

Seven Days a Week

By Tor Johnson

On Antigua, the city buses are minivans. It's a cultural immersion experience just to ride in one. Our driver had raced several cars, forcing a few off the road, yelled at all of his friends, and shouted obscenities at everyone else by the time we arrived, shaken and stirred, in the capital, St. George.

As we pulled up to the bus station, a lady pushed a red shopping cart full of vegetables for the market that said "Property of Now and Later Market" in front of the minivan.

"Gwan, push daht cyaht alang, woman. Das why it has a handle! Move ya faht ahss, woman!!!" yelled the driver.

To which she quickly replied sarcastically "Yes sah mista bus driva!!!".



In America there would have been a brawl. In Antigua, it was all in a day's fun.

Down the road a local Rastafarian lounged by a small stall with rolling papers and beads.

"I also got some fine sensimilla, mahn," he informed me. I was beginning to enjoy the Caribbean.

Certainly we had earned our trip here. Four of us had sailed a forty-eight foot sloop all the way across the Atlantic from Europe to get here. After a long trip at sea like that, any dry land looks like paradise. Still the Caribbean, with its incredibly diverse islands, is a special place. Nearly every island has its own unique culture, government, and language. In the colonial period, all of the islands belonged to one or another of the major European powers, but now most every island is a sovereign nation. Travelling by sailboat is possibly the best way

to see all these islands, although it's a bit of a hassle to lug all your documents down to customs and immigration in the hot sun every time you cross from one island to another.

Our search on Antigua led through the shanty towns of St. George, and we arrived on the other side to find a beach with water that seemed impossibly blue. Looking far out to sea, we saw two tiny coral islets, one with a lighthouse, the other with a shipwreck. It was too far away to tell for sure, but it looked like there might be a right point breaking around the island.

We got on the internet that afternoon, and found an e mail from Surfer's Path editor Alex Dick-Read, imparting his local knowledge of the Caribbean. Having grown up in Tortola, Alex is an encyclopedia of Caribbean information. He said he'd seen waves breaking on some islands off that coast of Antigua from a plane a few times, and described the very same islands we'd just seen. So we packed up our boat's rubber dinghy in a rentacar, and headed straight back across the island to explore those waves.

We motored slowly out into water such a perfect shade of azure it looked unreal, like driving the dinghy into a postcard. The island with an old lighthouse appeared to have the best waves, so we anchored the boat there for a session. The wave was wedging, quickly bowling over reef boils, shifting fast down the line. If you picked the right one, you'd get a speed wall, with a bowl section on the end. If you rode too far inside there were several ledges of dry coral waiting for you.

Secluded miniature tropical islands with white sand beaches and not a soul around make you miss your girl, and I was in luck because the hottest girl, the most beautiful and intelligent surfer girl ever, Annabel was on her way out from Hawaii to join me on the boat. The minute she arrived, I started exaggerating about how great the waves were, and telling the truth about how beautiful the little islands are, and got her to help pack the dinghy into the car again, drive across Antigua, and motor out to the islands. After a fun session on the rights, we picked our way ashore through the fringing reefs, and began a session of our own, naked on the white sand beach under the hot sun.

Just at that point, I heard the deep throbbing sound of a diesel motor, and looked up to see a wall of white. It was the hull of an immense cruise ship, literally a floating city, one of those beasts with four pools, five discos, a few cabarets, casinos, and several movie theatres. The captain was shaving our island pretty closely, and the rails were lined with white

tourists from Arkansas, gawking at yet another strange attraction. Not naturally exhibitionists, we scampered for the sea grape bushes and hid in shame.

On the way back through town a man came along, pushing a shopping cart full of something covered in plastic, bawling out "Seven days a week!! Seven days a week!!"

I could stand it no more, and I finally asked "What's he selling?"

"Toilet paypah, mahn, toilet paypah.," said a bus driver, as if stating the obvious.

