

One of those magic moments on Ireland's west coast - especially if you're a pair of hungry Hawaiians on holiday, like Tor and Yoshi. Question is, how big is 'big' over here?



# Cut down to size

by Tor Johnson

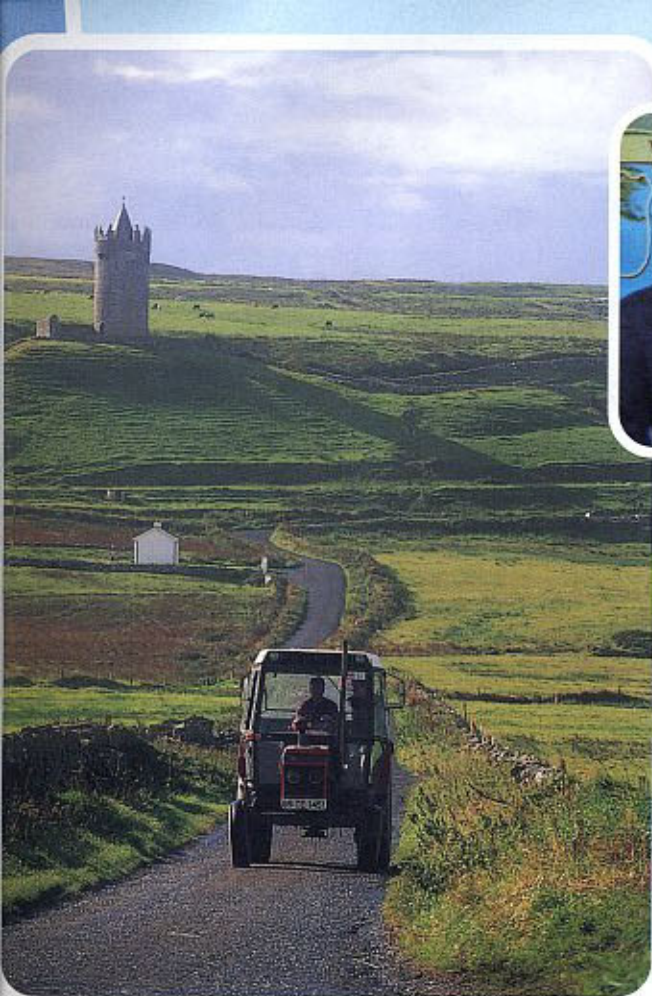
We paddled over the first wave lifting clear off our boards as it passed under us, spray from the offshore wind blowing twenty feet in the air.

You could feel a raw power to the new swell in the cold Irish Atlantic. We were a long way off shore, and it was a lot bigger than we'd thought.

ALL PHOTOS BY TOR JOHNSON  
UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED







MIKE NEWMAN

A huge depression, an ex-hurricane, had stalled mid-Atlantic sending real juice to the emerald isle's shores. Only the crazy travellers wanted a piece of it. The locals just watched, and enjoyed the craic.

Watching from the safety of the point, we'd tried to decide which boards to ride

What appeared to be perfect six foot barrels were peaking off the island and bowling straight across the channel. A massive and long-awaited depression had stalled off the coast not more than a few hundred miles away. These were the waves we'd come to Ireland for.

