

# Fortune Favors the Bold

BY TOR JOHNSON

Here: Kalle Carranza, looking like he's done this before. Actually, he's one of Mexico's top surfers, so he does this alot.

Opposite left: Robin Johnston "chillando" with some Mexican friends at the beach-front coconut plantation.

Middle: Photog Bob Johnson and crew devour some of the best fish in the world.

Right: The surf tends to blow out in the afternoons, which leaves several good hours for other important tasks.



**Is it a coincidence that the words “Hola” and “Aloha” are written with the very same letters? Probably. Is it a coincidence that “mañana” means the same thing as “Hawaiian time”? Or that Mexicans and Hawaiians seem to have the same sort of welcoming, laid-back style? And what about the “Mexican Pipe”? Does it really break like Pipeline?**

**R**obin Johnston loves to surf Pipe. It was a good season, but the end was near; the flat spells were getting longer, Sunset Beach was beginning to look like a yacht anchorage, and we were faced with the grim specter of long drives into “Town”, only to be frustrated by hoards of hungry longboarders paddling ferociously on boards big enough to catch any swell, breaking or not. Rather than face the dread specter of ‘endless summer’ on Oahu, Robin hatched the idea of heading for a place known for its winter-like power. We’d find out for ourselves whether the comparisons with Hawaii had any truth to them. Robin’s exotic and ultra-fit girlfriend Reena joined us, along with two friends who ride and test the boards Robin shapes, Mike Chun and Jensen Hasset.

Jensen met me at the airport in LA. Jensen is a tall and mellow guy, polite and considerate, even diffident. He’d just come from a World Qualifying Series event in the Maldives where he’d done “fairly well” against the field of hungry pros. He told me his main goal was to get into the Triple Crown, where he could surf against the “best” at his home breaks, a dream for any ambitious young Hawaiian. It wasn’t until much later that I learned that Jensen was only 19 years old.

Checking in for the plane south from LA we suddenly noticed that Spanish became the only language we could hear, and the service had got more loose, but somehow more friendly. Inside the plane there was a sort of family atmosphere, with people standing in the isles chatting and laughing.

We met Mike as we boarded. He’s a young ripper from Wahiawa who only just managed to make the trip after a series of nasty accidents. His family is hugely into fishing, and Mike was raised with a Hawaiian sling spear in hand.

Unfortunately Mike is too good at spear fishing, and he fell victim to a fish poisoning called ciguatera. Ciguatera is a toxin that naturally occurs in algae, which gets ingested by small reef fish. Predatory fish, like the “ulua” (trevalle), that Mike loves to hunt, build up exponentially greater levels of the toxin because they eat so many of the smaller fish. Ciguatera also builds up in humans who eat the reef predators, and it affects our nervous system and in extreme cases, kills people. The symptoms start with itching in the palms and soles of the feet, and progress to a point where the sensations of hot and cold are completely reversed- jumping into cool water feels like a scalding bath. Although the symptoms may subside, the levels of toxin remain in the blood so victims are always at risk from new exposure.

While out spear-fishing, and just as he was coming down with Ciguatera poisoning, Mike was removing a fish from his spear when a moray eel which looked “about as big around as a small dog” (but a lot longer) flashed up from its lair and attacked his wrist. The bite was so deep that it severed his arteries, and Mike nearly bled to death right there. When I met Mike he was rail-thin, weak from the poisoning, but he was stoked on the mission.

Over the years, we’d all heard about this wave. Nicknamed “Mexican Pipe”, it had a dangerous reputation. Most people who’d surfed it talked in hushed, reverent tones about random, board-snapping 10-15ft peaks, and powerful rips. Apparently on big days it wasn’t uncommon for someone to snap their 8’6” gun, get rolled by waves to the point of exhaustion, then after finally getting washed in out of the impact zone, get sucked right back out into it again. Three times. People have broken their necks, been paralyzed, and drowned at this place.

At least it sounded like a suitable antidote to a boring summer in Town.

