



Dog eatDog

By Tor Johnson

Do you remember the first wave you ever rode? What it felt like?

I remember floating in a Mexican shorebreak, gripping the nose section of a discarded broken board that had washed up. I remember the wave washing over me, my fear as it seemed to swallow me up in churning foam, relief as I shot out onto smooth water, the old board alive beneath me, the sudden realization as I sped across the surface: 'This is so much FUN!!'

Over the next 35 years I learned a lot about surfing, some of it good, some bad. I learned how to stand up; I learned about different breaks, about boards, fins, wetsuits, about pecking orders in the lineup, and about localism. I've learned a lot of things, but I think I actually knew what surfing is all about on that first ride.

The essence of surfing is the one thing we all have in common, no matter what kind of board or waves we ride, or how we ride them.

A kid on a chunk of foam in the Philippines is after the same thing as Laird at Teahupoo. We all want that same rush, stoke, thrill, joy – whatever you call it. It's what unites all of us as surfers, young or old, ripper or beginner, local or visitor.

How about your first surf trip? Do you remember that feeling, and the people you were with? For me, some of the people I've met are now my best friends, like brothers to me. There's something about sharing the entire experience that seems to unite us.

A recent trip to the Philippines made me think again about what surfing really is, what it can be, and what it should not be.



Lesbos East

As we rounded a steep rocky outcrop with vaguely human features, the captain motioned for us all to take off our hats and to be silent. Then he made the sign of the cross over his chest, opened a pack of cigarettes and threw several into the water, and crossed himself again. "For those who have perished on this crossing", he said solemnly.

Legend has it that there was once a bitter battle for succession on one of these islands. In an attempt to secure the dominance of their family names, most of the men had killed each other. This left an island populated almost entirely by women: sort of a "Lesbos of the East". Some of us were as eager to find this island as we were to find surf.

There were ten of us in two outrigger boats. One boat held a great friend of mine, North Shore character, ripper and shaper Robin Johnston. His Japanese friends, young aspiring surfers Sekita Hidetoshi and Nakamura Shota, shaper/surfer Yusuke Akaba, and legendary cameraman Kamio Mitsuteru crammed in with Robin. The boat I was on held another North Shore charger, my girlfriend Kyoko. Kyoko follows the mantra: "If you hesitate, your worst fears will come true". I have never seen her hesitate, though I'm not sure she fears anything anyway ... Then there was our friend Mike Oida, sort of the expedition leader. Mike and his wife Alma are Filipino-Americans who have just finished construction on an awesome new resort on the

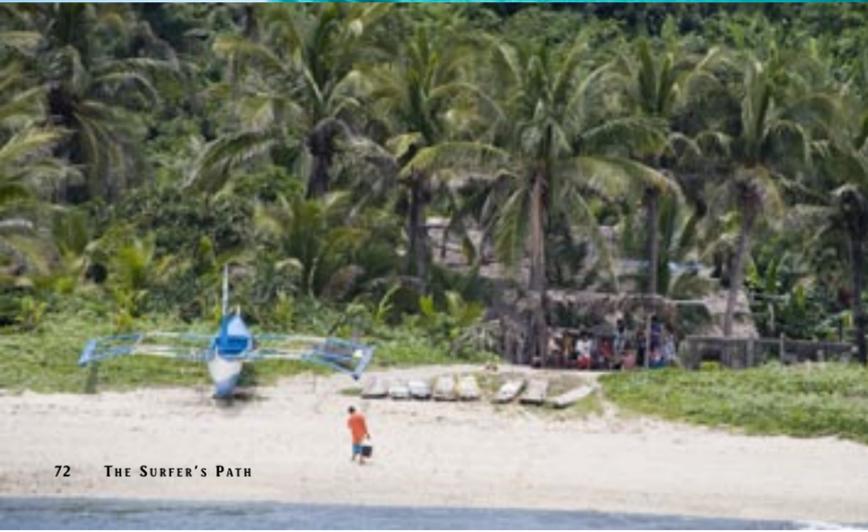
mainland called Kapuluan Vista.

The wind began to increase as soon as we left the shelter of the land, and the crossing was rough and wet, but less hazardous than we'd thought it might be. We were all relieved when we finally pulled up to a perfect calm white sand beach on the other side.

We were met by village officials who offered to show us around the island. The local pastor boarded our boat as guide. He said he'd never heard of this "island of women" that we talked about. As we circled the island looking for surf, we saw a strange black cloud that seemed to be hovering just over the trees of the dense jungle, shifting shape as it moved. It was a cloud of locusts. According to the pastor, the voracious insects had destroyed all the local crops, and left the islanders nearly without food. Such was the seriousness of the situation that he asked us if we knew of any way to combat the creatures. Clearly the islanders were getting desperate.

