

Aw, Phuket

by Tor Johnson

I

t was a dismal trip at best. Photog John Callahan had invited a bunch of incredibly talented surfers on a return trip to the Andaman Islands, where he had previously discovered a truly incredible right point. There was Darryl "Flea" Virostko, a guy whom I'd seen both pulling ridiculous air in

small surf and charging some of the biggest beasts with equal fluid confidence, and Joel Fitzgerald, whose video of cold and brutal "meaner-than Pipe" Irish pits had elevated him to hero status in my book. The rest of our crew from Santa Cruz, SoCal, and Hawaii were all ready for a fairly aggro surf trip.

Our first objective was the Andamans, but if we succeeded in coercing and bribing the right officials, we planned an unheard of trip down to the officially off-limits, wave-rich area of the Nicobar Islands. Some of the islands along the way were so remote that previous attempts to meet the natives had resulted in attacks with spears. Hopeful anthropologists trying to make contact with an unpolluted indigenous culture had fled into their boat amid a hail of spears, leaving behind their gifts of plastic pails, metal pans, and knives. Returning warily in a week, they found their gifts lying on the beach where they had put them, untouched.

Callahan had photo evidence of an endless right reef point that he said was almost too fast to ride—sort of a tropical Jeffrey's Bay. He had named the spot "Kumari Point," after a certain Indian virgin goddess. Apparently, in the Hindu religion

as practiced in traditional areas of India and Nepal, a young girl is worshipped as the Kumari, a virgin goddess, until she reaches puberty whereupon a new girl is found. Appropriate for a newly-found media darling "secret" spot. I wanted to ride this right point, but more than that, I was overcome with a desire to see how the natives might react to Flea's new leopard-spot hairdo. Would they welcome him as a brother? Spear him as prey? Being



Nicobar Islanders in traditional costume.

Flea, he would show no fear, but either way, I wanted video.

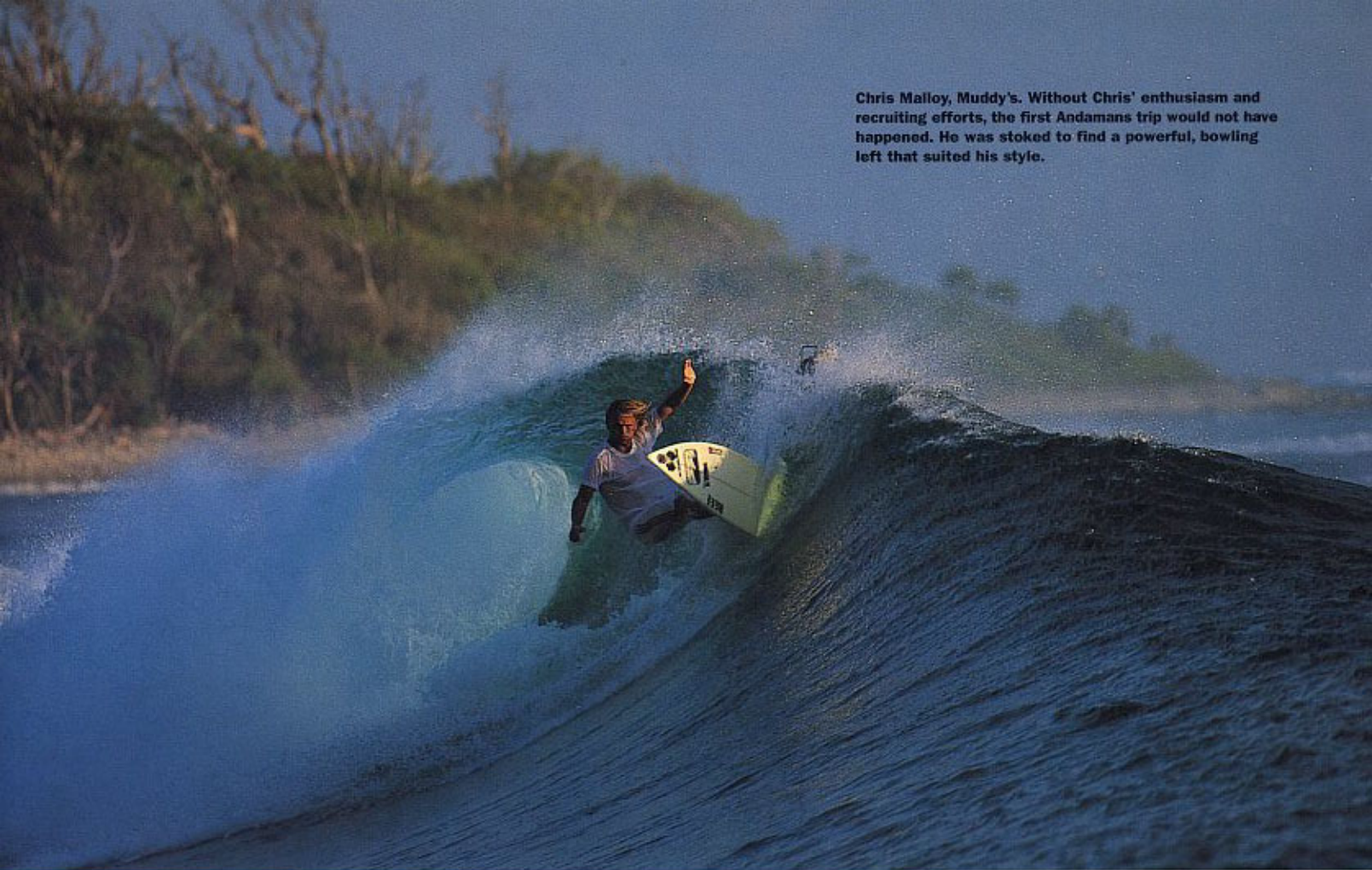
Our base camp for boarding the charter boat was the town of Patong, on the Island of Phuket, in southern Thailand. Phuket is like no other town I have ever seen. The entire place is devoted to the sex and party trade. Huge, fat, slobbering, drunk Germans stumble around, supported by tolerant, slender, and graceful raven-haired Thai girls; sometimes boys, sometimes girls who used to be boys, who have memorized the exchange rates of every currency on the Board of Trade.

