

High Noon at Bishop Rock

A Paddle-Only Assault at the Cortes Bank

BY CHRIS DIXON ■ PHOTOS BY JASON MURRAY



Mr. Terrible calmly navigates the glassy waters of the continental shelf in a style usually reserved for Wall Street bankers, AIG executives, and Russell Simmons.

Peter Mel (left) re-acquaints himself with an old friend. It'd been almost ten years since Pete had been out to the Bank. Paddling in gave it a whole new vibration.

“When we were here the last time,” Greg Long says, sweeping his arm toward the clanging bell buoy atop the Bishop Rock, “it was a whiteout the whole length of the reef. And all the way up, I mean, you know how long the Bank is, there were waves spotting and breaking all the way down right up to here in front of us. You could see waves breaking in slow motion, five miles away.”

“As far as the eye could see, it was just a huge square of whitewater,” adds Grant Baker in his deep Durbanese dialect. “We had to sit way out past the buoy, and the waves were coming right through the buoy. This area in here was a nightmare, all the fucking whitewater. If you lost your guy, he was gone. He would have just been lost in the expanse and you’d never find him. It was just so scary.”

Baker and Long were recalling January 5, 2008. It was the day they teamed up with hell-man boat captain and photographer Rob Brown, Mike Parsons, and Brad Gerlach and motored off into a tiny opening of calm air between the pinwheel arms of one of the deepest lows ever recorded in the north Pacific. On this Hail Mary mission into surfing’s greatest unknown, they returned with the frightful account of how they surfed the largest waves ever documented. I was given the opportunity to recount the tale for the *New York Times*. The article, accompanied by Brown’s famous photos of a diminutive Mike Parsons outrunning a cerulean avalanche, ended up being the week’s most heavily trafficked sports story on the *Times*’ website, even outranking the breaking news of Roger Clemens’ steroid abuse. But for me, the story didn’t end there.

Since that time, this 16-mile-long ridgeline, a sunken island the first California settlers probably walked atop 10,000 years ago, has become an obsession for me. In fact,





If they weren't in wetsuits, you might think it was just an epic day at Sunset (left). With a lineup a mile long, peaks were popping up everywhere, this one just outside the collective reach of our insta-crowd.

Western Australian Alex "Alfy" Cater (lower left) has made a career of putting himself into precarious positions, often with the assistance of a ski. Hanging with the Long brothers this winter has given him a chance to polish up on big-wave paddle skills.

Meet and greet (right). After a hectic 12-hour, last-minute prep, a group TransPac flight, and much second guessing, the crew mingles as we prepare to embark on our eight-hour crossing.



I imagine my mania for the place has come to somewhat resemble that of Long's. But rather than surf the Cortes Bank, I'm now in the middle of writing a book about it. I ponder the fact that I'm actually out here, and the company I'm with, and can only shake my head. With all the bizarre, terrifying, and fascinating stories I've heard in the last year, it's the strangest déjà vu: a homecoming to a place I've never visited.

This is the first time Long and Baker have been out here since 2008. The fact that we can sit right off the Bishop Rock buoy, which serves as a small island for Cortes Bank's bickering troupe of sea lions, means that the waves are decidedly smaller than they were then. Still, in its own way, this expedition is no less historic. Last summer, Long considered the fact that in late 1989, on a day much like today, Sam George, Bill Sharp, and a young San Clemente hell man named George Hulse joined *Surfing* magazine's late, great photographer Larry "Flame" Moore on a successful, if unsung paddle surfing mission out here (successful for everyone but George, who became wretchedly seasick).

Long and a few of his closest colleagues have lately been rewriting the book on the kind of waves it is physically possible to paddle into. What better laboratory for this ongoing experiment in mortality, Greg reasoned, than the 12-foot-deep pinnacle of Bishop Rock? But he didn't just want to do the deed with Baker, or Parsons (who was inexplicably absent from this trip), he wanted to include a cadre of the best big-wave surfers in the world. Long brought up the idea to lensman Jason Murray, who has joined him on expeditions to spots only they will ever know. Long worked the surfer angle, inviting his brother Rusty, Peter Mel, Nathan Fletcher, Kelly Slater, Mark Healey, and Chilean hell man Ramon

Navarro. Murray would work to sort out the transportation.