The Caribbean is a place of immense wealth and squalid poverty. People live in shacks in the mud flats while just offshore, multi-million dollar yachts ride at anchor. Some of these boats are so huge that people on deck look like ants. I thought I'd seen it all, but then the "Grand Bleu" pulled into the harbour. This would be the ultimate surf exploration vessel, for the surfer with an unlimited budget. On deck there is a helicopter for scouting and surfing remote areas in a jiffy, a sport fishing boat, several smaller powerboats, and a seventy-two foot sailboat. That's nearly twice the size of our boat. Inside there is an entire room on gimbals, that stays upright no matter how rough the sea, and a glass bottom dance floor, so you can have parties and dance over the fish.

Consulting that oracle of the surf traveller, the internet, I saw a solid groundswell approaching from the northwest, and I knew it was only a matter of getting to the right place when it arrived. Rather than surf the known spots, we gambled on a complete unknown, the Dutch Caribbean island of **Statia**. I'd never heard of anyone surfing there, which only made it all the more interesting because on the charts it looked like it had potential.

We spent that evening anchored in a peaceful bay off the island of Nevis, watching the sun set beneath a nearly perfect volcanic cone mountain. Another cruising boat, the "Scallywag", a nice solid go-anywhere ocean boat, the kind that makes you think of all the places she could take you, swung at anchor nearby.

The swell had picked up to a solid eight to ten foot by the time we approached Statia two days later. On the way in I was greeted by what looked like a barrelling right point, and moved in to get a better look, only to be chased out to sea by a solid eight foot set focusing on the shoals off the outside.

When we anchored in the bay, there was a sailboat being destroyed on the shelf by a four-foot shorepound. Sadly it was the "Scallywag". Her owners, a cruising couple who lived aboard, were standing on shore, watching their boat, their home, be torn to pieces. It was four a.m., and they had been sleeping aboard when a wave broke over their boat, ripping it from the mooring, throwing it on the rocks and snapping the mast in two. They barely managed to get ashore with the help of a local guy who happened to be driving past. Seeing a boat destroyed is a sad sight. It's almost as though they have a soul. It was a home, but more than that, a good boat is a friend that will keep you safe in a storm, take you through adventures, take you anywhere. It was the kind of sad accident that could happen to anyone on a boat and we left a bit more humble.

There were several breaks on the island, some of which obviously got good, but most of which were so deadly



North East Caribbean

shallow that we never went out. The locals all felt that it would be suicide to go in the water in such huge surf, and a few declared that the beaches were all closed. An eight-foot swell is obviously a rare event on Statia.



Opposite - Antigua shop. All the necessities, seven days a week. Left - Yacht 'Scallywag', a sorry victim of a swell enjoyed by many. Below - The day after Tor left Antigua, this happened. Check the small person paddling out.



Some of the best waves in this part of the Caribbean can be found on **Saint Barthelemy** (St. Barth's to locals). Billabong recently shot some footage here for their new video, giving it a fictitious name. The place belongs to the French, but even if you didn't know that, there's no mistaking it once you get there. There's a European-style café culture, towns straight out of the Cote d'Azur, and women in ridiculous sailor suits. On the positive side, the island is

stunningly beautiful, girls go topless, supermarkets stock the best French food, everything a surfing gourmet could ask for, and building is strictly regulated so that there are no monstrous resorts. And the girls are topless.

The local surfers never showed a trace of localism, and the good people at Totem Surf Shop told us to head over to Orient Bay. I rode an excellent right off a reef in the centre of the bay with a white sand beach with crystal clear water, while Annabel rode clean left and right peaks on the side of the bay. St. Barth's doesn't seem to get huge swell, but the trades blow offshore in the protected bays, and there's definitely good quality surf. And the girls are... Ahhhhh... you get the idea.