Joel Fitz had recently had a religious experience, which prevented him from enjoying the sordid atmosphere of the place, but the Santa Cruz boys had no such problems. They did their town proud and were soon completely plastered on Singha Beer.

Outside our hotel, unexpected and unwelcome wind and rain began to drown out the pumping disco sound from next door. The southwest monsoon, which blows onshore for half the year in Phuket, appeared to have started early this year. On the dimly slow, ancient beasts that pass for charter boats to the Andamans, the trip out to the islands takes three days. With these kind of headwinds, there is an excellent chance of never even getting that far.

John and I trudged down to the Internet cafe on Soi Bangla every morning to get the forecast. On one of our daily forays to see if this early arrival of the southwest monsoon was hopefully a fluke, I stepped on to the street from our hotel and felt a piercing pain in my foot. I looked down to see a long bamboo skewer sticking out at a right angle. I reached down to yank it loose and realized it was one of those mystery-meat-on-a-stick bamboo skewers that they sell on the street, filthy with old meat and coated with mud and who knows what scum from the gutter. I had just put enough germs into my foot to kill me, or vaccinate me for life.

Then we got the weather report: blasting southwest onshores for the foreseeable future. Based on what we knew about the surf conditions in the Andamans, which was more



Chris Malloy, Muddy's. Without Chris' enthusiasm and recruiting efforts, the first Andamans trip would not have happened. He was stoked to find a powerful, bowling left that suited his style.

than anyone, the waves were guaranteed to be blown-out, onshore crap, and the trip out there would be a headwind-bucking nightmare.

Back at the hotel cafe for a somber breakfast, Callahan attempted a jab at humor. A fat, bald, cashed-up European sat next to us chewing his croissant, while his breathtakingly beautiful Thai girlfriend stared vacantly at the wall just above his head, bored senseless. John poked me and said, "Hey, Tor, see that? That's your future, pal. That's you in 10 years, buddy." It was a truly frightening experience, as I could actually see it happening. After nearly a week of Singha Beer, nightclubs, and seedy idleness in Patong Beach, Phuket Province, Thailand, we were degenerating fast and it was time to get out of town.