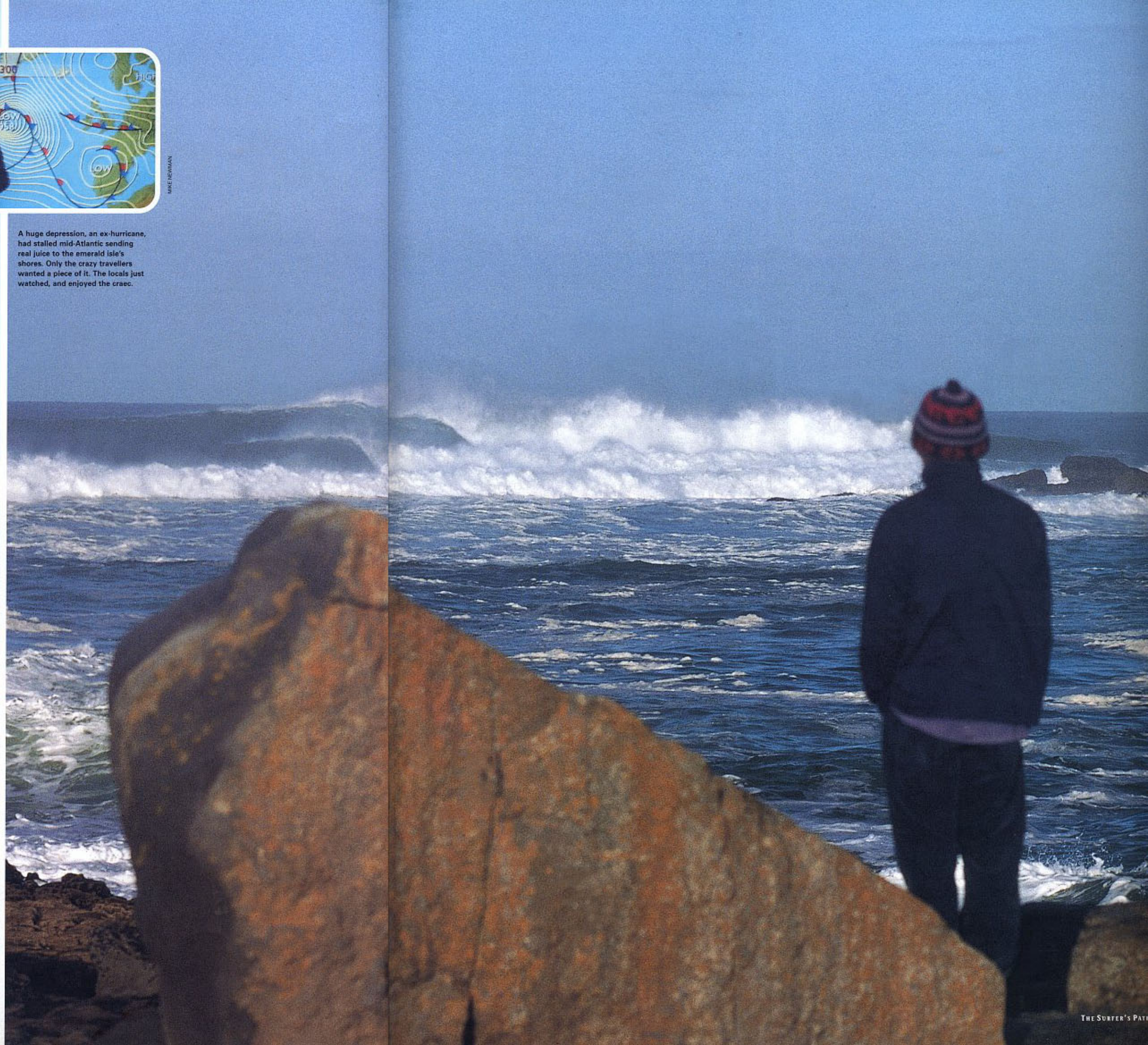
I'd lured my roommate Yoshi out to the British Isles with tales of a boat trip down the Atlantic Coast, looking for surf. But by the time he'd finally quit his job in Hawaii and made it out to join us on our boat in Plymouth, it was too late in the season to sail out into the Atlantic. The good thing about a roommate like Yoshi is that you just can't get him mad. As long as he's got beer, a few good friends, maybe a wave or two, he's alright. He didn't snap. He just sadly helped us put the boat up for winter, watching his hopes of a surf cruise dwindle away. A Japanese who has basically become a Hawaiian local, Yoshi is a man of few, yet insightful words.

"Beea, beea, beea" (Beer beer beer), he said. We'd plodded over to the pub to taste the whole line-up on offer. That's when we decided to buy a car and drive to Ireland.

The waves off the island were hollow, and it looked like a good fifteen minute paddle offshore, but with so much spray it was hard to judge the size and distances involved.

"Looks about 6 feet, huh Yoshi?", I said, trying to sound casual.

Yoshi looked at me a bit nervously, then looked back at the ocean. An impressive blue eight foot set reeled across, throwing a tall white mane of spray.







"Maybe we should ride the seven-sixes?", Yoshi said, sort of hopping from one foot to the other. He didn't look cold. We'd camped at the foot of the 16th Century castle at Easky in the pelting rain of the last storms as they mowed across Ireland one after another. Huddled under our tarp, we guarded our little instant barbecue from rogue gusts of wind like hermits protecting a priceless chalice, sipping of our precious Jameson's whisky to keep the cold at bay. We made up unusual deserts on our gas burner and amazed ourselves with how good they tasted. Somehow we felt we were the happiest surfers on earth.

We knew the weather would eventually clear, and we'd eventually get what we were after. We fell asleep and dreamt of overhead swell, offshore winds, a ruler-edge reef, some perfect barrels. Rights. Good beer, good food. Beautiful lasses. We won't get into that dream.

So finally, at last, we'd found the swell and conditions we'd waited for, and there was no question that we were going to ride it.

