

Chaos, Crowds and Clarity

Notes from a mid-Atlantic isle

Words by James Pribram • Photos by Will Henry

I remember him well, sitting there on those stairs, motionless. He looked to be thinking about heaven and hell, as if he were staring into a face full of invisible eyes. His arms were covered with tattoos, his face consumed by a rat's nest of long, scummy hair. His breath smelled like he'd been dead for 10 years. I knew him well, but then again I didn't. He didn't live in this world; he had his own — a world of imagination that he celebrated alone, which was visible only through his eyes. The driving force for that eternal moment of his life — only for today, never dreaming of tomorrow — was the power of his mind. A fascinating mind, always at work, asking and questioning . . . what was it that made one's worth?

He questioned humanity. He asked me that day, "Do you think I'm dumb?" Then he added: "And if so, why? Is it because I'm not part of the farm? Not one of the cattle, standing in line with my hand out, like the rest of them? Are you a product of your money with your big homes and fancy cars? Can you buy yourself, too? Or do you know who you really are? Are you an individual who speaks from the heart and not from your wallet? Do you dress to please or just to be? Are you part of the garden or just another tree?"

Here I was some 15 years later, wondering if this was what my old best friend had been talking about? It hit me in the head like a ton of bricks. It was here that I began to rethink things myself — here in the Canary Islands, on the island of Tenerife, caught inside in the chaos of Playa Las Americas.

Perhaps it was the local history — that the Romanians ran the drug trade through here — that I thought of my old friend Tanner. He was once just like me; he lived and loved the sport of Hawaiian kings. Too bad for him that he traded in his surfboard for long stints in prison. Surfing has always kept me straight.

Although Tanner's whereabouts is unknown to me now, I could imagine him being here with me, pointing at all the fat Europeans walking in every direction like ants hassled out of their secret dens. It actually pains me right now in writing this . . . thinking about Tanner, once known as the nicest person you could hope to meet, who traded in his life and surfboard for cocaine.

Playa Las Americas

From daytime to nighttime, from the shore to the ocean, contradictions scream in every direction. Beginning with the boardwalk that runs through it, Las Americas is littered with people, surrounded by stores, filled with ugly signs all jumbled together, a chaos whipped up like mashed potatoes in hell . . . I can't stop thinking to myself that this is nothing like the Canary Islands I'd imagined .

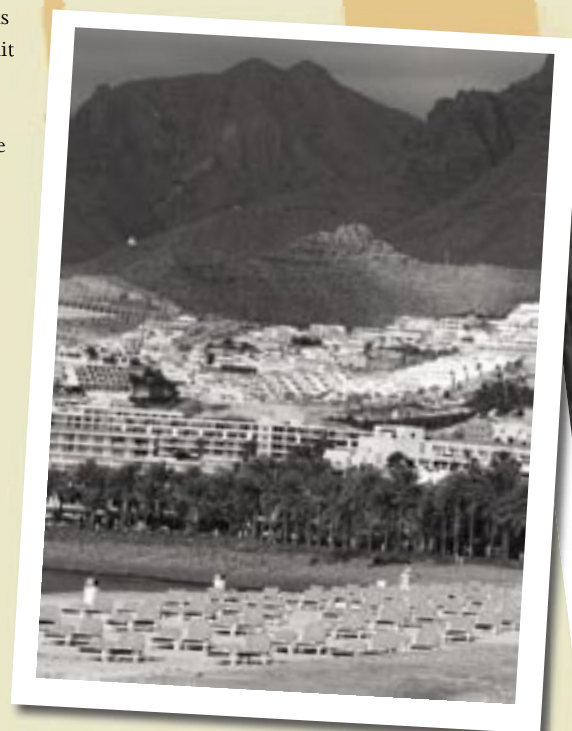
The ocean lies nearby in sharp contrast. It sparkles under the sun's warmth, textured ever so lightly with just a whisper of breeze. A dark blue sea sits out there in peace, its eternal presence guarded by the locals that ride her every day. Strange as it might seem, this would be like protecting Space Mountain at Disneyland.

You walk through town (Las Americas) in the daytime and you can feel the spirit and the ghost of the night before. They had played hard and partied harder in the strip clubs and brothels. You can feel it and see it in the neon flashing lights where it seems that trouble is forever hiding just around the corner. The locals talk about the African immigrants, setting sail and risking it all to make it to one of the Canary Islands. Dangerous, they say . . . even ruthless. They line the boardwalk selling things and bugging the passersby under the watchful eyes of the police, who are sure to keep them moving. It's a cycle that repeats over and over, like an old friend who keeps going back to the drug they call cocaine.

So strange the way some countries can make you feel. This place, Tenerife, is strange. The vibe is strange. The waves were great, but now it's time to move on.

Luckily, in today's world, you can get in a car and drive to wherever it is you want to go. So it was that on an overcast, somewhat windy day we headed up Tenerife's biggest attraction, the snow-covered volcano that rises 3,000 feet above the ocean.