The last time Long and Baker visited these waters, they napped in surfboard bags in the open hull of Rob Brown's go-fast boat while trading frigid hours atop their second jet ski in a surplus Navy survival suit. This time, Murray's well-placed calls yielded interest from Jerry Herbst, a billionaire with family interests in Vegas casinos, convenience stores, oil, and a racing team. He'd let them travel aboard his glittering 105-foot Westport, a yacht named *Mr. Terrible*, for the cost of fuel and crew.

A day before we boarded *Mr. Terrible*, Long and Baker had been in Hawaii, with no idea that they would soon be trekking out to Cortes Bank. The hardest-working duo in big-wave surfing has spent the winter of '09-'10 jetting between the West Coast and Hawaii in a manic, epic quest to score El Niño's greatest bounty. With a healthy, long-period swell looming, there had been quiet chatter of a post Christmas Bank job, but the winds were looking particularly unfavorable. Thus, Christmas Day found Long and Baker enduring back-to-back, near-death experiences at Peahi. Flummoxed, frustrated, and possibly nursing a slight concussion, Long just wanted to rest. But then the call came in from Murray. The winds were backing off.

By 11:00 p.m. on December 26, the dusty four-wheel-drive Econoline that doubles as Greg's home rumbled to a stop in front of Terrible Herbst's waterfront Newport Harbor mansion and spilled out an overstuffed cargo of surfboards, surfers, and Long and Baker's girlfriends, Kate Lovemore and Jess Spraker. Minutes later, Bill Sharp rolled his video camera as a bleary-eyed Long greeted a team of the best big-wave surfers on earth.

For some reason, apparently unclear even to himself, Kelly Slater chose to simply say hello to everyone at the dock and then drive toward LAX on a quest to chase a big Atlantic swell through the Caribbean to Morocco. As *Mr. Terrible* passed the gilded palaces along Newport Harbor, Mark Healey's cell phone rang. Long laughs at the ensuing conversation: "Kelly says, 'I was just driving down the road and I didn't really realize, did I just drive away from that whole production? That's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I drove back. Can you guys come back and pick me up?'"

Long settled down alongside Pete Mel to a plate of steaming tamales and took what appeared to be the first hard look around since LAX. "I almost drowned yesterday. Now look at this. I'm sitting on a yacht eating fresh tamales. It's surreal."

It was a sense shared by everyone else on board. Hell, when the call came to me nine hours earlier that the mission was on, I was cruising down a hill on a skateboard with my four-year-old daughter in front of my mom's house...in *Atlanta*.

Through mouthfuls of tamales, Long told of his particular vexation at the punishment he and Baker had endured at Jaws, wondering whether to blame it on a bad set of fins, his board, or his surfing. "It's a pretty weird experience to think that you fucked up that bad," said Long. "It was everything you don't do. I did the Skindog. We were out there before the sun comes up, and the first big wave...I haven't towed into something like that in I don't know how long."

"So, you got maybe a little overzealous, no?" Mel chided. "Slightly? Would that be the first mistake?"

"No, I mean, we sat there and watched a couple of sets go through, and it's a deceiving wave, because if you let go on

the peak, then you're way too deep. You can't make forward momentum because all this water's drawing back. Let go at the shoulder, and then you're actually in the peak. I let go too early on my first wave, and it was massive, I got stuck behind it and took the west bowl on the head. The next wave I started going down the face and started to try to turn, but the board didn't want to. I was dealing with all the bumps, and as soon as I got to the bottom, it was like; bump, bump, bump, and I just fell straight on my face. Then I'm just like, skip, skip, skip, whoooooosh. I'm upside-down looking out of the tube getting the suplex. It was the most violent flogging I'd had in a long time."

Talk turns to wipeouts, concussions, and near-death experiences. Slater and Baker recount hilarious and frightening stories of cases of amnesia they endured after brutal wipeouts in Java and South Africa. Then someone asked Mark Healey about his recent excursion to ride on the backs of great white sharks off Guadalupe Island. It's an idea that for a spearfishing hell-man like Healey seems perfectly normal, but to everyone else seems perfectly insane.

When talk turns back to horrifying wipeouts, the subject of Maverick's reappears, in particular, a hellish hold-down endured by Neil Mathies ten or so years back.