The only other resources on the islands are the rocks and coral on the beaches, which are sold for decoration in landscaping. Nearly all the men worked on a small neighboring island, all day in the blistering sun, sifting rocks from the beach sand. This left the main island with mostly women, so in a sense, we had found our Isle of Lesbos after all.

As guests of honor in a place that rarely sees an outsider, we were invited to a birthday party and feast that night. Robin





could see that the locals barely had enough to eat, and was just wondering how they could possibly feed ten hungry surfers who just showed up for the party unannounced, when he met a man from the village walking the other way along the beach path. He was carrying a cute and cuddly medium sized dog, nestled in his arms.

Robin was thinking "No. They're not going to...?"

At which point the man grinned with pleasure and shouted: "Eat dog!"

The party was quite a scene. Our hostess seated us at the central table with a perfect view of the men roasting the dog whole, over an open fire. Our crew included several dog owners, so, hoping to head off any dog dishes, I announced to our gracious hosts:

"We're all vegetarians!" But when they produced a steaming plate of delicious noodles and chicken, we all went at it like buccaneers, ruining our "vegetarian" ploy. The Japanese insisted: "We are Japanese. We do not eat dog!"

Meanwhile, the cook flipped the dog by its legs, burning off the hair and roasting the skin. I tried not to look at its face, lips pulled back in a grimace baring its teeth, as we tucked into plates of fried rice. Trays of desert followed. The food was delicious. The men began hacking the dog into pieces

to be fried in a pan. Whether it was the looks on our faces or the declarations we made, or they were just keeping the best for themselves, we never knew, but we were thankfully never offered any dog.

We surfed a left point with a section that doubled up viciously. Robin was using his Pipe approach, plugging as many tubes as possible from as deep as he could on his backside. As always in the Philippines, the water was bath temperature. The only drawback to the wave was its nasty tendency to shut down while you were in the tube, something Robin found out quickly. Robin was hit so fast he never knew exactly how it happened, or even what part of his board did the damage, but suddenly he was sucking air through the side of his face from a gash clear through his cheek.

The hospital was less than encouraging. It was hot and damp, and smelled of old operations. A wooden table with peeling white paint held a steel tray full of instruments soaking in a reddish liquid. A wooden rack held rows of drying disposable latex gloves. Lying on the operating table, Robin grabbed me and whispered, "Make sure they use a new needle!"

The female doctor came right out and looked us all over. She didn't appear overly impressed. Mike began making



introductions. She cut him off. "What happened?" she wanted to know. I liked her immediately. She had Robin sanitized and sewn up like a Gucci bag in no time, without even ruining his career as a male model/actor. The total for the emergency visit, fine stitches, painkillers, and antibiotics came to US\$8.

With Robin out of the water, it was the Japanese boys' turn

to take over the spot. The swell had dropped a little, but that didn't stop them from trading tubes like gophers on ice all day long. They were deliriously happy.

A crowd of local kids came down to watch the show. Some of them have started surfing, and they seemed to be taking notes on every wave. Since surfboards are difficult to come by in this



country, Mike has a surfboard policy at his resort: the local kids are welcome to use any of his boards as long as they help with beach cleanups, and don't drop in on each other or the guests. Mike later showed me a web chat room in which some foreign surfers made a case against Filipinos surfing. I couldn't believe that foreigners would try to keep locals from surfing their own waves, but there it was.

In this chat room, someone named "Malec" from Guam was keen to keep boards out of the hands of the locals. He wrote that we shouldn't give the locals surfboards because:

"... They just won't get it ... it won't really help them, it will not last for them ... They will sell the boards for food if they have the chance ... the sad and crucial fact is, most of these kids face a serious and real wall of survival as soon as they are out of their teens (if not before), and surfing just isn't going to help them find decent work, make a living, etc. In fact, they will have no time for surfing, they will only be haunted by having to give it up".

He went on: "Also, if these kids would be just as pleased, if not more, by flying a kite, why impregnate future line-ups with people who otherwise wouldn't even miss it? ... Give them a comic book or lollipop instead, and they'd never miss it!"

Let them fly a kite?? Give them a lollipop? This is truly twisted logic, and its seduction lies in the part of what Malec says that is true: the locals *do* have a hard life, as we'd seen out in the rural islands. But the sad truth is that Malec, and foreigners like him who buy into his argument, are motivated purely by greed. They are simply trying to keep the waves for themselves. In the end it's the Filipinos themselves, not foreigners, who will decide whether or not to take up surfing.

