

Return to Rebal

When surfer/writer Tor Johnson won a prestigious award from the Philippine government he was thrilled, if a little worried about what to wear when he went to pick it up. One look at the forecast changed all that. All he'd need was a pair of shorts and some warm-water wax...

Words and photography by Tor Johnson





Mr Villanueva, the manager at the Philippine Airlines counter, informed me that yes, it was true – it now costs US\$125 to bring a surfboard to Manila.

I pointed out the long line of Filipinos, overseas workers returning from the 'land of everything', overloaded with boxes labeled 'Balikbayan (homecoming) Box'. I pointed out that no one was being charged for these gigantic boxes full of clothes, stereos, televisions, and, maybe even smaller family members.

"You know, I'm traveling as a guest of the Dept of Tourism, and Philippine Airlines itself", I said, playing my last card. "Surely you can give me an allowance for the boards?"

Ten minutes later, Mr Villanueva returned with a computer printout.

"Sir, it says here that you are the Philippines' Travel Writer of the Year!"

"Yes", I said, "I'm flying to Manila to receive an award for my article about Philippine surfing in your in-flight magazine. I am to meet the President, Mrs Arroyo"

"That will be \$125 for the surfboard", he said.

There's no way around exorbitant airline surfboard charges these days.

The offer of a trip from the Philippine Department of Tourism had taken me by surprise, but an even better surprise was a

super-typhoon Lupit. At the time it was spinning off the Philippines' Pacific coast with wind speeds in excess of 200mph, and it was headed right through the swell window.

In the last few days I'd been running around town trying to find the right suit to wear to an awards ceremony in Manila, where I was to meet President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. I called a writer friend, who once received the same award.

"They must be hurting for good press, because they're giving me their Foreign Travel Writer of the Year Award", I told him.

"Hey", he replied, "don't worry if your pants and jacket don't match. You know, they'll be giving an award for the Taxi Driver of the Year as well."

The thing is, the president of the Philippines surfs. Last year at an international surf contest at Cloud Nine, President Gloria Arroyo paddled out and actually rode a few waves. She had one of the local rippers give her lessons down the beach at a secluded spot so she wouldn't make a fool of herself, then managed to ride a bit of whitewater on the inside. Meanwhile, her husband paddled around to the outside peak on a bodyboard and got slammed to within an inch of his life on the Backdoor-Pipe-style reefbreak. I was looking forward to hanging with the surfing president and her

Opposite -
Trike ride. This aint no
SUV.

Above -
Angie Hugo, a
Concrete local, turning
a super-typhoon wave
into a moment of
playful beauty

charging "First Gentleman".

At the boarding gate, Mr Villanueva once again approached me, unfolding a piece of paper with a serious look on his face. Sadly, it was not a refund of my board fees; it was an infrared satellite image of nature gone wild – a great vortex of torn, swirling clouds with a perfectly circular clear eye. "Sir," he said gravely, handing me the picture, "I think you had better not go surfing."

Maybe the overcharges would be money well spent.

I tried to get some sleep on the plane, but images of racing clouds, swirling winds and large tubes were all I saw when I closed my eyes. I opened *The Economist* to pass the time and looked for news on the Philippines. It was not encouraging. There was an article about recent violent anti-government street demonstrations near my assigned hotel and one about an air traffic controller who occupied the Manila Airport tower with guns and explosives, detouring all flights. He died when police stormed the tower.

Pretty soon our co-pilot announced that we'd be about an

hour behind schedule, due to a detour around a "storm". This seemed an understatement, since Lupit was actually a super-typhoon, with unbelievable, off-the-chart wind speeds. Realistically, the term "super-typhoon" probably doesn't get much play on airplane intercoms.

At Manila Airport, two surfing friends from past trips to the Philippines – Alex Resurreccion and Olin Duaso – rescued me from the crush of braying taxi drivers and hotel representatives.