"He played it off on film, but he buckled his back," says Pete. "I think he went back, but he never rode a wave. He was like, 'This isn't enjoyable anymore. I'm over it.' Which I think is way more admirable than trying to fake that you like it. It's like, I frickin' love this. I swear I do. Umm, I'm supposed to love this? Wait, I don't love this; I'm scared shitless!"

"For me, it totally depends on the kind of mood I'm in," Slater says, strumming a vintage Kamaka ukulele. "Like



Everyone knows about the colorful lineage and history of the Fletcher/Hoffman surfing dynasty. What they might not know is that Nathan (top right) is one of the most diverse and gifted surfers on the planet. From two-foot onshore crap you wouldn't look at twice to 30-foot perfection that would leave you crying for mom, Nate not only excels but leads. Here he is channeling Herb's sideslip boogie in the barrel of the day.

An inevitable moment occurs. This particular beast (right) reared its head about 90 yards outside of where every other wave had previously broken on this corner of the reef. Never a dull moment 100 miles to sea.

Taking the Boy Scout motto to a whole new level (left).





Greg Long sets up for a well-deserved barrel (right). Still in rough shape from a Christmas present beat-down at Jaws, he and Twig were both a little sore as they paddled to the lineup.

Loading skis at the dock can be challenging in itself. Doing it in 20-foot surf (left) is a whole different ball of wax. Fortunately, the calm morning conditions made for an easy entrance.

Rusty Long, Cortes Bank, 2009 or Tom Curren, Todos Santos, 1986 (bottom right)? Good surfing never goes out of style.



the day before the Eddie, I was like, 'fuck it,' I'm not even into it. But then I got there the morning of the contest and I'm like, let's go! Then when I get out there, it's like for me, I don't know that I'm going to go out there and push myself on a big wave. But then I get out there and I'm like, my God, these things are perfect. If I wipeout, I'll just hold my breath for 20 seconds. There's something to be said for putting yourself in a situation. Once you're in it, you're like, well, I have to deal with it now."

Before we turn in, Nathan Fletcher, a guy I've never met before but come to like a lot, briefly recounts a tale related by his uncle Phillip "Flippy" Hoffman of an experience off San Clemente Island, a spot we're due to pass in a couple of hours. "You don't know what to expect out here, really," Fletcher says. "It's at the edge of the continental shelf. Anything can happen. My uncle was out on a day and it was 15- to 18-foot. All of a sudden, a hundred-foot wave—a rogue wave—came, and they were motoring up it and the boat went over the falls. He had to jump off and swim to San Clemente Island. He said it's still the biggest wave he's ever seen."

At dawn the next morning, the possibility of a rogue wave seems unlikely, but not out of the realm of possibility. A quarter mile off the bow looms a strange apparition. Solid lines of a new swell bump on the horizon in the middle of the ocean. The first rises glacier blue beneath diffuse morning sunlight, a majestic A-frame peak, perhaps 25 feet from trough to crest. Its concussion and the subsequent geyser of whitewater shatter the morning quiet like an artillery burst from the hills behind Trestles. Baker gives a contented grin and then shouts below deck: "Healey, ceets a left!"

After motoring out on a scouting mission with Healey, Greg wants to be the first one in the water. But first he wants

to give the lovely Jess a chance to peer into his world from the back of his ski. In the distance, the WaveRunner makes a solo drop down a wave perhaps 20 feet from top to bottom. Greg expertly pilots right along the wave's massive flank. When they pull back up to the boat, Spraker's eyes are like saucers. Amped on adrenaline, an epiphany tumbles from her mouth.

"Nothing I've ever done comes close to that," she says. "And he said that wasn't even huge. I'm like, oh, my God, are you nuts? Oh, my God. That was so fun. The wave just exploded; we were getting sprayed by it. I was screaming. Oh, my God. Kate and I always say Greg and Twiggy, they're drug addicts. Now I can see exactly why he does this."

Before long, it's my turn. One of the crewmen, a hardy young fisherman named Nate Perez, has been ferrying surfers out to the lineup on a spare ski. He's not wearing a wetsuit, and so I figure I don't need mine either. Perhaps 50 yards from *Mr. Terrible*, I sense this is a mistake. My mind turns to a story I've been researching about a crew of crazy entrepreneurs who sought to create their own island nation atop Cortes Bank by sinking a massive concrete freighter on the exact pinnacle of rock that lies dead ahead. The leader of the operation went to sea with no life jacket, clad in fur après ski boots, a sweater, and cashmere pants. The mistake nearly cost him his life.