We didn't see many surfers until we got to **Tortola**, where there's a fairly serious bunch of locals who ride Cane Garden Bay and a few other choice spots. Yet even on Tortola we avoided all crowds by taking our dinghy around the tip of the island and surfing by ourselves. My buddy Tracy and I hitch hiked around the island to check the waves, and a beautiful black girl picked us up. On the way she stopped to pick up her four year old boy, and then took us all the way around the island. Where else in the world these days will a young woman pick up two guys hitch-hiking? Only in the Caribbean.

We moved on and next we surfed a punchy little beachbreak on the small island of **Culebra**, our first stop in the United States Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Culebra is an arid little paradise, with nearly no surfers, the kind of place where localism doesn't exist, and a travelling surfer in a rental car is more likely to be chased after and taken surfing by the locals. The sister island of Vieques is rumoured to have good surf, but is home to the disputed US Navy bombing range. Since a civilian guard was killed by a stray bomb last year, the locals have been taking fishing boats out in commando Greenpeace-style blocking operations against US warships, and activists have been sneaking onto the range and getting arrested during firing exercises.

Most of the island is still off limits, except for a narrow strip of the middle, where everyone lives. It's a peculiar arrangement. Murals saying "Marina Fuera Vieques!" (Navy out of Vieques) showing the "Valiant Fishermen" driving their boats in front of huge destroyers, are plastered like wallpaper all over the beachside bar.

Tracy, a good friend and surfing buddy who is crewing for us, happens to be a bomb disposal expert for the US Navy in Hawaii. Since my father is a WWII Navy veteran, they were bound to have a different slant on things.

"The Navy needs somewhere to practise," Tracy said. "How can you expect them to be ready to protect you if they don't practise?"

My reply was: "they've trashed a beautiful island here. Seems to me we lose more land to our own military than we ever will to enemy invasion."

Tracy got us in to the marina at the US Navy base Roosevelt Roads, on the coast of Puerto Rico, so we could stock up on food at the commissary. He introduced us to the bomb disposal chief on base. On his desk was a rusty cluster of heavy nails welded together in the middle and sharpened on both ends. Apparently the activists have been slingshotting these things at the guards. The chief was mad as hell, and wanted to retaliate. To me it sounded like both sides need to chill out quite a bit.

Closeout Surf Shop in Rincon is the Puerto Rican embassy to the surfing world, and Ramse and Alberto are the ambassadors. Leaving the boat in the care of my father, we drove the hour and a half up to Rincon, on the northwest corner of the **Puerto Rico**. We decided to stop by the shop and ask the boys for some local insight on where the best waves would be. Puerto Rico has incredible, powerful surf in the winter, but it's really slow in summer, so most Puerto Ricans travel a lot, and these guys were no exception. They'd surfed all over the world, and when I told Ramse where I live in Hawaii, he knew the place so well that he said "oh yeah, by the elementary school?"

Having taken boat trips in Indonesia, their dream was to travel the world by boat.

"I'm going to check the surf right now. Follow me", said Alberto, so we fell in with our new red rental car behind the "Bomba Negra" (black bomb), their absolutely trashed, gigantic, rusty black 1980 Thunderbird. They all have newer cars, but they'd all broken down and everyone was too busy surfing to fix them, so they use "La Bomba Negra" as sort of a

communal surf car. If Alberto happens to be surfing when Ramse gets off work, he'll get out of the water, pick up his friend, then they'll both paddle back out.

The surfing community in Rincon is still small enough that everyone seems to know each other. When you arrive at the beach, the custom is to shake hands with everyone there, whether you know them or not. There is a lot of hooting and yelling; the Puerto Ricans are passionate people who have a great love for each other and for life in general.

While we surfed, Alberto headed back to the shop to pick Ramse up for an afternoon surf. By the time they got back, my friend and crew mate Tracy had snapped an FCS fin out of his board. Ramse pulled another exactly matching fin from the back of his car and gave it to Tracy, refusing any money.

"A traveller," Ramse said, "is always prepared."

