

THERE'S NO SURF IN PHUKET

HEARD IT COUNTLESS TIMES WHEN PULLING THIS TRIP TOGETHER. THE GUYS I'D CONVINCED TO COME ALONG, VICTORIAN SURFER/SHAPER JORDIE BROWN, HIS ALAIA SLIDER MATE JIMMY WEIGALL, AND BRIT STYLE-HOUND JAMES PARRY, ALSO COPPED IT TIME AND AGAIN. "JIMMY AND I HAD BEEN CRUISING THROUGH ASIA FOR A FEW MONTHS, AND IT WAS PRETTY INTERESTING TELLING PEOPLE WE'RE GOING TO THAILAND TO SURF," SAYS JORDIE. "WITHOUT EXCEPTION THEY SAID, 'WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? THERE'S NO SURF IN PHUKET!'"



Everyone thought we were mad (the editor of this publication included), but with 15 recognised and several not-so-well-known surf beaches around Phuket, finding rideable waves wasn't difficult at all. At low tide the outer banks of several beaches actually had some great longboarding waves, while high tide dished up some punchier in-shore peaks.

Most of the swell we encountered was short period wind-swell, but there were a couple of days where it was touching

head-high, although to get that big meant that it was as windy as hell. Most days though we found protected corners near a headland or rivermouth, except of course for the times we drove for hours to come up empty-handed. But throwing in the towel on these surf exploratory drives always seemed to end at a bar with an amazing ocean or jungle view. And as we all know, it's always offshore at a bar. Double that if the place had a pool-table. And if we'd have found one next to a Swedish backpacker establishment, the guys would never have left.



(main photo) Sporting brand new tailored suits, the boys tried their luck on the nearest street corner in Patong on a busy Friday night.
(insets) Open beaches and sheltered pockets dot the Phuket coastline.



(above left) Jordie, with nothing but good intentions. (above right) You know you're having a good holiday when you're too lazy to shave yourself.
(bottom) Traipsing Patong Road to satisfy Moonwalker's grand *Endless Summer* homage ensured the boys attracted a lot of attention (and sweated gallons).

DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

Stroll 100 metres around any of the hotel and restaurant areas and you're going to hit at least three shops offering tailor made suits, complete with spruikers eagerly trying to steer you in. "Best price and best quality assured", naturally! With a couple of stormy days meaning surf options were limited, we hatched a cunning plan. All being fans of the original *Endless Summer*, we thought it could be a helluva lot of fun getting decked out for a meander through the party throng in Patong Road in the evening. Well, why not. We're surfers damn it, we have a sense of style to uphold... beyond wearing baseball caps sideways.

Of course, once the suits were fitted, executing this brilliant plan was a little trickier than anticipated. Turned out we were smack into the holiest day of the holiest period of the year for Buddhists, meaning no alcohol sold or served anywhere. And no alcohol meant pretty much a shutdown of all the bars and associated vice that occurs along Patong Road. I was mortified; of all the days of the year, I mean Patong is far too much of an assault on the senses to handle sober. As I sat there cursing Buddhism and slotting it in the same fun category as tantric Catholicism, the boys suggested we just give it a try - heading into Patong that is, not tantric Catholicism.

We rolled in mid-evening and headed for the busiest thoroughfare we could find

to get some shots. And even sober it didn't disappoint, tuk-tuks, buses, throngs of tourists and locals still poured in. You get the impression Patong's one of those places that's seen it all. Like say, a naked Silvio Berlusconi could ride an elephant (there's something he hasn't ridden yet!) down the main drag and hardly raise an eyebrow. But as soon as three guys strolled in carrying surfboards and wearing suits, well, I've never seen people reach for cameras so quickly. August and Hynson eat your heart out.

And given the heat, with attendant copious sweating in now sodden suits, hope sprang eternal for a quenching brew. But they were absolutely and definitely not serving alcohol at any bars before the official end of the holiday at midnight... and definitely not in unmarked plastic cups, and certainly not before 11, well 10, 9.30-ish at least.