I peer down into the water, hoping for a glimpse at the wreckage of the ship. But all Perez and I can see is a forest of palm kelp, big, scary swirls of current, and an occasional tornado of what I can only imagine must be schooling sardine. Out at the peak, the surfers sit in a loose bunch, scattered in a circle at least 75 yards across. Every once in a while, a sea lion surfaces and slings a yellowtail into the air. A seal carcass floats out at the edge of the lineup. Healey's jokes about sharks scare the bejeezus out of everyone.



The waves are shifty beasts. Some hit far up on the peak, capping over and rolling down the line like mutant runners off Old Man's. Others rise up into explosive cone-shaped wedges that Slater says remind him of Sebastian Inlet on steroids. Others shift a little farther to the east, and jack up into steep, deep slabs that I can't imagine trying to paddle into. Ramon Navarro can, though. He strokes hard, and the wave drops out from under him. He slides down on his back like he's at a water slide, snaps his leash, and is pummeled on the inside. A few minutes later, Alfie Cater makes the same mistake. From a ringside seat, his freefall to hell is gut wrenching.

We edge closer and watch Slater and Long stroke into a pair of bombs. There's the barest whisper of south wind. But it's enough to blow a cascade of spray off the wave's hulking back. The rainstorm shower is the only thing you hear until the tremor that's unleashed when the wave folds over. I've never heard or seen anything quite like it, not while sitting on boats at Todos Santos or Maverick's, and certainly not standing on the beach or the point at Waimea Bay. Silence punctuated by showers, hoots, and explosions.

Healey and Long slide down the face of a beautifully tapered right-hander. Fletcher sketches into a steep bomb atop a terribly skinny 11-footer. I never see Healey ride a left. For documentarians like Bill Sharp or Murray, or the surfers who casually call waves like these 20-footers, you can sense that it might be possible to eventually lose your sense of wonder at a scene like this. But because I have no desire to surf waves like these, just being out here is absolute sensory overload.

Perez idles around, trying to keep us away from impellor-choking strands of kelp, and we both just marvel

at the whole damn thing. I've delved deeply into the geologic origins of this rock and have pieced together what I hope is the first coherent line of history on the horribly tragic details surrounding its discovery and first charting. I've listened to divers spin fantastic tales of the wonders that lie below. I've interviewed a man who traveled out here with legendary treasure hunter Mel Fisher on a hilariously ill-fated attempt to find the gold of a Spanish galleon. I recently located a man who surfed out here alone in 1961 and have interviewed another legendary big-wave surfer whose boat sank out from under him in the middle of the night. That he is alive today is pure miracle.

I'm sitting on the ski pondering these imponderables and staring down into the depths when I finally get a view of the bottom, or the top if you think of the Cortes Bank as a 6,000-foot mountain. The water's as clear as an aquarium and it's impossible to tell how deep it is, but you can clearly see dark rock interspersed with patches of very, very white sand. Golden fish, they must be garibaldi, weave through the forest. So complete is our distraction that Perez and I fail to notice a dark lump outside. When we do look up simultaneously, the view is, frankly, terrifying. A gray-blue wall the size of a house has erased the horizon and is bearing down. Perez fires the ski. Nothing. He hits the starter again, and the engine fires. I pray we've not sucked up any kelp as he guns it. We're nearly erased.

On the flight home to Charleston the next morning, I ask myself if the previous day really happened. Even though I've logged hours of interviews and unearthed rare photos and footage, the Cortes Bank has never actually seemed like a real place. Now that I've actually been out there, I'm not sure if that feeling has changed. ♡

Rusty Long on the wave of the day (upper left). With such a stacked crew, it was ironic that the only surfer without a primary sponsor nabbed the grand prize. After this trip and a two-year hiatus from apparel company love, Russ finally found a new home with Quiksilver. Keep doing what you love and someone will eventually take notice.

Ramon Navarro (left) was somewhere in Northern Baja when the mission light turned green. After numerous calls to his sponsors and friends, he was located, driven to the border, and taxied all the way to San Clemente. It may have been an expensive fare, but worth every Chilean peso.

Utterly pelagic, the break at Bishop Rock (right) is populated with subsurface animals you don't want to think about.