Alex and Olin live in Manila; they escorted me all over the town and treated me like a VIP or, even better, a friend. They finally deposited me in a stylish old hotel called the Pensionne Makati, then returned later for the long bus ride across the island. It was Saturday night in Makati, a party town of foreigners, restaurants, internet cafés and nightclubs. At three in the morning the place was full of Manilans out having a good time. There were black-haired beauties gliding into clubs and boys in tight shorts lolling around the entrance of a gay disco, where an older Caucasian man leered smugly from a chair in the middle of them all.

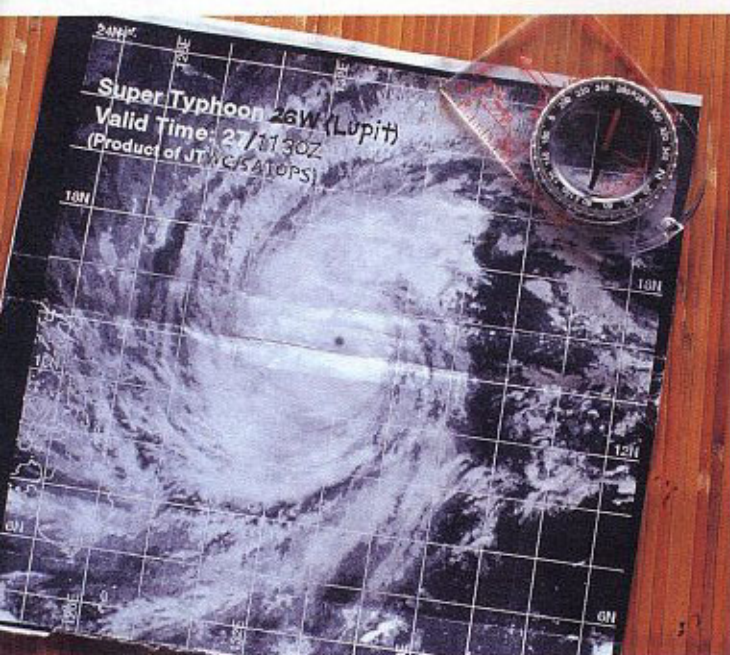
A little round-faced boy of about seven stood around

Below -
The view from the
Shangri-la Hotel,
Manila. Thanks,
Madam President.

Opposite top -
Yeah, baby!

Opposite bottom -
Concrete is a fairly
rare wave but when it
goes, it goes round.







watching us load our boards onto the car, wide awake in the small hours of the morning. Olin, who is a nurse, noticed a plastic bag in the boy's hand and then the kid slowly put the bag to his face and inhaled. The bag was laced with solvents. Olin tried to take the bag from him, but the boy recoiled, his placid face instantly transformed into a mask of possessive rage. The life of a kid on the street is hard; he wasn't giving up the one thing he had.

Alex, who runs a skate and sports magazine in Manila, took the eight-hour bus ride with me across Luzon to Rebal in search of surf. Rebal was one of the first surf discoveries in the Philippines, it featured as the double for Vietnam in Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*. The surfing sequence was filmed at a rivermouth (definitely not the best wave around) and the break is now named Charlie's Point, after the famous scene in which surf-stoked Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duval) orders red-hot California surfer Lance Johnson (Sam Bottoms) to "surf or fight" during a firefight with the North Vietnamese.

Finding Rebal

Around the time Coppola's crew was scouting the location for the filming of *Apocalypse Now*, a kid called Tracy Dixon, the son of the US military attaché to the Philippines, set out with a few of his buddies ("sons of ex-pats, spies and engineers") on a mission to find surf. One of the kids insisted that he'd seen perfect lines wrapping around a point somewhere on the east coast when he flew in from the US. True or not, the rumor was enough to stir the imagination of the whole bunch of groms, none of whom was afraid of a 20-hour bus ride into the uncharted provinces. Plus, Tracy spoke Tagalog fairly well.