When I was scanning the papers for recent news about Mexico, I came across a less-than-encouraging article in the Wall Street Journal. Apparently Mexico’s new president, Felipe Calderón, is attempting to quell the drug trade. With American backing, Calderón has imprisoned several of the major drug kingpins, and he’s hunting down more. Unfortunately a turf war has ensued, and rival drug barons have been decapitating victims and impaling their heads on police station gates with mocking notes.

What with deadly surf, and violence onshore, I began to imagine the worst ... but decided to heed the old surfers’ adage: “If you don’t go, you don’t know.”



I planned to catch a ride out in the rip, swim out of it, and back to the kids. Instead, I was swept ... down the beach faster than I thought possible



What with deadly surf, and violence onshore, I began to imagine the worst. Then again, as any traveler knows, the stories and the experience don't always match. I decided to heed the old surfers' adage: "If you don't go, you don't know."

And right from the start, the experience was different from the stories. The Mexicans at the small airport were easy and relaxed, and there was none of the usual hustle for taxis, hotels, and girls.

Our first view of the beach was not encouraging: a dusty dirt road fronted by a few restaurants, mangy dogs lurking all over, a scorching hot black sand beach, and a confused beach break. But it was our good fortune to stay at Paco's Hotel, which is run by an animated gentleman named Paco and his gracious wife. A sad tragedy recently befell Paco's family when

their daughter Lulu's young American fiancé drowned in one of the powerful rips, just days before their marriage. Paco's family are still fast friends with her fiancé's parents, and Lulu has become like their own daughter, often visiting them in the US.

Paco had the good sense to hire a family of energetic young girls to help run the place. The girls are all gorgeous. Juani, Mari, Candy, and Ufé are Christian, like most Mexicans. They are polite, hospitable, and sweet. They are what you might call "good girls": despite the concerted efforts of many local and visiting surfers, the girls just aren't 'available'.

Right away they adopted Robin's girlfriend Reena and invited us to their family home for a Fathers' Day feast of traditional pozole. At their mother's urging the girls fed us bowls of this pre-Columbian native soup made of corn and various unidentifiable and fatty parts of a pig. It was delicious, but so rich that Robin, Reena, and I were all pushing our chairs away from the table after two bowls while the girls tried to re-fill our bowls.

Then they took us into town to see the parade. Garish floats depicted a capsule of Mexico's history, complete with natives living in sin, superstition, and perdition, followed by the Spanish conquistadores, who brought a beaming Jesus to save them (in reality they also brought slaughter and disease), then floats showing scenes from the bible elaborately depicted by motionless parishioners in biblical robes, broiling in the sun. It was a tidy and simple day-glo history lesson. A completely surreal start.

Our first session at the beachbreak was intimidating. It was shockingly powerful. I didn't realize I was slow on my take-off until I went over the falls several times. I seemed unable to judge things right. The wave would hesitate, then hit a shallow sand ledge and simply go *round*. Finally I caught a double-overhead wave, already throwing out in a big peak. I paddled hard on the shoulder to make the drop. I was halfway down the face, congratulating myself on making the drop, when the wave hollowed out underneath me and I was flung in wild arcs by the white water. I was promptly pulled right back out through the lineup in the grip of a relentless rip. It's a humbling place. I saw Robin ride a few nice tubes while I was gasping for air on the inside.

Getting caught inside is simply a fact of life here. I'd been out for hours chasing peaks when I got caught inside again. I casually swam under a wave, but I didn't quite go deep enough to make it through the back. The energy of the wave easily picked me up and threw me over the falls head first, straight into the sand like a pile driver. I heard my neck crack. Despite the pain, everything still worked, so I swam in. I knew I was lucky to escape with just a sore neck

Opposite top: Two wildly contrasting approaches to a Mexican beach holiday. Where would you rather be?

Opposite bottom: Another makeable mountain, snagged in the corner.

This page clockwise: Paco's Hotel, the cleanest and friendliest place in the country (also the only place we stayed).

Local kids dressed as Spanish Conquistadores, bringing enlightenment to the savages. Or are they pro wrestlers...?

Demons being chased away by a glittering gold Jesus

The Arroyo family, who run Paco's place with grace and style.



and a warning not to get lazy with a wave like this one.

