

# I ♥ Santa Cruz

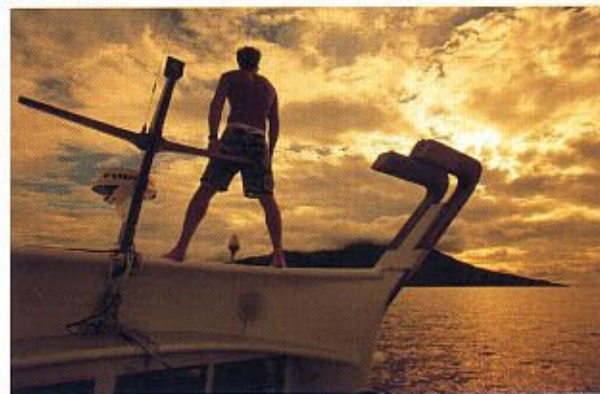
It sounds like some vacant, hackneyed phrase you'd see on a tourists' bumper sticker. You know the ones, with a heart sign instead of the word 'love'. No one could really mean that. Yet for me, it runs a lot deeper. It's like this: I was born in the now defunct Sister's Hospital, right by Steamer Lane, across from where the Dream Inn now stands. Although I've probably spent more of the years since then away travelling than in Santa Cruz, I recently found out I love the place more than I ever realised. It's as though Santa Cruz has become part of me, and I'm unconsciously pulled to the place like a salmon is mysteriously drawn back to the stream where it was born.

Once I had learned how to surf in Santa Cruz, all I wanted to do was get away and explore exotic tropical locations - Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, South America, Africa, anywhere that promised good surf. While on the road I saw typhoons where nature went wild, saw foreign cultures and witnessed strange ceremonies, and surfed waves more perfect than Santa Cruz ever got.

Everything was new and different, and I had no desire to go back home, where the water was cold, the weather was mild, the landscape boringly familiar. On a stopover on one trip to the East, I decided to stay in Hawaii - because of the surf for sure, but also the warm, sweet rotting plumeria smell of the place. I moved there, and now could surf 'real' waves - the litany of holy name-brand spots: Sunset, Laniakea, Backdoor, (Puny's) etc.

Then I went back to Santa Cruz for a visit, and drove down to the Monterey Aquarium, at the southern end of the bay opposite Santa Cruz. The Aquarium is an immensely popular tourist attraction, so I fully expected to be disappointed by some standard, boxed and packaged, glassed-in view of an environment that I had surfed and lived first hand. But this aquarium is different. The Monterey Bay, with Santa Cruz at its northern hook, hides a mile-deep canyon, and the sheer amount and variety of sea life is staggering. Nutrients brought up by upwelling start a vast food chain, at the top of which sea lions and several-ton elephant seals snack on salmon, and are in turn devoured by the 'land-lords', huge Great White sharks.

When you surf Santa Cruz, especially the coast north of town, there's a lot going on in the water. It's not uncommon to see seals, otters, and porpoises, swimming all around you. The place feels wild, and you have to climb down steep vertigo-inducing cliffs to get to some of the heavier, secluded spots. The waves are bigger and more powerful up north, the water is colder, and it's often foggy and ominous, which makes the place feel sharky as well. In fact, shark encounters



are not uncommon, and you sometimes get the uneasy sense that you are part of the food chain. And not at the top of it, either.

The aquarium has a big display on the Great White Shark. I remembered stopping by a friend's house one day and seeing his badly mangled board, with two huge shark teeth embedded in it. The glass was gouged with long, cleanly removed rectangular divots. The teeth were sharp enough to cut perfectly, even diagonally against the lay of the cloth. The swell had been small, so he'd headed out of town, up north to a particularly exposed break. He was sitting on his board, waiting for a set, looking out to sea. Suddenly he felt the motion of his board had been stopped. It was no longer rocking in the swell, but stable, like it was "held in a vice". Things started to go slow motion, and he found himself looking straight into the

eye of a fifteen-foot Great White. "It was the coldest, meanest eye, I'd ever seen. It was primeval, like it was from another world", he'd said. He slipped off the tail, still holding onto his board near the fins, while the shark gripped the middle and nose of his board. For a while, both shark and surfer held the board. The shark gently mouthed the it, as though trying to see if it was food. "Like when you pick up a tomato or something in the store, to see if it's ripe". The shark finally let go and swam off, leaving my friend still holding on to the tail, and in shock. His injuries totalled one small cut on his thumb. But he can't seem to forget that shark's eye, even when he sleeps. He stays away from the north coast, and mostly surfs in town at the Lane now. My friend is fairly religious, and calls what happened to him "a miracle".

There have been a few attacks in Santa Cruz area over the years, mostly north of town. Most victims aren't as lucky as he was, but interestingly, attacks are rarely fatal. For some reason Whites tend to bite once, then release their prey. No one knows if they are investigating to see if it's food, or incapacitating their prey by mauling it so they can come back later and feast.

Whites are smart predators; they're probably covering both angles. But whatever the reason, most Santa Cruz surfers have managed to get help in time

after the shark left them alone. Good reason not to surf on your own.

Sometimes after an attack you'd hear, "why do you guys (read "fools") surf there at all?" I figure it's not a death wish or anything. It's actually the opposite. You get a feeling of being alive, like you're a part of that place at that time. We do it to surf great waves with only our friends, on a truly wild coast. If there's a risk involved in leaving the sanitised, artificial world of strip-malls, so be it. I like to know that we haven't yet managed to control the entire world, that there's still a wild natural order out there somewhere. It is reassuring that there are still real places left in the world, places where you could actually be eaten.

I walked on through the aquarium and caught an incredible slide show, the life work of local nature cameramen perfectly orchestrated to music. It began with aerial shots of the redwood fringed cliff coast,

then descended to water level with feeding pelicans and gulls, then underwater, into the kelp forests where seals and otters cavorted. I remembered one day on the North Coast actually petting a small seal that swam up to the nose of my board, looking at me with huge, curious brown eyes, still too young to be afraid. His fur felt smooth and warm.

My memories of Santa Cruz are inextricably mixed with the ocean. I surfed every day, and I was constantly watching the ocean as it changed its moods, hoping like any surfer for that perfect combination of tide, swell, and wind. There was the anticipation of watching the rivermouth during a winter storm and seeing a crisp new the bar form, knowing you're going to ride a perfect wave right where the chocolate-brown water is dump a sandbar, just for you.

Even my memories of the first girl I ever slept with and the salty sweet wonder of her body, mixes with the memory of the sea. And learning to ride the tube at the harbour, getting trapped in a cave under the jetty, the feeling of coming to the surface, through light, airy foam, realising like a dream, "Hey, I'm still alive". So many feelings, such a powerful place.

Suddenly I felt my mouth begin to go tight at the corners. It was as though all the time I'd been away from Santa Cruz, I'd been missing it deep down, without even knowing it. I realised with disbelief: "I'm going to cry!".

Big, warm salty tears began rolling down my cheeks, and onto my lips, right there in the aquarium. It must be true that we are mostly made of saltwater, because the tears tasted just like seawater. A warm version of the sea in Santa Cruz.

Above and right—Santa Cruz surfers are some of the most travelled breed on the planet. They get everywhere. But at the end of the day, the heart never leaves the home. The author, far away from Surf City's streets, on an Andaman Sea adventure.



The Johnson now lives and works on O'ahu, Hawai'i. He travels extensively, and regularly writes about his adventures for Surfing Magazine, in between bouts of film location work and Japanese translation.