This was a turbulent time, and the boys' bus broke down, stranding them in a remote frontier town called Cabanatuan. They were a small band of kids with surfboards and long, bleached blond hair surrounded by the mass of Philippine humanity... or, as Tracy put it, "con men, gamblers, merchants, urchins, prostitutes, communists, soldiers, salesmen and beggars." Eventually the bus was repaired, and the surfers all scrambled back onto the roof, dodging overhanging limbs of overhanging jungle trees and hanging onto the hemp rope ties holding down the luggage, as the bus careened down mountains to the Pacific coast.

They arrived in Rebal late at night, but the concierge at the hotel told them to go away. This was during the time of Ferdinand Marcos, when martial law was in force and there was a strict curfew. The boys were intercepted by a gang of police with automatic weapons, taken to the police station and shown a huge bloodstain that the cops said came from some communists they'd just caught. The boys decided to head straight home as soon as they were released, but when morning came, things looked brighter and safer. They decided to look for surf, and at the end of a long walk through mangroves and over reef they found what Tracy calls "a beautiful, hollow right that shouldered off into deep water, so perfect that we could see through the peak on every wave. There was no wind, and our biggest problem was that it was



Opposite top -
A truckload of Aloha,
Philippine-style.

Opposite bottom -
The author, Tor Johnson,
with some new best
friends.

Top and below -
Two more views of local
stand-out Argie Hugo.
Though not a mass sport
here, the standard of
Philippine surfing has
skyrocketed since the
first US servicemen (and
their sons) started
exploring these shores.





Above - Beyond the mangroves, an empty emerald mountain.

Main - Rebal riverside scene.

so hot that the wax kept melting off our boards while we surfed". This was before tropical-water wax.

After a few more trips to Rebal, the local fishermen out on the point got used to the strange long-haired kids, and one day a woman of the village came down from her thatched hut and invited them in for breakfast. She had everything prepared, with a bowl of hot *champorado* rice porridge mixed with coconut, and a place set for each of the boys. She had obviously been waiting for them a long time. They knew enough to understand what a huge gesture this was for a family living hand to mouth on whatever they could catch from the ocean every day.

After this, Tracy became fast friends with the fishermen, and the boys stayed out at the point with the families, bringing supplies from the market to contribute to their food stock when they came.