Swimming around with a water camera in these conditions was also extremely challenging; I had to work hard for every image I got.

But I'd begun to feel quite confident after a few days of swimming through powerful rips in large surf, and when I saw a group of seven young kids playing in the shorebreak, right next to a huge rip tide, I thought I'd pass on a bit of wisdom.

"Hola niños," I began. "We speak English." They replied as though it were obvious.

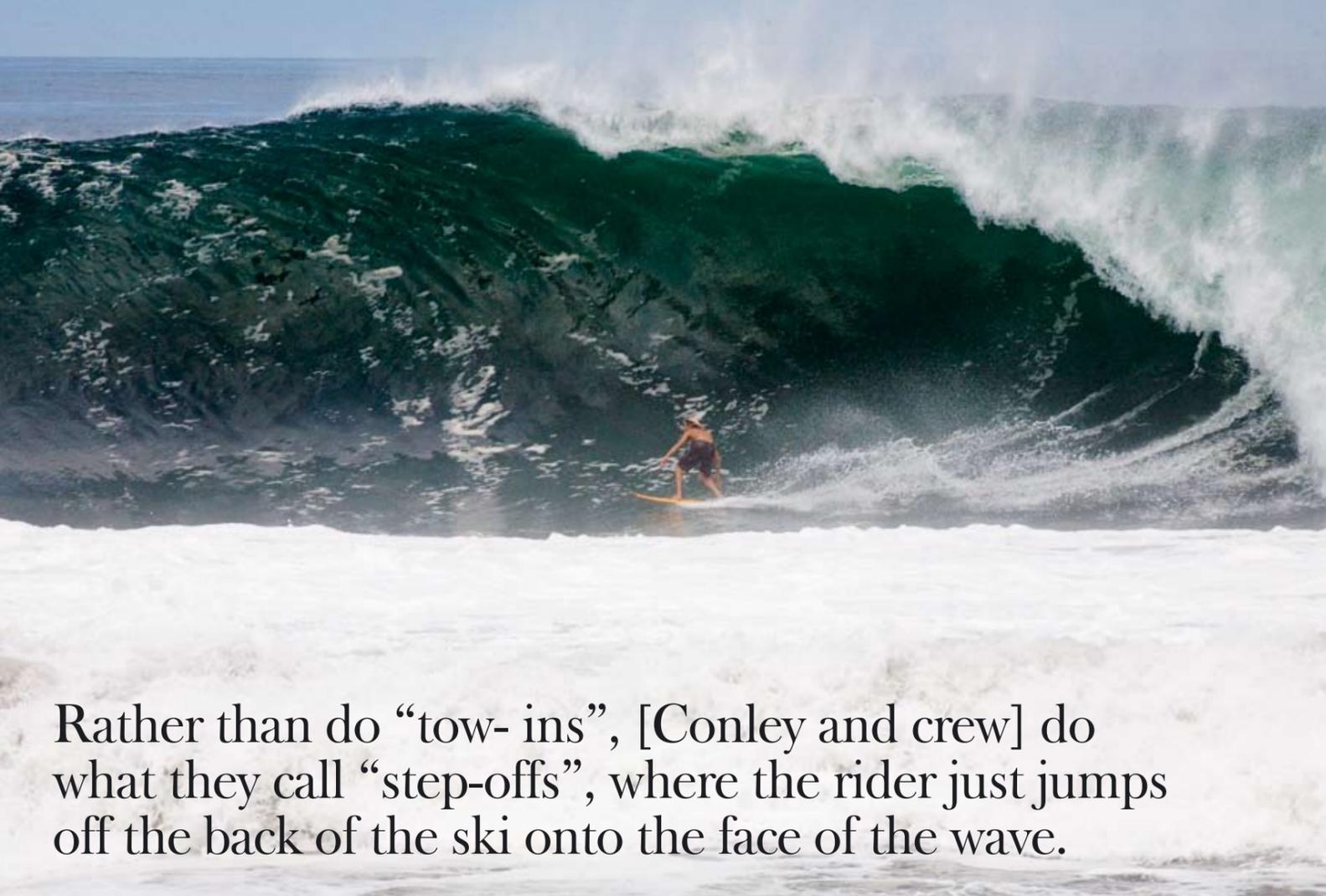
"We're from LA. And these are our cousins. They live here."

