis, a new field in Japan. She is dedicated to yoga, fitness, Tim, and now surfing. When Tim took her surfing she told me she was so excited she felt like she was "going on a first date". She had just begun to stand on her board and angle along the face and was reveling in the feeling of speed and wonder. "It feels like falling in love!" she said.

Other than the cold and waveless winter season, one thing that bothers Tim most is the "twisted concept of localism". Since the waves only get really good a few times a year, some of the locals can be very jealous of those few perfect days. Mostly the locals are only hard on each other, telling beginners to go in, kicking photographers they don't know off the beach, the usual macho local posturing. But Japanese localism is a bit different. The Japanese are a traditionally clannish people. It was only comparatively recently that the country has been unified; throughout most of history Japan was ruled by feuding lords in a web of shifting alliances. They are fiercely loyal, completely honest with their friends, and suspicious of outsiders. In the surfing world, this means that many breaks have a small, demented crew of locals who seem to live in their own small world, and refuse to accept outsiders.

Tim is a respectful person, which is one of the reasons his friends call him "very Japanese". He is acutely aware of the locals, and he always tries to be fair, waiting his turn, or taking the deepest, meanest waves that no one else really wants. He takes time to talk with the locals, making sure he shows respect. The Japanese live in a culture of respect, and the easiest way to anger them is to break the rules and show disrespect. Although Japanese pros are up at the top of the game, the average level of surfing is not high, so it's often important to show some respect to locals who may not be the best surfers

Most locals know Tim, and Tim considers them some of his best friends. These include a universe of characters, people like Teppei. Teppei is one of the mellowest guys in the water, calmly waiting his turn, never speaking much. I asked him what he's been doing for work.

"Security." Was all he said.

"Do you carry a weapon … a club?" I asked.

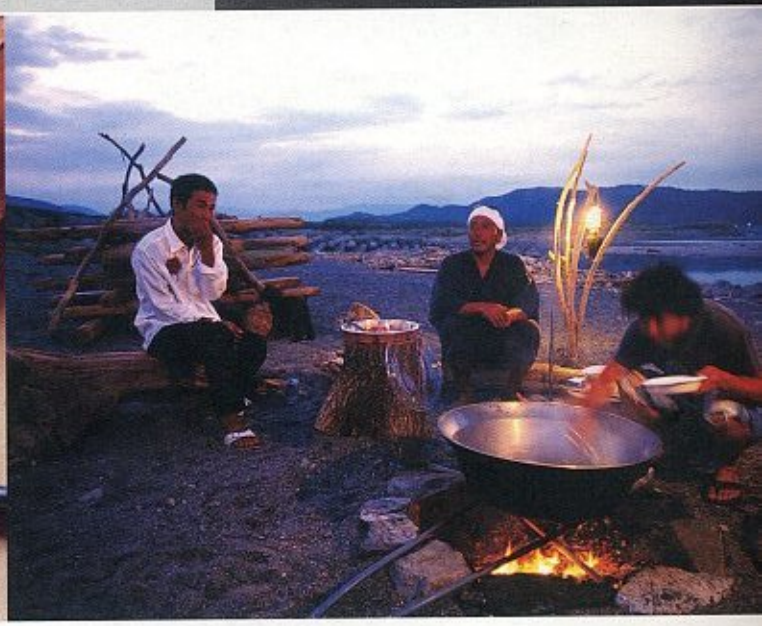
He held up his hands. "Just these," he said.

"Martial arts?" I said.

"Not much, I'm learning Aikido with my kids," he said bashfully.

Above left to right - "Classes have been cancelled today due to sensei Tim Gilder's unexpected illness"; Japanese sometimes look this way when they drink too much. Country festival devil mask; Traditional Japanese wood carving of a dragon; Makoto, Yoko-chan, and Kuroishi: The local boys making world-class sukiyaki on the beach.

Bottom left to right - What Tim would call a "good" bar at the rivermouth. Flowers on Tim's fence.



I learned later that Teppei could actually have nearly anyone in line-up begging for mercy in three seconds.

Despite the friends like these, tension sometimes arises. A longboarder recently snapped at Tim: "You could surf here for a thousand years and never be a local!" Tim calmly replied in Japanese: "And you could surf here a thousand years and still be a kook!" Fortunately they never came to blows. I realized later that in a way, the longboarder was actually acknowledging Tim's long-term status.

Tim and I went into a market in the village to buy some fish, and we emerged to find the street barred with hemp ropes. A young girl ran past us, followed at top speed by men who chased her down, grabbed her by the collar, and brought her back behind the ropes. There followed an elaborate procession in celebration of the changing season. Men wore fearsome masks to frighten away evil spirits, and swung oversized mallets to destroy devils, priests uttered incantations, drummers summoned the gods, men purified the ground with brooms. A group of men carried a golden shrine on their shoulders under which all spectators passed for luck: the young, old, a man in a wheelchair. Then there were beautiful young maidens dressed in white kimono and made up like courtesans, perhaps to symbolize the new purity of the land.

As Tim and I were watching the show, one of the youths in the middle of the procession suddenly turned, looked past me, and began waving with a great smile that seemed to light up the street. He yelled, "Hi Tim *sensei*!!" The spectators all turned to look. Tim gave a small wave. Tim was proud of the guy, who he said was one of his top English students at the prep school where he works. Tim looked happy, the local gaijin surrounded by beaming young Japanese. Tim has plans to retire and move back to Australia soon, but something tells me he'll have a hard time leaving Japan.

Tor Johnson *sailed to Japan with his family at the ripe old age of 17. He learned Japanese and while working as an interpreter in Japan 15 years ago, Tor surprised Tim Gilder by hitchhiking with a surfboard through his part of the sleepy Japanese countryside. The two became good friends between surf sessions. Tor now lives in Hawaii, where he photographs, writes, and works in film production when he's not surfing or sailing the globe in search of water in motion.*

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