And it appears they've already made that choice: Locals all over the Philippines are picking up the sport, and their ability level is growing so fast that in some spots, traveling surfers now find themselves at the bottom, rather than the top of the lineup in terms of ability. Eventually Malec and his friends will be relegated to the sidelines, watching the locals rip. Their day is done, and in the end, they will be forced to rely on the generosity and hospitality of the locals to get any waves at all.





Typhoon

The US military's Joint Typhoon Warning Center predicted a low-pressure system just off the Philippine coast that was forecast to weaken and disappear in the next few days. There was a small remnant swell from a typhoon that had tracked away to the north as well, so my girlfriend Kyoko and I decided to travel to a small resort on an island that I won't name, with a hollow right-hander. The wave here was actually the most well-known in the Philippines until Cloud Nine became the name on everyone's lips. This island got a well-deserved reputation for being fickle, with unendurable flat spells. This scared a lot of surfers off. Then Cloud Nine took over the limelight, eventually hosting WQS ranked international surfing events. The island we'd chosen had virtually been forgotten, except by the occasional traveling surfer and a few loyal die-hard Aussies.

The first people we met when we rocked up at the bungalow were Robert and Nev, two of these die-hard Aussies. They were somewhat friendly until they somehow discovered that I write for magazines such as this one, and immediately decided that I represented the evil forces of exploitation and overcrowding.

"We hope you don't get any waves", they told me.

"Hey, hold on", I said. "I've never even named a surf spot in my years of writing, I'm not drawing any maps. If this spot does get crowded, it won't be because of anything I write. I'm a surfer too. Why would I want to bring a lot of people here?"

This seemed to placate them somewhat, and I thought they might eventually see they had nothing to fear from me. It was too much to hope that they might actually read something I'd written and draw their own conclusions.

The next day we were surprised to find the wind steadily increasing from the sea, with a deeply bruised purple sky and heavy black rain-squalls. The ocean began to heave with a huge, lumpy swell. It looked exactly like a typhoon. Apparently even the US military can be wrong (!). Rain found the holes in the thatch roof of our hut, and began dusting our gear with spray. When the thatch began lifting off the roofs of nearby huts, we packed our things and scurried for the safety of the main building, a tall concrete structure on a hillside overlooking the surf. As the wind increased, banana trees toppled all around. Waves began to break into random whitewater all over the surface of the ocean, and from our new vantage point on the hill it looked like the ocean had come to life in one great angry, heaving mass. It was terrible and beautiful.

That night the power lines blew down. We ate



dinner by candlelight in the hallway. Bottles of rum and gin appeared, and people did what they always do in the face of a dangerous natural disaster: they got drunk. While Kyoko and I retired to our wonderfully dry room to watch a movie on our laptop, Robert and Nev proceeded to get completely plastered with a Japanese friend in his upstairs apartment.

During the night the typhoon swept across the island, intensified, and moved on maliciously toward Manila, the capital of the Philippines. Gigantic billboards blew away in the downtown area, trapping people underneath them. Trees snapped and their limbs were hurled through the air. Hundreds of Filipinos perished. It was a sad story, and no less so for being such a common one.

The next morning it was a different world outside. The sun shone on a blue sea with a stiff offshore wind the only reminder of the typhoon's fury. While the locals fatalistically assessed the damage and set about doggedly putting their lives back in order, Kyoko and I got ready for a surf. That's when I realized that my boards had disappeared. I'd left them safely in the concrete building behind a locked door, just outside of the room where Robert was staying ... Reluctant to believe anyone would touch my gear in such a peaceful and safe place, I walked over to the only other resort, a group of bungalows owned by a local family. I struck up a conversation with Aireen Tanael, a local Filipina surfer girl whose family owns the bungalows. In perfect English, with a delightful Aussie accent, she told me,

"I was out looking for things that might have washed up in

the typhoon early this morning, and I found a board bag half covered in sand."

She ran to her shed and produced a sand-encrusted triple board bag. It was mine. There was no sign of the three boards. These were all custom shaped by friends of mine, top North Shore shapers who put their entire hearts into the boards for me.