With continued onshores in the forecast as far as we could get a report, our only chance to get some sort of a surf trip out of this situation and quiet the restless troops, who were very fed up with Patong, was to just head out to sea and hope that at some point the wind might change. So, we decided to battle the headwinds, all the way out to the Andamans. Rousing the boys from their air-con rooms and loading a huge amount of gear took the better part of a day and gave us more exercise than we had had in a week. We got everything on board and put out to sea in the *Crescent*, a battle-weary, motor-sailing dive boat. We came out of the shelter of the harbor into a nasty ocean, six feet of disgusting choppy swell built up from a week of stiff onshore southwest winds.

The boat began to pitch and roll, bucking hard against the waves and dousing everyone with spray, and soon most of the surfers were retching their guts out over the side. Grom Jamie Sterling, a charger from the North Shore of Oahu, disappeared below decks into the forward compartment, not to be seen again. The sea got rougher and rougher as we crawled away from land. Someone was lying in the water rushing around on deck, moaning, "This SUCKS. Uhhhhhhhhhh. I'm gonna die." It was miserable, and then it got worse. It started to rain, a heavy tropical squall that blasted the boat with more water and more gusts of crazy wind.

I wasn't exactly feeling chipper myself, and the sight of soul brother #1 washing around in his own spew was making me queasy. Rather than help him as I should have, I decided to get as far away from him as possible. Fighting to keep my own breakfast, I cautiously groped my way back to the big dive platform that had been bolted onto the stern of the boat. Callahan was back there with Joel Fitz, sitting in a bucket to keep upright and gripping a flashlight to watch the dinghy line jerk the trailing tender back and forth across the wake. The boat lurched up the face of a particularly steep wind-swell wave and the stern went down. The platform hit the water with a resounding crash and went a few feet underwater before being ripped out of the sea again as the bow fell off the crest of the wave. Not only was it unsafe on the platform, with the extremely short swell period, it looked as though the platform



Nicobar chores in elephantiasis-ville.

was being gradually ripped off the boat. Worse yet, the big stainless steel brackets that held the thing on were splitting the hull at the seam, opening the boat like a can opener!

Around midnight, Captain Matt called a conference in the wheelhouse. Everyone who wasn't puking their guts up and

could stand was present. "OK, boys, we're making two knots against this bastard of a headwind," he said in his crisp Cornish accent. "It will take us five days to reach Port Blair at this rate, and every forecast we've seen is calling for more of the same. The monsoon is here, and there's not much we can do about it. Even when we get there and go south to the surf, it's going to be trashed by this onshore. What do you want to do?" We vote to turn back, much to the relief of the surfers. Going back was, if anything, hairier than going forward as the short period, extremely steep and choppy windswell threatened to drive the 50-something foot and overloaded *Crescent* into the trough of a wave before the next wave could lift the stern.

Pulling into Chalong Bay, which is a nice sheltered anchorage in a southwest wind, we were all pretty glad to see dry land and hear the anchor chain rattle as the "pick" dropped into the mud. I think even Joel Fitz had decided that Phuket wasn't such a wicked place after all. The boat stopped rocking, finally. Jamie Sterling popped up from the forward hatch a full 10 hours after we had last seen him, looking fresh and saying, "Hey, what's up? Why'd we turn around?" The Kid was The Man of the moment.

Kumari Point under the influence of a southwest swell and northwest wind. Quite possibly one of the best coral-reef points on the planet.



The boys dispersed right after hitting land. Some of the better sponsored planned to head for Bali as soon as possible for a consolation surf, leaving John and I with the unplanned and unpleasant task of trying to negotiate a refund from the charter company. Having already received payment in full, the woman in charge had a death grip on USD \$20,000 and was about as ready to part with it as a Patong bar girl. She naturally insisted that we had canceled the trip because we were too weak to stomach the headwinds, that the boat was in no danger of sinking, and that they deserved the charter fee for having booked the boat. Standard procedure. The boys were furious. Flea was ready to lead the crew over to their office and start breaking things. It was a good thing he didn't, because the lady's son was a fairly accomplished Muay Thai kick boxer, and would probably have added injury to insult.

In the end, John and I were forced to accept a percentage that had been saved by returning some of the unused food and fuel. We were offered and took a three-day photo cruise to the monsoon protected Phang Nga Bay, but we never did surf on that entire trip, and we all left pretty damn disappointed.

But at least now I know where I'll be in 10 years.