"You see this current here?"

"No," they replied.

"Well. It's called a rip tide. Tell you what. I'm going to jump in the water right here, and you just watch what happens to me, OK?"

I planned to catch a ride out in the rip, swim



## Rather than do “tow- ins”, [Conley and crew] do what they call “step-offs”, where the rider just jumps off the back of the ski onto the face of the wave.

out of it, and back to the kids. Instead, I was swept out and down the beach faster than I thought possible, and even once I got outside I was still being carried down the beach faster than I could swim. I bodysurfed a wave, which promptly rolled me, rolled me again, then thrashed me into the sand. I finally got out of the water far down the beach and trudged back to the kids. They'd lost sight of me.

“Are you OK?” they wanted to know.

I had rehearsed a lesson about how to swim out of a rip, but I threw it away.

“I’m tired!” was all I said. Hopefully at least they saw the rip.

There were rumors that Andy Irons and his entourage were showing up within the week. We were all looking forward to seeing what the champ would do with these challenging waves, most of which were so fast and hollow that no one around could make them. At the same time, we were reluctant to give up some of the best waves to AI and his posse. But the surf was forecast to drop to only head high to double overhead, so Andy must have cancelled his trip.

Instead of Andy, a crew of Latin America’s best surfers showed up for the filming of a movie called *Amigos*. The format was to get the best surfers from South and Central America – Panama, Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela, and of course Mexico, together all in one place for some expression sessions. They turned out to be extremely talented riders and great to watch. Mexican surfer Kalle Caranza in particular seemed at home in the deep tubes.

Then the swell picked up. It was 10ft Hawaiian scale, and quite serious. A crew of



Opposite: Brian Conley taking the bull by the horns (with a little help from Honda). The sequence is below.

This page clockwise: If you can’t beat ‘em... This local gringo was vehemently against jet skis- until he got towed into a few good barrels.

The busiest business in town. Ding repair around here means board repair.

This board may be deep in another beachbreak pit by tomorrow morning.



guys appeared with PWCs and small boards. Brian Conley had already made a movie (*My Eyes Won't Dry*) about surfing remote Mexico, so he and his crew had the drill down to a routine. They used PWCs in the big stuff, but rather than do “tow- ins”, they do what they call “step-offs”, where the rider just jumps off the back of the ski onto the face of the wave. They feel that the technique keeps everything tighter and works better for a hollow beach break where the impact zone is so close to the take-off.

Brian, and his friends Todd, Sean, Greg, and Hopper absolutely owned the break when it got big. With no channels, completely unpredictable random peaks, and large, gaping tubes, we could all see that while paddle surfing was just a roll of the dice, the PWCs could pick the best waves from the entire stretch of beach. The crew got so many big, deep tubes it was almost ridiculous. Finally a few paddle surfers made it out, but with the notable exception of one Californian charger who got an incredible barrel by paddling into it, the motorized crew got everything, and rode it incredibly well.

Our own Jensen Hasett managed to paddle out and was playing a long waiting game with the biggest peaks, watching the ski crews zip all around him taking five waves to his one. Finally a wave came to him, but someone stepped off a ski and grabbed it first. Jensen simply dropped in on him. The PWC driver later cruised by Jensen. “What, Jensen?” was all he had to say.

When he came in, Jensen said, “I hope those guys aren't too bummed at me ...” It's just the kind of guy Jensen is. He stood up for himself, but he had no malice about it at all. Robin was fairly upset and went to talk with the guys, one of whom said with some attitude, “This is what we do here.”

But the power-assist crews were generous with rides, and few refused one when looking at a nearly impossible swim across the impact zone. With big, random, merciless peaks, and no channels, it's certainly an ideal place for power-assisted surfing. On the other hand, if a 19 year-old is man enough to challenge it with his own two hands, he obviously deserves any wave he can catch.