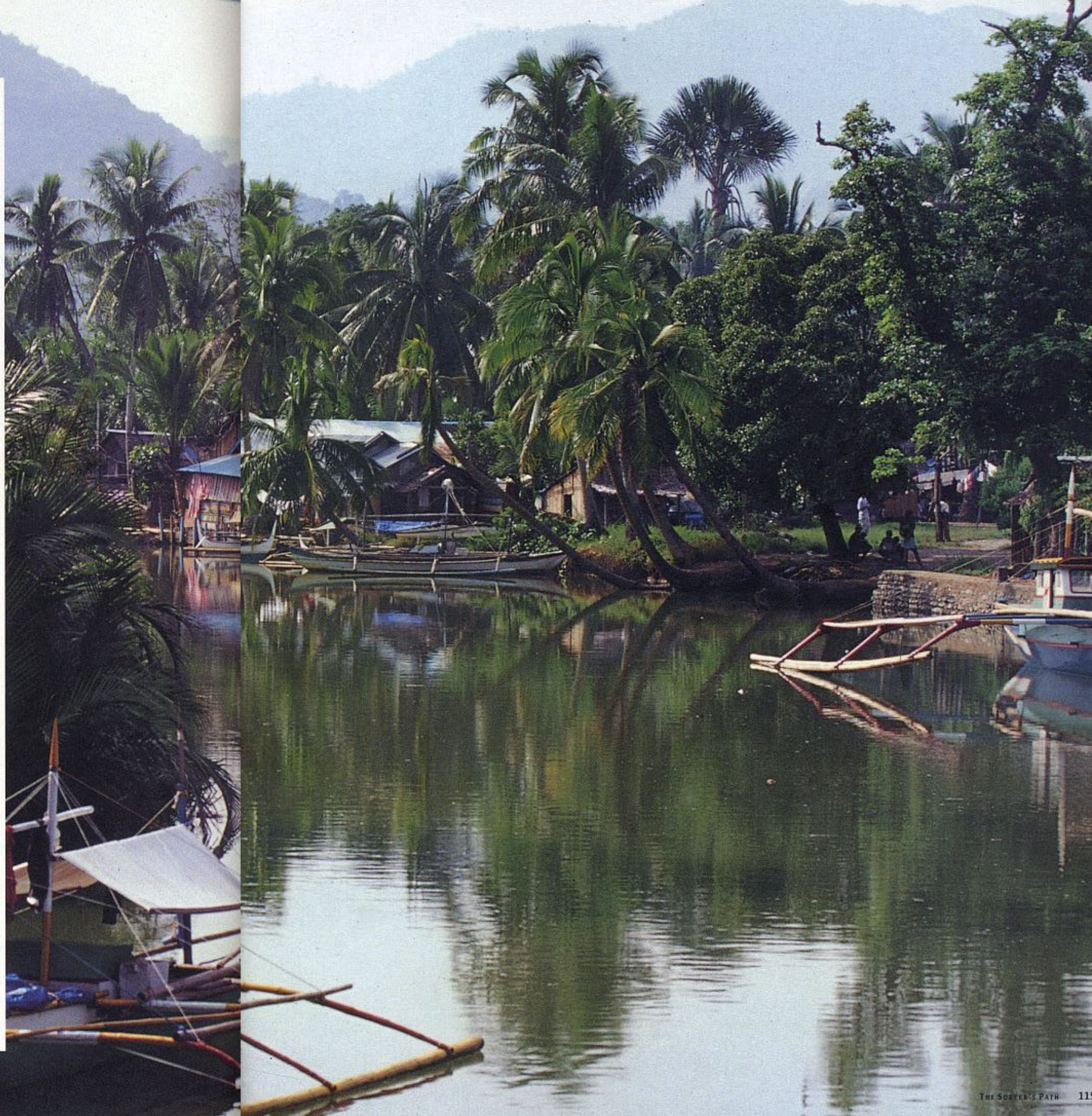
Rebal, Take One

By the time my brother and I arrived in the Philippines on a sailboat with our parents in the mid-1970s, the ex-pat Manila boys had already made several trips out to Rebal. I was just a kid of 14 when my brother and I met Tracy Dixon in Manila.

Tracy was stoked to find some new faces to surf with and absolutely enthralled with our surfboards. Since the guys didn't have enough boards to go around, they had started making their own out of whatever materials they could scrounge. Their favorite was a brownish creation made from refrigerator insulation that they called the "caribou board", after the reliable beasts (actually buffalo) that till fields throughout the Philippines.

Tracy, by now a calloused veteran of many journeys across the mountainous spine of Luzon, took us on a bus ride that was nearly as hellish as *Apocalypse Now* itself.

On that first trip to Rebal, our bus left Manila in the dark and, after a few hours, began swaying perilously around vertical cliffs as it plunged headlong into deep ravines. During one river crossing, the large vehicle actually floated clear of



the bottom and began slipping sideways downstream with the rapid current. The wheels quickly found purchase and we resumed course as a bus rather than a boat. A few hours into the mountain crossing, people began to "lose their balut". I was crouched with one buttock in the aisle, sharing a cramped two-person seat with a rather grave young couple on their way home from church in their Sunday finest. Being young, dumb, and having spent some time at sea on my way to the Philippines, I considered myself above motion sickness. So while people began to spew out of the windows, streaking the outside of the bus with gay colors, much to the amusement of the people in the villages we passed, I fought the "urge to regurge," and I was successful ... until a wizened brown grandma in an seat in front of me leaned slowly over and retched into the aisle. The sound and smell of this spectacle proved too much, and I realized too late that my own lunch wanted out — now! I pawed over my seatmates for the window,

ignorantly placing my hand in the crotch of a mortified young lady in a frilly pink dress, and retched, aiming the projectile out the window. Sadly, the window was closed.

It was a mess, and I, of course, was terribly embarrassed. From the look her husband gave me, he probably soon joined the insurgent New People's Army on a mission to eradicate Americans from the country. Tracy and my brother thought it was the funniest thing they'd ever seen.