I knew what had happened: Robert and Nev had gotten drunk, and one or both of them had thrown my boards in the water to be destroyed on the rocky coast. It was obviously an attempt to get me to leave. Aireen told me about how she'd had to ban the Aussies from her resort for abusing and intimidating other guests and for their drunken belligerent attitudes. Everything just added up. But still, I wasn't sure it was really them. There was still a chance that someone had stolen the boards – not likely in the middle of a typhoon, from a place where nothing had ever been stolen before – but still a chance. Robert and Nev had conveniently taken an early morning road trip, to a nearby spot that couldn't possibly have been working, considering the wind conditions. When they returned, they paddled out for a surf. I followed Robert out into the lineup and asked him straight up:

"Look, you guys are Aussies, and Aussies are pretty straightforward, so I expect a straight answer. Did you mess with my boards?"

"I didn't steal your boards" was his reply.

I asked Nev the same question: "What was your part in this?"



He said, “I went to sleep dead blind drunk. I can’t say what my mates did. I gotta stick with my mates”.

I looked Robert in the eye and said, “I figure it was probably someone who wanted me gone”.

He said, “Not me”.

I told him I’d heard about his reputation for intimidating people in the lineup. I knew that he and his friends had pressured many decent traveling surfers into either shortening their stays, or canceling their trips. Several times they’d actually made death threats.

In his defense Robert told me that he was from the “Superbank” in Australia, that the surfers there were all so hot that he could barely get a wave.

“Yeah mate, when I come here, I’m a bit closer to the top of the feeding chain. I might take a wave or two, ya know, when I’m here on me vacation.”

“I see”, I said. “So, what do you think happened to my boards?”

“I figure the local boys are divvying them up right now”, he replied.

“Seems strange, the boards were right outside of your room...” I began.

“Are you accusing me of taking your boards?!” he asked.

“No, what makes you say that? I was just saying, you were right there, so who’d mess with my gear?” I replied.

It wasn’t a great surprise when the *barangay captain*, a local official who happened to be Aireen’s brother, showed up that evening with the news that villagers had found my boards washed up on the neighboring beaches, just downwind of the surf spot. The boards were pretty beat up, but they were all in one piece, and the locals wanted to return them. After negotiating a “finders fee” with the locals, who knew well what the boards were worth, I brought them home. Now two things were clear: This was not a theft, it was an act of intimidation. And the locals were not “divvying them up”, they were returning them like you’d expect honest people might.

While I was at the police station the next day filing a criminal complaint, another Aussie named Peter showed up. Peter is a friend of Robert and Nev’s with a long history in the Philippines. Aireen, the local Filipina surfer had told me about Peter trying to chase her and her friends out of the water at a nearby break, telling her “This isn’t your break, this is my place. Go back home”.

My girlfriend Kyoko got into an argument out in the lineup with Peter when he started making comments about

how “People who don’t live here shouldn’t surf here”. I nearly came to blows with him on the beach when he made some ethnic slurs about her. Now Kyoko was as mad as I was. She’s resourceful, and tough as well.

We decided something had to be done. These were foreigners making their own rules, taking advantage of the hospitality and tolerance of peaceful Filipinos, ruining the place for others who just wanted to surf, and giving the entire place a bad name. So we made petitions to have them declared *persona non grata* in the village, the island, and even the Philippines in general. The surprising thing was that once we’d typed up a petition to Vice Mayor Chito Chi, and the local officials, the entire village came together in support of the effort. Over the years, surfing has grown among the locals, and there are now quite a few local surfers. These three Aussies had long spread the idea that locals shouldn’t be given boards or encouraged to surf, and they’d dominated the lineup for years. They were dead set against local contests where Filipinos from other provinces could come to compete. All of the locals we met demanded to sign the petition. They’d each seen enough of these characters, but Filipinos are habitually patient and tolerant, and especially hospitable to foreigners. Until now it was “live and let live”.

Whether the Mayor, the village officials, the police, or

the Department of Immigration will take action remains to be seen. But at least the locals know that they can stand up for themselves. And Filipinos don’t have to give up their waves to foreigners simply because they’re rich and white. Hopefully we sent a message that no one owns their waves, that they have a right to share the waves with each other and with foreigners who behave properly, and that no one needs to fear self-styled “locals”. And the three Aussies may well be banned from ever surfing the very same waves from which they tried so hard to exclude others. Now that would be justice.

Surfing is still young in the Philippines, and despite some bad examples, the Filipinos don’t seem to have decided to exclude anyone from their spots. Something tells me it’s just not in their nature. As traveling surfers, we foreigners should think about whether we want to introduce surfing as a sport where we try to hoard as many waves as possible for ourselves, or as a sport in which we share the waves as friends. Remember your first wave? You knew what surfing was all about right then. The further we get from that first sensation of riding that first wave, the further we get from the heart of surfing. After all, surfing is still about having fun, isn’t it?