FAULTY TOWERS

We'd booked to stay in an establishment boasting a restaurant that billed itself as "the first hotel on the sea-front". Turned out it was 400 metres from the beach and all you could see from the rooms were tangled and overloaded power poles. The restaurant? Shut down. (Hardly the end of the world, no problem finding great eats in Phuket.) Far from expensive, but certainly not a fleapit, it was run by a chain-smoking, highly-strung Italian called Angelo.

The toilet in Jimmy and Jordie's room died upon first flush. Jimmy fixed it with some MacGyver tinkering, but it broke again. And Angelo was missing. Most afternoons it rained, tropical thunderstorm rain, get caught in it and a quick hot shower would be good, especially as the vehicle we were rolling in was too small and the boys rode in the back tray getting soaked. But the hotel's hot water system was broken and Angelo didn't care.

However Angelo did care very much when somehow 40,000 litres of water mysteriously disappeared overnight. Fuming, he tried to blame us for taking showers that were far too long for common decency and his water budget. What happened to it who knows, but I swear he eyed our bags as we left for the day to see if we were smuggling any aqua out. Jimmy politely retorted; "We're not big on taking long cold showers, let us know when they're hot." Angelo didn't like that either and gave us continuous stinkeye for the rest of the stay.

Rooms were "cleaned" and towels "changed" - meaning the used, wet, sandy rags were taken from the bathroom, folded and placed back on the bed as if fresh. Luckily, according to Angelo's beacon-of-truth website, the hotel was "Elegant and comfortable with cleaning kept in great importance, to satisfy the most demanding tastes". Elegance, like "good surf", is relative.





Jimmy Weigall, aloia sunset sliding.

(centre left) Jordie Brown with a picturesque quickstep. (centre right) Intrigued Japanese tourists about to be kneecapped by James Parry's log.

(bottom) We really didn't expect to score "good" waves in Phuket. We were happily surprised. Jordie certainly wasn't complaining after this session.





Englishman James Parry is one of those annoyingly talented surfers who naturally adapt to any surf craft and make it look oh-so-easy – from aerials on shorties (yes he lands them) to extended tip time on heavy single-fins.





(top) Hidden around a point we found this wave breaking into a rivermouth. Small, sheltered, sporadic. You really need to keep an eye on the tides when in Phuket. Jordie heading up-river. (above left) The natural order of travel according to Moonwalker; himself and camera equipment in cab, surf scum (ie: talent) squashed into tray. Then hit pot-holes with speed. (above right) If you want any info or surf supplies when in Phuket, this is the place. Owned by genial Aussie ex-pat Rick Gamble, Saltwater Dreaming is the best surf shop on the island by far.

PHUKET'S MR. SURF

Rick Gamble is an ex-pat Aussie, lifelong surfer, and the founder/owner of the Saltwater Dreaming Surf Shop in Phuket. We met him by chance and Rick and his family laid on the most hospitable and welcoming BBO the boys and I have ever encountered; fish, gigantic prawns, beef, pork and barely any salad - a real man BBO, brilliant in its simplicity. Over a few beers, I turned on the tape.

How long have you been here?

"I arrived in January '99 and saw waves. I didn't have a board as I didn't expect to find any surf. I saw a board nailed to a tree that a guy was using as a sign for his restaurant so asked if I could please borrow his sign, and went out and caught a few. The locals were shocked when they saw someone surfing, besides, I was younger then and could actually surf OK. A few western guys traveling through had boards, but they were generally guns made for heavy Indo sessions, and I rarely saw anyone else surfing. The original "sign board" is

now here at the shop, it had a plywood fin shoved in it and has been re-painted so many times I have no idea what label it is."

So what about the surf potential for Phuket as whole?

"There's no surf in Phuket man, haha! (Rick cracks up while pointing to a wall of photos that would make any doubter shut their cake-hole.) Look, to be honest though, you're not going to come here for a serious surfing holiday, you're going to come for another purpose. Most of the boards I rent are to guys on their honeymoon who are sneaking in a couple of sly surfs, and also to families, seeing that it's mostly extremely beginner friendly.