After wading across two rivers with our boards in hand, we finally arrived at the fisherman's house, a simple yet beautiful raised structure of palm tree trunks and bamboo. We slept on a floor made of slats of flattened bamboo; it had a spring not unlike a mattress, and the breeze would come up through the cracks and keep the place cool. The fisherman was very gracious, insisting that we eat with his family.

During the night it began to rain hard and steady, and a wet northeast wind foretold an approaching typhoon. Tracy

Below -
Gramps and grom,
fishing.



took us aside and told us that three hungry young surfers would soon eat the family out of house and home, so we had to set off in the storm for the market to buy rice and vegetables. The two rivers we had waded across were now looking risky, but the locals were ready in canoes, and they managed to paddle us diagonally across as we were swept downstream.

The market was under a foot of water as we waded from stall to stall, collecting our supplies in a lake of filthy water. By the time we started back, the locals in their canoes refused to challenge the rivers, so we were stranded in town. The locals all told us to ask the fathers at the Jesuit mission if we could stay the night. We had certain misgivings, being pagan surfer boys unwilling to submit to rigid Jesuit discipline, but considering the option of spending a night outside in a hurricane, we decided we could all stand one night of religion.

The church turned out to be nothing like we'd expected. The mission was manned by an imposing Texan who called

himself "Father Al" and was so happy to see some of his own countrymen that he pulled out a bottle of his best whisky. Despite the fact that I was only 14 and my brother less than three years ahead of me, Father Al proceeded to drink all of us all into a stupor. Between shots, he would grab a fly-swatter and attack the clouds of incessantly annoying flies with a terrible fury.

"Father Al", my brother slurred, "isn't that unchristian of you, killing God's little creatures?"

"I just like to maim 'em and watch 'em die real slow", he drawled, straight-faced.

After a few days the storm finally calmed down, and we were able to get back to the point with bags of rice and vegetables for the family. The waves were steep and hollow, beyond my ability as a beginning grom. My brother and Tracy rode a few, but we all had to sprint for shore when "the landlord" showed up in the shape of a huge shark.

Opposite -
Unknown local guy at
Concreto. It gets
busy here, but the
locals organise
themselves and take
turns. Very Filipino.





Rebal 2004

This year, I boarded the bus to Rebal with trepidation, a plastic bag ready at the top of my camera bag. I found to my delight that the roads were relatively smooth, until we started climbing into the mountains. At a dingy roadside café a man got on the bus with a plastic bucket, yelling about something for sale. It turned out to be peanuts roasted with chunks of garlic and salt. While munching the unexpectedly delicious nuts, I noticed the lettering on the side of the plastic bucket: "Odorless Pest Exterminator". The bus was fairly packed, and luggage space was hard to find, so my boards ended up in the aisle, getting trampled by the locals. An attractive middle-aged woman shifted a basket full of hats out of the way and sat down next to me, prompting a harsh remark from the owner of the basket.

"Did she get mad at you?" I asked in sympathy with her plight.

"No," she replied with a smile, "I am not married".

"Oh," I said

Later, noticing that, like half the people on the bus, she was using the text function on her cell phone, I told her that I'd like to get one of those phones for my next trip.

"Yes," she replied, "you can have my number. And here is my address".

This time, despite my worst fears, I managed to contain the contents of my stomach over the mountains and down into Rebal.

Alex and I arrived to find the entire waterfront awash from the huge, messy surf of Typhoon Lupit. I'd seen satellite pictures, but this was different: tangible proof of the insanely powerful storm raging offshore. Although the center of Lupit was 500 miles away, the typhoon was so wide and strong that the winds almost reached the shore. The reef at Concreto (basically a ledge jutting out into the Pacific) was just a mass of white storm surge, with waves that never actually jacked up and threw out, but surged in and turned to whitewater before breaking.

