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Travel & Vacations

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SURFING

Crave the wave? Surf camps good place to start

Surfing pioneers have found great spots to pursue their main passion. And after establishing their own surf camps, they're sharing the wealth.

BY TERRY GIBSON
Special to The Herald

Surfers are often described as nomads, as intrepid travelers on a search for the search's sake. But increasingly, as the demand for surf travel increases, surfers are venturing out into more remote places, searching for a spot to begin again or build themselves a better way of life -- one that revolves around the ocean.

One pioneer's story starts in Nicaragua, that of a young surfer from Jacksonville named JJ Yemma. In 1998, JJ's black jeep came screeching into Hospedaje Tica, a small surf camp I had been staying at for two weeks. Previously, enough surfers had cruised through that the owners, Juan and Gloria, had built basic *cabinas*.

Hospedaje Tica was very low-key, typical of most surf camps in developing countries. There was no running water, electricity was spotty, and there was nothing to do but surf, find shade, and dine on Gloria's hearty meals, all for about 5 bucks a day. Evenings were quiet, and JJ's Dukes-of-Hazzard entrance seemed awfully brash, considering the pockets of lingering resentment toward Americans. But Juan and Gloria greeted him like a son.

Two year earlier, JJ had dropped out of high school and gone to Playa Negra, Costa Rica, an area already colonized by surfers. He found work as a chef, learned Spanish, and surfed through every spare moment.

Playa Negra is overrun with travelers, but it isn't more than two to three hours from the Nicaragua border, which proved a siren's call for JJ. He went directly to a fairly well-known A-frame reef break called Popoyo near Las Salinas in the San Juan Del Sur province of Nicaragua -- and there he found some excellent waves.

The 19-year-old had come to buy land when I met him, wild-eyed with dreams of his future. JJ went back to the States to pitch his surf-camp concept to investors. Although I had my doubts, I didn't want to discourage him.

SUCCESS

Four months after we parted ways, Hurricane Mitch ravaged Nicaragua. A year later, I returned to Las Salinas to find the town still lacked consistent power. Nevertheless, JJ had obtained a fine location overlooking the Pacific and, with some hand tools and hammers, set about building Popoyo Surf Camp. JJ had already built the main rancho -- a large, conical thatched hut -- and one of the *cabinas*. He lorded over the construction site on horseback while his new wife tended to their firstborn and their monkey. The camp is now very successful and the local economy is growing, thanks to surfer traffic.

While JJ's path was unique, there are a number of surf pioneer stories that could make a rich anthology.

David and Jeannie Clark first came upon Fiji's Tavarua Island in 1979. A tiny island in a chain situated near one of the largest storm centers on earth, the Tasman Sea, Tavarua boasts a wave called Cloudbreak that's become a major event on the pro surfing circuit.

The Clarks had envisioned a low-key resort that would harmoniously blend into the tropical paradise. Working with village chiefs, they "lease" the wave and maintain the aura of Fijian culture, particularly through Kava rituals, Fijian friendliness and folklore, and traditional dance ceremonies. The camp also provides aid in the forms of scholarship programs and medical education and assistance. Although some nomads balk at its exclusivity and cost, it is one of the best examples of how surf culture can enhance -- rather than pollute -- indigenous cultures.

HEAVEN BY THE SEA

The surfing demographic has changed radically over the last decade. Heaven on the Planet eco-lodge, owned by renowned oceanographer Kerry Black in Lombok, Indonesia, caters to both low- and high-end surfing clients. "Heaven" is a fine example of eco-lodges catering to surfers who are working professionals with two or three weeks vacation a year. Some nomads deride this set as "surf tourists," but places like Heaven allow folks to retreat to pristine reaches of the Indian Ocean in safety and comfort, and with the knowledge that their presence is beneficial to the local community. There are a dozen world-class waves in the vicinity of Lombok, as well as a coral-studded wall for diving and exceptional fishing.

Costa Rica changed Tierza Davis' life. After a trip to Mal Pais, on the southern tip of the Nicoya Peninsula, the Californian turned expat and set up Pura Vida Adventures, a surf camp exclusively for women, a growing group among surfers. A veteran surfer, Tierza offers surf lessons, yoga and massage and relaxation sessions without the competitive atmosphere more typical in male-dominated camps.

Surfing is indeed spreading its culture across the globe, with surf camps running the gamut from bamboo shacks to luxury yachts and hotel accommodations. Whether it's the adventure or the wave you crave, pick the right camp and you'll find surf pioneering bodes well for its location, too.