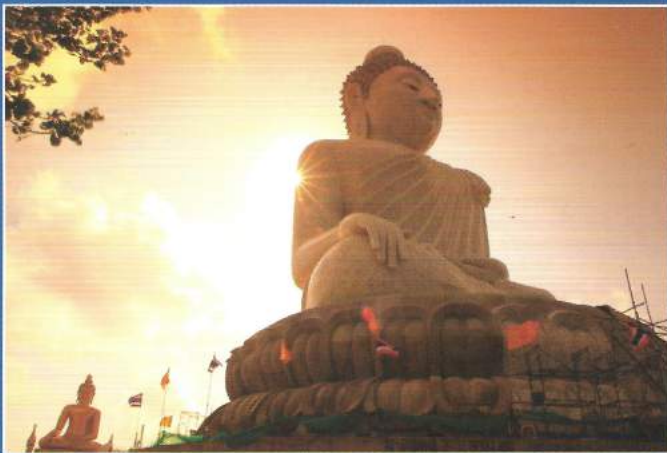
"Basically, May to the beginning of November is best for swell. The surf scene's really grown in the past few years, people are getting more into it now. Just going by my shop, every year for the past three, business has been doubling. The lifeguards are surfing, the locals see them and it's generating a real buzz. I mean this certainly isn't going to be the next Bali by any means,

over the 12 years I've been here I've seen plenty of surf shops open and close."

How did your shop eventuate?

"I made a website to show my mates back in Australia that there are waves in Phuket and it got picked up by Google because there were no others talking about surfing here. I called it Saltwater Dreaming, as I was thinking about home, then people coming here were asking me, 'Where's Saltwater Dreaming located?' So three doors down (from the current shop location) you'll see the old logo painted on the back wall. I started with four surfboards from Australia and one hundred t-shirts. I never intended it to be a full-blown shop, it just kind-of happened. From a simple, picture-heavy website, to a few t-shirts, to now this!"

Rick gestures to his amply stocked shop and I definitely detect a slight "proud dad" grin. Good on him. I mean there's not epic surf here, but there is a friendly vibe in the water and it's warm and uncrowded.



(inserts) Stoic statues and shredding visitors. Buddah chills while Jordie plays. (below) "Look, no fin!" Jimmy shows-off the good wood.

QUICK THAI TRIVIA

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with His Majesty the King recognized as Head of State, Head of the Armed Forces, Upholder of the Buddhist religion and Upholder of all religions. Desecrating his image or any royal flags is a big BIG no-no that will land you in serious strife.

Thailand is the only country in south-east Asia that has never been under a European power. Its neighbors Myanmar (Burma) and Malaysia were part of the British Empire. Other neighbors, Laos and Cambodia were under French control. So naturally, baguettes and English tea aren't big in Thailand.

Phuket is Thailand's largest island, approximately the size of Singapore.

Phuket formerly derived its wealth from tin and rubber, and enjoyed a rich, colorful history. The island was on one of the major trading routes between India and China, and was frequently mentioned in foreign trader's ship logs.





It was windy one night and the next morning overcast. We weren't expecting much, but lo-and-behold found an empty point wave. It was good, and would've been even better on the early low tide, but we'd slept in thanks to Rick's mega seafood BBQ and welcoming bevvy's. We blamed Rick.

LAST WORD TO THE LADS

Jimmy: "I've got a good mate who's lived on Phi Phi Island (just offshore from Phuket) doing dive tours for the past ten-years, and even he told me not to bother about surfing here. Ha! He should stick to diving."

Jordie: "This was a fun trip, some good

nights out, cool temples and sights to see, great food, beautiful beaches. And I can say there're definitely waves - and good waves when it's working. In fact, you'd have to work pretty hard not to enjoy this place."

James: "I brought my log and a shortboard and I really didn't expect to

ride the shortie much, but there were some great little ramps to hit. The waves are generally crumbly on take-off but once you tapped into the clean face the whole ride opens up. There are plenty of spots and plenty of waves."