We killed a few days waiting for the ocean to calm down, watching the sea rage, wandering around town and meeting the local surfers. Rebal now has a solid crew of locals who ride the hollow peak at Concreto extremely well. Most of the guys ride battered boards handed down from visiting surfers. Concreto is a powerful, ledging wave, and there's barely a board among them that hasn't been snapped at least once by the merciless lip.

Sequence -

Noel Mercado, a local boy at Concreto, making it look easy.

Above -

The crew on the rocks.

Opposite top -

Having struggled to find his smartest clothes ever, it was a small disappointment for Tor that the surfing President didn't show. But at least Lupit did. Receiving his award from the Secretary of Tourism.



Filipinos are group-oriented by nature, and the surfers here are no exception. They all surf together. They have frequent contests, and the idea of surfing solo just doesn't occur. When I was there, the locals were sending a delegation to respectfully petition the local congresswoman, Belafior Angara Castillo, for sponsorship to a surf contest. This too was a particularly Filipino thing. In the US, private companies would sponsor their surfers; but here, where much of the money and power is in the hands of the officials, things are more paternalistic... or, in this case, maternalistic.

Two British surfers, Matt and Rob from Croyde, were the lone foreigners around. They'd rented the only house on the beach near Concreto, owned by a local surfer named Raul, who was working in Los Angeles. It was a beautiful structure, built in local style much like the one I'd stayed in 25 years ago; it had split bamboo floors with the same spring to them. The fisherman and his family were gone, but this place had several rooms and a comfortable porch with a view of Concreto. I moved in with the Brits.

After several days, the surf finally calmed to the point where it was just rideable, but still seriously powerful. Concreto is a unique wave. It comes out of deep water and

hits the ledge so quickly that the wave doubles up from the peak and even a six-foot wave starts as a deceptively tiny two-footer until the bottom drops out and the mass of water behind it catches up. At six feet, it packs the power of a ten-foot wave. I paddled a bit late for a set wave that looked about two feet tall but I lifted off the face, landed halfway down, and was sucked back up and over. The wave threw me across the reef with an amazing force, rag dolling me like a pit bull with a baby. I came up for air just in time to be slammed by the rest of the set. I ended up gasping for breath several hundred yards down the reef after the worst beating I'd had all year, including half the Hawaiian winter.

During the next few days the waves dropped to the point where they could be ridden without such serious consequences, and the locals all began ripping. The place is just now beginning to get crowded, in the sense that not everyone gets every wave they want. Since people all tend to surf together, there have been squabbles over waves. The locals seem to have solved this problem in true Filipino style by going surfing separately in two smaller groups rather than one huge group. Still, it's a far cry from the crowds we have in the US, and everyone still gets along fairly well.

The two English lads were so happy to be getting shacks every day with minimal crowds that they decided to treat me to a particular English delicacy called "bubble and squeak". Nothing against English cuisine, but this may explain how they got the pilgrims to leave England and settle in America.

The next morning, still trying to digest my slab of bubble and squeak, I crammed my oversized carcass into a tricycle and caught the bus back to Manila, where I was to meet the president and receive my award.

The Department of Tourism had graciously booked me into the best hotel in town, the plush Makati Shangri-la Hotel. Feeling a bit like a country bumpkin fresh from the provinces, I stumbled into the palatial lobby of the four-star hotel covered in road dust, carrying three boards.

The awards ceremony was dominated by a huge video screen showing images of the planes exploding into the World Trade Center on September 11. Why the Department of Tourism would show such images in a venue intended to promote tourism, I could not understand... until the Secretary of Tourism took to the podium and explained in a thundering oratory, at length and in detail, about standing firm and overcoming terrorism.

Sadly, Mrs Arroyo never showed up, so I never got to talk surfing with her and her charger bodyboarding husband. But that's okay; my suit didn't match anyway. I found myself wishing I was back in Rebal, lulled to sleep on a springy bed of bamboo slats by the bottomless pits of Concreto rumbling like a deep bass in the background.

The author would like to thank Tracy Dixon for his memoirs on discovering surf in the Philippines, the Philippine Department of Tourism for their hospitality, and Olin Duaso and Alex Resurreccion for being good friends.