With Will Henry (director of Save





the Waves) and film-maker Vince Deur along for the trip, I felt like a kid on some sort of field trip as those two split the driving. My sense of direction is horrid and with all the confusing roundabouts here, I'd just as soon sit back and give Vince a hard time about his driving. I've suffered too many concussions to drive in these circus-like conditions (at least that's what I tell them).

As we drove the winding road up the mountainside, the atmosphere of the island began to change. Stunning views opened up beneath us as the day changed from warm to cold. Near the top, the slopes were covered in pine trees, and a forest of lava rock spilled down from the volcano towards the surrounding ocean, glistening far below.

Local Boogie

I had heard there was localism in the Canary Islands, but this was silly. I've been to Hawaii more times than I can count, and to Tahiti a half a dozen times, without any hassles. I was taught at an early age to respect the locals and your beach environment (my environment for that matter). I grew up surfing a little reef in front of my parents' home in Laguna Beach, California, and I was once one of those local loudmouths. Luckily, I grew out of it. I say 'luckily' because surfing in its truest form should never be associated with violence or ego-filled bravado. It goes against everything surfing was founded upon, beginning with the spirit of Aloha.

So when I paddled out by myself to a reef that had a mini-Sunset peak firing on the outside with no one except for the local boogie-boarders surfing the inside and off to the right (which was an entirely different wave), I couldn't help but laugh when they lit me up with a full array of insults.

Given that two cameras were documenting my every move, I understood that they worried about us blowing up their sacred spot in the media, but I firmly believe in not revealing the particulars of spots I surf on my travels. That's not my style. In the end, we eventually made friends, and that's what surfing should really be about: respecting one another and becoming friends over the course of the day.



CANARY DREAMS

By Will Henry

On a rainy night in a small town on the north shore of Tenerife, I met up with a group of local guys to play some music. Back home I sing lead vocals in a garage band, and I love the chance to play with different musicians around the world. Music, much like surfing, is a connection that crosses almost any cultural divide. On that particular night, Angel Lobo, President of the Canary Islands Surfing Federation, invited me to sit in as a guest with his reggae band and jam a few tunes. As I entered the home of one of his band mates I was awestruck by the artwork covering the walls – surf shots from spots all over the island, most of their colors faded with age, but all revealing a surfer with a classic surfing style, fading bottom turns, slashing turns, and laying back into beautiful, azure barrels. Angel pointed out one shot that struck me as particularly beautiful – a surfer pulling in backside to a gorgeous, wide-open barrel, laying back casually into the face. “Where is that?” I asked. “That is La Fitenia,” replied Angel, “one of the waves we lost in the ‘80s, so they could build an artificial beach for the hotels in Las Americas.”

Angel introduced me to the other guys in the band, both older than me with graying hair and beer guts, but with an obvious sparkle in their eyes. I asked them who the surfer was in all the pictures. “That’s me,” said one of them, the drummer, whom I will call Frankie. Angel went on to explain that Frankie was once the most revered surfer on the island; that Tom Curren used to stay at his house when he came to town, and that his picture had appeared in many surf magazines over the years. All the same, it appeared that the years had not treated him well. He was walking with a cane, and had just had surgery on his throat, which he explained would hamper his ability to sing that night.

We played music until the wee hours, and what can I say, we connected – the instruments came together and we made beautiful sounds, song after song, as I filled in on vocals. At the end of the night, it was like we were old friends. In the car ride home, I asked Angel what had happened to Frankie’s health. Angel told me that he hadn’t surfed for a very long time. First he lost his favorite wave, La Fitenia, despite leading a local effort to try to preserve it. Next his girlfriend left him, tired of his obsession with waves and music. The loss of both of these true loves broke his heart. He fell into depression and alcohol abuse, and eventually stopped





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Two Brothers

Walking down the ancient cobblestone, rock-riddled road, I was beginning to believe that I was actually in the subtropical paradise that I had imagined the island of Tenerife would be. Will and I followed the road towards the beach past an old farmhouse and down a trail through a flower-filled valley. Beyond, the ocean was a startling dark cobalt blue, and waves broke along a rock-stacked point following the reef's point-like formation on the outside, which made the drop steep and full of boils with a current running sideways like a river.

Sitting on the inside I couldn't help but look up in awe at the vertical cliff looming hundreds of feet above and into the sky. There was a formation at the very top – two huge boulders sitting side by side as if they were looking down on this beautiful beach, which fired off an epic righthander. The twin formation was known as the Two Brothers.



The Journey

Surfing has always been about the journey – the path less traveled some might say, although these days there seem to be more and more surfers every day. But perhaps that only adds more magic to those days when you find the best waves. Yes, the path that all surfers search for, the one that sometimes ends up costing our relationships as we repeatedly abandon our loved ones for periods of time, is all a part of the surfer's dream of surfing perfect waves in strange lands ... and perhaps finding out who we really are.

My trip to Tenerife was nothing short of an inner journey. From the moment we arrived (via frostbitten London) in the tourist district of Tenerife, a town that reminded me more of the TV show *Lost* than the subtropical island I was expecting, I had to adapt to my preconceptions and flow with the reality.