We paddled our way out to what we considered the takeoff point, off the farthest extremity the little island, basically out in the middle of the Atlantic. A set came through deep in the pit, and you could see straight through fifty yards of peak as it threw out. I was reminded of a shot of Maverick's in a recent American mag. I immediately tried to put the image out of my mind.

My 7'6" was feeling very small. There was a lot of water moving, and it was very hollow. Yoshi paddled for the shoulder, lifting on his arms and staring at the horizon, ready to bolt at the first sign of a set. After letting a few go by, I decided to paddle for one. There was a tense second as I felt the wave begin to drive me with it, blinded by the spray coming up the face. Then it passed me like a truck and left me squinting in the hail.

Yoshi looked over at me as if to say, "Not very bright, are ya?"

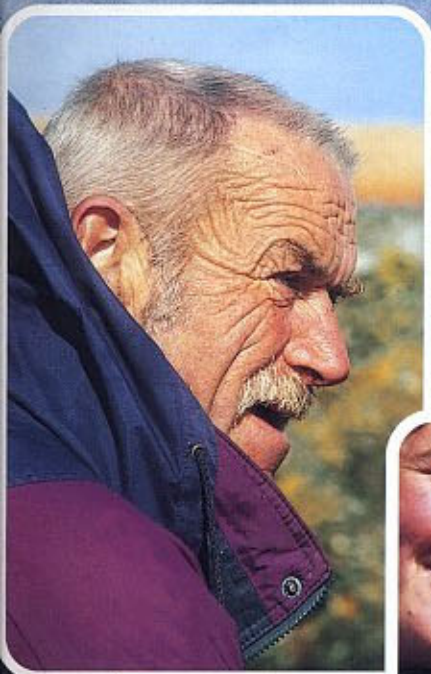
I decided I was going to ride a wave no matter what, even if my board was too small. I paddled for a few more monsters, getting left behind each time. If I wanted one of these things, I was going to have to paddle right under the lip. Finally one broke deep in the pit and sort of feathered over toward me. A nice easy takeoff. I rode the entire mushy shoulder of a wave in a survival stance, and pulled out on shaky legs. I'd done it. Now I could go in.



Small shots: They had camped at Easky waiting for the swell, and eventually scored something sweet. But it was further south, on the most open stretch of the coast, that Tor and Yoshi eventually found their match, and almost met their maker. Main: Way undergunned on their 7'6" Tor and Yoshi found it almost impossible to get into the Mavericks-like peaks. In the end Tor snagged a small shoulder, and rode it in a survival stance until it faded out. Survival carve on the inside.







Main: Lining up is never easy on a fresh hurricane swell. As the size increases the sets stay wide apart, so you'll find a spot that seems to be right, then suddenly the horizon goes black as the ocean ups the ante another notch. Tor scratching, before all hell broke loose. Smalls: Happy to be on dry land again, the guys made for the 'bees', and took a ribbing from the friendly locals. The Irish folk loved it - two hardcore Hawai'i surfers, heartily humbled.



We flew over the first one in the flume of spray I yelled to Yoshi: "Let's get out of here. This is stupid!"

Then the horizon went black. Yoshi was paddling for his life... and peered through the white-out for an agonising moment. As it cleared the white line of a heaving lip emerged high in the mist. It was a fifteen foot set breaking top to bottom outside of us. No escape.

I thought of calling over to Yosh, "Hey, wouldn't you rather be somewhere else?" But that would be a waste of increasingly crucial oxygen. Besides, Yoshi was beating me to the shoulder. I dove early, deep into the green depths, and as the whitewater rolled over me, it went all black. My leash stretched to the pencil-thin limits of urethane, and started dragging me inwards. I wondered how I was going to get in if I lost my board. After a few circuits of the whitewater, it just let me up. Yoshi had been washed all the way to the inside, around the island, and was happily paddling across the channel. I was alone.

It was a long, tense paddle through the inside, watching my back the whole way like a shopper run-walking to her car in South Central LA.

We got out of the water thoroughly stoked. Yoshi looked over at me and said "Bea, bea, bea". Back in the pub, hot whisky calmed the butterflies and Guinness stew tasted somehow more rich and real.

We met some Lahinch locals the next day.

"Did you hear about those boys from Hawaii who rode the Island?" they asked.

We had to tell them that we didn't really ride it, since between the two of us we'd ridden a grand total of - one wave. It was a terrifying experience. We'd been completely humbled. They laughed, and wanted to know how it compared with Hawaii.

"Maybe not as powerful, but unpredictable, and at least as scary," I said. They seemed to like the fact that their own waves were heavy enough to scare surfers from a place as famous as Hawaii. Maybe the ocean, like the good folk of Ireland, just enjoyed taking the piss. ☺