**Above:** Magnum Martinez of Venezuela doing the most important thing to do here: getting down the face quickly.

**Left:** Morning swell check, with untamed left.

**Main:** A visiting surfer with the appropriate name, Orion Barels, grabbed the best bomb on this day



“That guy is a legend for me. That’s something I respect: he challenged it with his own two hands. No jet-ski.”

Kalle Caranza told us about an amazing wave he’d seen there: “It was huge – maybe 15ft – so big that nobody even was thinking of riding it. Then this guy paddled over from the river, the only place you could even get out. His name was Will ... we all just called him Crazy Will ... Anyway, when he got into position, this monster of a peak came straight at him. I thought he was going to get caught inside, and we were all just hoping he’d make it over the top, and then he just spins around and starts paddling! No way I’d have even thought of that. I’d just be praying to make it over. This guy basically falls down the face with his board, and

somehow pulls it together at the bottom. He made the drop!”

“Then what happened?” I asked.  
 “Oh, the lip landed right on his tail and he got exploded off his board. But he made the drop! That guy is a legend for me. That’s something I respect: he challenged it with his own two hands. No jet-ski.”

Our crew went to see a rodeo the next day. We were all frisked for *pistolas* on the way in. We bought beer with limes and salt, while a kid with shiny hair and cowboy boots tried to sell us some “strong *mota*”. A taco stand advertised

lips, tongue, eyeballs, and brains. A professional beggar made the rounds of the stadium with perfect sincerity and a pitiful limp. A band with lots of drums and horns, amplified to complete distortion, blared songs of love and loss from the bleachers.

Then a frantic bull was let in through a narrow alleyway made of steel pipes. He rushed through so fast that he rammed a steel bar, momentarily knocking himself to the ground in the tight holding pen. Kids straddling the pen tried to get me to ride the thing, gesturing with one hand up like a cowboy.

I suggested they ride it themselves.

**Right:** Jensen Hassett a bit of a hero, on a rare small day

**Far right:** New Zealander James was relaxed and perfectly smooth on some very intense waves



Then a thin teenager with a very serious look climbed into the pen and straddled the bull. The gates were opened by a macho with a chiseled face. The bull roared from the pen, throwing the kid to the ground and trampling him in the abdomen with its hoof. Men rushed to distract the bull. There was silence from the crowd as older cowboys half-carried the kid off the field. As they passed close by me, I saw the boy's grimace of pain, and the unwanted tears welling in his eyes. Several more bulls were ridden, with varying success. Then another angry bull was fixed in the holding pen and who should appear but the same kid who'd just been injured. The crowd was silent. The band struck up a rousing tune, and the bull came out bucking. The kid rode his bull until it finally stopped kicking, exhausted. There was wild applause, as the boy stepped off his mount and walked out of the ring, looking a lot less like a kid. The Latinos seem to have a thing about valor.

Looking back on the trip, I realize that it was all about courage. It took some courage to come here in the first place – if we'd listened to the horror stories, we'd never have had the chance to meet the family at Paco's, and never had the chance to experience one of the meanest beachbreaks in the world. It took courage for Mike Chun just to paddle out, still recovering from poisoning. It took courage for Jensen to stand up for his right to charge on the big day. And to give them their due, it took courage for the PWC crews to go as deep as they did. None of the best waves were hidden without someone taking on the risk.

I learned that underestimating the risks can be dangerous, even fatal, but then I wonder: doesn't anything worthwhile involve risk? All of life's paths throw up challenges and the true rewards go to those who meet them with courage. Fortune favors the bold.

*Tor Johnson lives and works in Wailua, Hawaii. When he's not translating Japanese or traveling the world on surf, sailing, writing and photographing adventures, he can often be seen sneaking peaks at many of the North Shore's best breaks.*



Above left: "Los Machos" at the rodeo. Something told me to ask very politely if I could take their picture. Middle: Everyone must face their own bull. Right: A great band to ride a bull by. They have cool shirts and hats, too.



**Main:** Robin Johnson tames another beachbreak bull and rides it out with style.

**Left:** One of the Mexico's great surfers, Diego Cadena, on his own chunk of blue Pacific.

**Bottom left:** Robin Johnson replaying a few scenes in his mind after a big, clean day.



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