The first couple days of a trip are always the toughest as you try to figure out where to go and where not to go. After a couple of days on Tenerife, we knew where to go. There was no shortage of good waves. But also, in the process of discovering them, I fell in love with surfing all over again. It felt almost as if my surfing career and life had come full circle.

We were supposed to be on a surf trip, but it turned into more of a spiritual awakening along the way. We met with a little resistance, as we do in life, but we kept to the path, and in the end found some great friends. In particular two brothers, who will remain nameless, left a lasting impression on me – two brothers that shared a bond of brotherly love. One was there for the other as he fought his way back from a series of life's hard knocks. Happily, he was once again smiling, surfing, and playing music. It almost seemed as if surfing had saved him.

It doesn't save everyone, though. It didn't save my friend Tanner. But what's so special about surfing is that it does have this power to save people and, who knows, maybe even places, too.

Peace.

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surfing altogether. The band drifted apart, and Frankie became just another bum on the seedy streets of Las Americas.

“But he is turning his life back around,” said Angel. “He has put the band back together, and I know that soon he will be surfing again. Your visit tonight was good for him. It reminded him of how surfing can help to heal his wounds.”

The next morning, James and I paddled out to a surf spot in Las Americas known as Spanish Left – the best wave left on a coastline that once held twice as many spots. Most of the waves in this region were destroyed by a frenzy of development in the 1980s in an effort to cater to the onslaught of tourists arriving from Europe every winter. The Canary Islands receive more than twice the number of visitors per year than the Hawaiian Islands, despite having half the landmass. The impact on tourist zones like Las Americas has been devastating to the natural environment.

There were about five surfers in the water and all were vibing us hard. Stink-eye and numerous insults in Spanish were flying our way. I struck up a conversation with one of the guys, who regarded my attempts at diplomacy with evident suspicion. I told him that we were on the island to meet with the government, to try to save the wave at La Enramada, and that the day before the Ministry of the Environment had agreed to deny the marina proposal that was threatening it. He didn't seem to believe what I was saying. “They are even thinking about removing the seawalls at La Fitenia,” I told him, and he turned to me with a scornful look.

“That's a bunch of shit,” he said. “They will never change this place. Las Americas is ruined, and they will keep going until the rest of the island is the same.”

“Don't you think you can do something to stop it?” I asked.



“We’re surfers. You think they listen to us? It’s a waste of time,” he said, and paddled away. I sat for a while in the lineup and considered what he had just said. If every surfer took his attitude, it’s true, we would stand no chance at preserving what’s left. But on the other hand, I’ve seen what can be accomplished when surfers come together. I decided to try another track, trying to convince one more local surfer to see some hope for the future.

“Hey,” I said to him, “I saw a picture last night of the wave at La Fitenia. I was playing music with an old-time surfer, a guy named Frankie – you know him?”

The guy’s eyes bulged out. “You know Frankie? That guy’s a legend! No way, you know Frankie? You jammed with him?”

“That’s right,” I said, suddenly feeling important. “I also saw that photo of him in the barrel at La Fitenia. What a perfect wave that was. Frankie told me the reef is still there, and there’s a chance we could bring the wave back. I mean, if the government is willing to consider removing the seawall, that’s a good start, don’t you think?”

He paused for a few seconds to digest what I’d just told him. “I guess you’re right. Wow, you hung out with Frankie? Listen, man, if Frankie’s behind it, you have my support.”

The dark mood in the water lifted almost immediately, and we shared waves and stories with the local guys as the sun set over the horizon. Between sets, I thought about what we had accomplished on this trip. Even though we had witnessed the ugly side of surfing, and a tourism industry that had spiraled out of control,

we had also seen that there is hope for a better future for surfers. Tenerife, like other tourist destinations that are popular with the surf crowd, was a place that had finally come to acknowledge the importance of surf tourism to their economy. They also had apparently realized their mistakes, especially in Las Americas, and were looking for ways to fix them. The government officials that we met with, while not surfers themselves, were truly interested in what we had to say about preserving the coast. They seemed to recognize that experienced surfers are, for the most part, experts on issues that relate to the surf zone.

The officials were doubly intrigued by my suggestion to consider removing the seawalls around the island, which most people considered an eyesore, and replacing them with artificial surfing reefs. The logic was perfect: the rocks are already there, and all you would have to do is spread them out, submerge them and place them in the proper form, and voilà! Not only is the ugly wall gone, but in its place is a gorgeous wave, and another reason for surfers to come here on vacation.

In a perfect world, every government would protect each and every one of its surf spots. Frankie’s story of love lost, and thousands of others like his, should never be allowed to happen again. No one should lose a lover to a wealthier man, especially if that man will take away her beauty and hide her from the world.

Maybe we’re not too far away from a world where our governments realize that, the more surfers there are catching good waves, the more happy people there will be.

Will Henry is founder and director of Save The Waves, an organization that protects threatened surf spots around the world. He lives in Santa Cruz, California where he also writes, plays music and raises his family. You can find out more about STW at www.savethewaves.org

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