

A Gulf Coast wave hunt finds its reward south in Veracruz.

As Told By Jon Steele

Tracking El Norte

All we do is watch the wind, that's what you do when you're a surfer from Texas. You just watch wait—maybe you ride a few tanker waves, but mostly you just speculate on where will be good when, and if, those winds finally show up. On this particular mission we'd been watching for a long time. We heard about these waves way down around Veracruz that guys used to surf in the '70s, but then for whatever reason they just went dormant, or people stopped surfing there, or the people that were surfing there shut up about it. But the stories kind of perked my interest.

I started doing my homework, and being a good Texan, waited for the wind. What you're looking for is a north-to-south wind we call an El Norte—the winter jet stream pushing down from Colorado and out onto the Gulf of Mexico. It doesn't mean shit for Texas—except they're usually damn cold—but obviously if it blows long enough it can create some kind of swell somewhere.

From Corpus Christi, it's an 18-hour shot. It's about two hours to the border, and then because we don't like to drive through the night, we break the mission up into two days. We stopped in Tampico after the first day's drive. It's crazy, there's some pretty forgotten about stretches

of coastline. Obviously, it doesn't offer the surfer much, but because of the new swell in the water and its short-period nature, when we got glimpses of the ocean from the road it was rocking. Unlike our Texas forefathers in the '70s, we struck the Red Headed Stranger from the stereo and blared speed metal straight through.

Why hasn't anybody been surfing down here since those old-time Willie Nelson fans? Probably because it's nearly impossible to predict unless you're super on it, and from Veracruz if you drive for another four hours you can get out to Barra De La Cruz and all those waves on the Pacific. I'm guessing that's why nobody surfs on the Gulf side any more, I mean, would you rather take your chances on a fickle, mysto wave in the Gulf of Mexico or score point break perfection? Not really much of a decision to be made on that one.

I've been told the place we surfed is the only reef break in the Gulf of Mexico. I don't know if that's really true, but I've spent a lot of time lurking about the Gulf, and I'm a believer. Also, if you look at the charts right off Veracruz, there is this huge, super deep trench. That pretty much ruins most chances for surf, unless it gets plenty big. Luckily, that's exactly what we were after.



Caption

After sniffing this place out the last couple years, I'd met people in both Texas and Mexico that could help guide us and give us the red or green light. Because it's such a full-on kind of mission, it's not really a place you just go on a whim. We checked a lot of maps, looked at a lot of satellite images, made a lot of phone calls, and watched the wind for a long time before we decided to load up.

A while ago, some guys from Texas and some guys from down there [Mexico] tried to get a contest going, like a little Tex/Mex flavor, best guys from our zone versus the best guys from their zone. It never really came together, but maybe someday. There's definitely the potential for some waves, as we found out.

When we first showed up, we witnessed proper 15-foot surf. The interval is like nothing, so it's like

you're constantly in this scramble mode. It can be pretty exhausting after 18 hours jammed in a car, but then after sitting and waiting for so long, there's nothing better. You have to blow yourself out because the waves can be here in the morning and all but gone by day's end. We ended up getting really lucky. We enjoyed surf in a whole range of sizes, the conditions never got too bad, and we pretty much had every session to ourselves. I don't know how many more times I'll have the privilege getting down to that part of the world. It wasn't easy, and I have a pretty good feeling luck was on our side this time around. But like a good Texan, you know I'm going to keep waiting for the winds, and if a good El Norte comes through again, well, we might just have to pack up the Suburban and head south again.



HEART OF ISOLATION

Prowling For Surf In Fiji's Far Reaches

By Jennifer Flanigan

Gathered before a sway-backed wharf flanked by vessels aging obsolete, exhausted eyes adjust to a glinty scene of sunlight, steel, and salt-water. Everywhere, commotion. Dark-skinned dorymen busy themselves on the docks, squabbling and laughing despite the heat. Trawlers empty ice chests of tuna bound for market; freighters spew oxidized appliances, late-model cars, and anonymous crated goods come from across the sea; a bustle of re-fueling and last-minute repairs. A graveyard of ships leers on with eerie porthole eyes and skeletal rigging—once celebrated feats of modern manufacturing, now retired to this secluded South Pacific seaport to live out their days in third-world obscurity.

The mouth of the ferryboat gapes vacant before us, a blinding black cave against this blinking seascape. A blur of action transforms the pier from a languid human holding pen to a melee of movement as chain barriers lower and passengers are beckoned aboard. Two-hundred Fijians pour into the stale dark of the ferry's underbelly, a sweating mass of hickory skin tones and cropped, kinky hairdos. Our group becomes scattered by the sea of humanity mounting the gangplank, but still we're hard to miss; our pale faces punctuate the crowd like a few specks of salt in a shaker of pepper. We are the only foreigners for miles.

Earlier this morning we got our first glimpse of Fiji—that equatorial archipelago of malachite-colored islands nestled east of Australia in the cobalt expanse of the South Pacific. Deposited direct from the madness of LAX to the mango tree-tranquility of Nadi, I'm joined by Californians Mary Osborne, Kaley Swift, Holly Beck, and Chandler Parr. A 14-hour overnight chug across the Koro Sea and Bligh Water shipping lanes will bring us from Fiji's main island, Viti Levu, to the less-inhabited island of Vanua Levu. There we'll board a 142-foot motor-sail schooner, *Tui Tai*, and head for the far reaches of Fiji's remote northern islands to distribute the clothing, school supplies, and 72 toothbrushes crammed in our baggage. Somewhere along the way we hope to find surf.