Tracy generally rides a longboard, and since he didn't want lug his 9'6" on ferries, planes, and buses, he was borrowing my 7'2" gun. As anyone who has tried it knows, it's not easy paddling a shortboard once you've gotten used to a longboard. Although he had his good and bad days, I thought he was ripping on the thing, and I had to give the guy credit for making the transition back to a shortboard. Still, I was forced to fire off an e-mail to my fanatically anti-longboarder room-mate, Tino in Hawaii:

To: Tino Ramirez

From: tor johnson

Comrade Tino,

Comrade Tor reporting as we approach Cuba, from the beaches of Puerto Rico. I am happy to report on the successful re-education of Comrade Tracy. Due to the fact that he left his bourgeois, wave-consuming, shortboard-oppressing longboard behind, he has been using one of my own boards. It was a hard transition for him at first, and he struggled to paddle like the masses, toiling for his daily waves miserably. But he has adjusted to his proper place in society, and happiness shines on his smiling face as he wipes the sweat from his brow and pulls into glorious working man's tubes. He now turns on the shoulders, literally ripping with the proletariat.

Viva Fidel, Viva la revolucion shortboard

Comrade Tor

Consulting the great oracle again, I saw a solid Northeast swell born of a low coming off the US East Coast, projected to arrive right on time for my birthday.

And the oracle spoke true. On April 11th we surfed all day with Ramse and Albert in well overhead Maria's, a shifting, powerful, peaky wave that deals out the beatings fairly hard. Looking at our nautical charts on the boat, I could see why. Underwater, Puerto Rico slopes so steeply off the north coast that thirty miles off, it's nearly a mile deep. Go the same distance again and the Puerto Rico Trench is two miles deep. A savvy surfer once described it to me this way:

"You know how windy it is at the top of a mountain pass? All that power is squeezed as it flows over the top, right? Ocean swells are the same. The power of a swell reaches very deep, and it's concentrated on the first shallow spot."

Looking at places like Hawaii, Puerto Rico or the Basque Country in comparison to places that have a long continental shelf like Southern California, I've begun to see what he meant.

Despite the beatings at Maria's, we were still up for an

evening session at Tres Palmas, Rincon's fabled big wave spot. According to Ramse, there are three sets of three palm trees on the mountain behind the break that the old timers used as line-up markers, so the place should really be called "Nine Palms".

For Ramse, Tres Palmas is an almost a mystical place, a place that has a feel all its own.

"Tres Palmas is completely different from any other surf spot on the island. It breaks far out, and you must paddle through rough water to get there. When you reach the outside, you are in a very different sea with smooth water and you have waves with much power, like Sunset. When you look back at the island, you see very clearly the mountains, all the trees, far away."

Tres Palmas was only beginning to show its true form at six to eight feet, but it is a long, deep-water wave that breaks up to twenty feet, over an incredible distance. Waiting for the next big set in the clear open ocean on my 7'2", I could see what Ramse meant about the place. Somehow looking back at the lush tropical shore from a distance gives you another perspective on things.

This was my birthday, and although there was a party planned for me on the boat, I elected to stay with my new friends so that



I could get up early and surf. Just one more instance of a surfer blowing off all obligations to be in the right place at the right time. Some things never change. In an ideal world, I'll be doing that at sixty.

Since my crew mates had taken our car back to the boat, I was stranded in Rincon. The local boys decided to personally deliver me back to the boat, which by this time had already moved on to the next port of Guanica, over an hour's drive away. We stopped and talked with all of their friends along the way, as usual. There was so much interest in our boat trip that the local boogie-boarding girls came along, and we ended up with two cars full of locals. The road trip became a party on the highway, with everyone laughing and switching cars along the way so they could party with the rest of their friends. Everyone came out to the boat and I had another birthday party under the stars. We drank the champagne I'd neglected the night before, and Ramse toasted "To new friends, and the passion for life!".

Seven days a week, man ●

Opposite top - Unridded Statia temptation.
Opposite bottom - Boat mission - often the best way to find surf in the island chain.
Above - Another good way to find surf in the islands - hook up the friendliest locals around. Puerto Rico posse with the Bomba Negra.