Ordinarily, a 30-minute puddle hop takes the rare tourist to outer islands, but encumbered by board bags, we're forbidden from the 20-seater twin-prop and forced the way of the ferry. We tack two days to our trip and hope for smooth sailing.

On the deck of the ferry, locals pull tarpaulins from knapsacks and settle in for the long haul—escaping the claustrophobic bowels of the boat, which stink of seasick and the canned mackerel passengers merrily guzzle in

the galley. Inside the economy cabin, a sickening medley of mildew and body odor spikes air thick as hot breath and humidity. We choose exposure to the elements over the questionable comforts of the cabin, and claim a deck-top table as accommodations for our jaunt across the sea. Kaley reads *Kingsolver*. Mary recedes into iPod oblivion. I pass strange pleasantries with an androgynous teenager in a too-tight T-shirt. Temperatures drop as we motor past the protection of the bay and into open water. The sea begins to churn.

Nearby, a group of grizzled workmen lay atop a tarp. In a bowl they mix water with a powder the consistency of ground bones. A *kava* ceremony begins. Passing a cup, they take turns swigging the murky drink reputed to induce feelings of euphoria and sleepiness, then clap three times upon swallowing. When the *kava* kicks in the men relax,

sprawled prone across the deck. Watching, I wriggle uncomfortably on my tabletop bed. But Dramamine doubles as a sleep-aid, and eight hours later we wake to the din of a dropping anchor.

Crammed into taxis, we make our way toward the *Tui Tai*. Across blown speakers, our cabbie blares a Hindi playlist of Bollywood songs and tinny Indi-pop. Twenty minutes outside Savusavu, the paved two-lane gives way to gravel. As we lurch over potholes and swerve to avoid schoolchildren, Hindu amulets of Siva and Ganesh swing from the rearview mirror, slamming against the windshield. From a labyrinth of plumerias and palms, beady coconut eyes watch warily as we speed into the heart of isolation.

The road curves to reveal Natewa Bay. Clapboard fishing shanties speck the shoreline, their wood-frame foundations stilted against high tide and typhoons like





Caption

the surrounding mangroves. Moored offshore awaits the *Tui Tai*—Fijian for “chief from across the sea.” Owned by a Californian and his Fijian wife, the schooner and its all-local crew is the only tourist ship operating in the far reaches of northern Fiji. Though famous as a surfing destination, Fiji’s surf tourism is almost completely curtailed to the easily accessible islands of Tavarua and Namotu. Surf has been sighted off the northern islands, but not much is known about its quality or consistency. We’re game to find out.

Sailing south through Georgia Channel, we anchor off Rabi Island—home of a displaced people from the Central Pacific island of Banaba. After phosphate was discovered there in 1900, the British forcibly relocated the Banabans to gut their island with mines. Far from home, they now live on Rabi in villages and primitive, plumbing-less outposts.

On the shores of Albert Bay, a barefoot Banaban elder sits for a chat and recounts her people’s exodus as if it occurred yesterday. In the smoky dark of her palm-frond hut, she tells Mary about the importance of mat weaving in a successful marriage. Outside a rooster crows, debating his status as tonight’s supper. Displaced and defeated, rather than move forward in a direction not of their choosing, it seems some Banabans have decided to halt the progression of time altogether. We leave her with T-shirts and toothbrushes, then slink back to our boat full of iPods and satellite cell phones.

For five days we’ve been motoring laps around Taveuni without any luck. The barrier reef- and craggy coastline-setups are promising, but the swell necessary to light up this potential surfing playground is on island time. When we left our homes it was winter in North America, crossing the equator into the realm of the South Pacific has deposited us directly into summer—also known as the surfing off season at Fiji’s more fashionable breaks. But November-April is the best time to score obscure North Pacific swells as they wind their way into the little-known northern island nooks where we prowl for surf.

Finally, we spot a swell on the horizon. We motor through the night toward the island of Qamea in a risky gamble to locate a rumored right-hander. Morning dawns clear and windless. Load the Zodiac; roll the dice.

Zooming over coral heads and brightly colored fish, the water a piebald palette of bottomless blues and turquoise shallows. Whitewash on the horizon like a

flock of a thousand albatrosses. Feeding on trade winds and tropical tempests, these waves voyage myriad miles across open ocean to impale themselves on the shallow ledges of a subaquatic cityscape.

Heavy-water walls reel toward the channel. Peaking on the outside, this sultry South Seas wave lifts its skirts, inhales deeply, and thrusts itself brazenly across the coral. Early entry is crucial; a moment of hesitation earns you a rendezvous with reef rash. Holly chances a late takeoff and surfaces with lacerations to her lower back. “Bet it’ll scar,” she brags. The rest of us choose waves wisely and navigate a high-line toward the safety of deeper waters. But diligence pays dividends, and Holly scores the tube of the trip. After pig-dogging an inverted drop and squeezing through an almond-eye barrel, she’s triumphantly exhaled from cavernous depths in a spit of blonde hair and sea spray.

For two weeks, we wander these wilds without another surfer in sight, guided by instinct and the nuance of a tattered nautical chart. One endless equatorial day evolves into the next; thunderclouds roiling overhead, gifting shade and showers, sunrise, sunset; a time-lapse-photography-fade of passing hours. When the swell drops, the ocean calms into an open invitation. We don masks and snorkels and dive deep to marvel at underwater architecture strong enough to halt the passage of open-ocean energy. Aside Technicolor wrasses and dainty damselfish, we sink beneath the thermocline into the infinite abyss.

We return to a California taken by winter. Pulling a wetsuit over frozen feet, I envision those South Seas islands encircled by surf. The daydream overcomes me, and I’m warmed to the core.

