

NOT JUST ANOTHER INDO BOAT TRIP

Words and Photos by Will Henry

The channel today was dangerous. Between the islands is a distance of only two or three miles – not far, but the currents can be treacherous, especially when combined with such a big swell. Nonetheless Wadi assured Scott that they could make it across. “Are you sure?” asked Scott, not wanting to put anyone’s life at risk just for a good day of surfing.

“No worry, Scott,” said Wadi. He smiled, proud that he was undertaking such an important task. This white man was a frequent visitor to his village during the dry season, and Wadi admired him for his bravery and skill at riding waves.

“The swell is awful big,” replied Scott, even though he sensed he couldn’t change Wadi’s mind.

Wadi had grown up in a village on a small island in the Mentawai chain, and had been taught to navigate by his father, a man with many years upon the sea. He knew the reefs well, how to read the color of the water, the ripples of current on the surface, how to run across the swell so as not to capsize the canoe. His father had faith in his abilities, and now, at age 14, he was entrusted to pilot the large boat, which he had crafted with his father after felling a large tree in the nearby jungle. The family had saved enough money to buy a powerful outboard motor, which made it the fastest boat in their village, of which

Wadi was very proud.

“It’s okay, Wadi,” said Scott. “We can wait until tomorrow.” But he knew the decision had been made.

In the channel the waves were very large indeed. The wind was light but a big groundswell was running, and as it moved against the outgoing tidal currents they grew into waves of immense size and steepness. Wadi couldn’t remember a time when he had seen the swells so big in the channel, but he read the waves with confidence and weaved the canoe safely through.

Just 30 minutes after leaving the shore of his island, they drew near to the reef pass that would lead them into Katiet. Wadi could see the backs of the waves breaking on the reef, the place now famous amongst the white men, the place they call Lance’s Right, or Hollow Trees. The day was sunny, but a sweaty mist hung in the air and made the shoreline difficult to see.

The keyhole, an area of deep water next to the reef, was the only safe path to the beach. Wadi slowed the engine and steered into the keyhole, cautiously eyeing the swells behind him. There were no surfers in the lineup, no boats anchored in the channel like they usually were. “Must be too big to surf,” said Scott nervously.

Large swells were rolling through the keyhole and passing under the boat. Normally the reef would dissipate most of the

swell’s energy, but today the waves were crashing heavily on the sand. After several minutes a lull came and Wadi revved the outboard motor. The boat’s bow touched the sand gently, allowing Scott to exit safely to the beach.

Wadi revved the engine in reverse to back away from the shore, but the water surged back violently behind him and the bow stuck in the sand. Suddenly the boat was dry-docked on the steep beach with a river of shallow current running down the sand into the next wave behind the stern. The boat listed sideways as it slipped backwards. Scott stood helplessly on the dry sand, just feet away from Wadi but powerless to help. “Jump!” he yelled, but Wadi was struggling to keep the boat from capsizing. The wave behind him drew back and spilled onto the boat with great fury, and the boat pitched further sideways, flipping upside down and throwing Wadi into the water beneath it.

The surging wave leapt up the beach and Wadi surfaced next to it. Scott ran down but couldn’t get close enough to grab him. Wadi clung to the side of the canoe, desperately trying to right it, but Scott could tell it was futile. “No, Wadi! No!”

But Wadi still clung on. The next surge pounded on top of him, flipping the boat over again. When the water ran back down the beach, Scott could see Wadi’s body beside it, limp and lifeless. The waves crashed again and again and Wadi did not surface. Moments later Scott pulled his body from the water, but the color had left his skin. He tried to resuscitate him but Wadi’s world had already gone black.

The following day Wadi’s body was returned to his village, where a service was held to remember his short life. His family accepted the news with sadness but no anger. His father spoke at the funeral, and said that the night before Wadi passed away, he had had a dream that Wadi would die that day. The villagers seemed to understand that it was his time to go.

Our boat arrives in the predawn light, dropping anchor in the dark water of the channel. The conditions are amazing: light offshore grooming deep Antarctic lines that have journeyed thousands of unfettered miles across the Indian Ocean to Siberut, the northernmost island in the Mentawai chain. We had studied the wave charts before we left – a massive storm system swinging around Cape Horn was predicted to produce the largest swell event so far this season. The swell had apparently arrived with us – waves and surfers meeting halfway on their voyage across the globe.

We stand on the bow in temporary silence. A semi-conscious fog clouds my head and I try to rub the sleep from my bleary eyes, just risen from a careening bunk filled with jet-lagged



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dreams, an anemic rest from the channel-crossing. The sky is overcast and the air heavy with warmth and moisture. As the first set wave breaks on the outside section of reef, my companions on the deck point excitedly and make their predictions.

“It looks perfect.”

“It’s not too big, I think.”

“No, it looks like a fun size, shoulder-high, let’s get out there and make a few turns!”

We are a group of surfers from Santa Cruz and San Francisco, a loose-knit troop of friends that are all somewhere around our 40th birthdays, possibly approaching some kind of surfing mid-life crisis and in need of solid Indo barrels to cure us of any potential future tomfoolery. Most of us have never been to the Mentawais, but had promised ourselves that at some point in our lives, we would. We aren’t getting any younger, so let’s just do it before we can’t surf the waves properly anymore. Now we find ourselves staring face-to-face with a wave of consequence, and no doubt I’m not the only one contemplating my mortality.

As the first surfer reaches the take-off zone he turns and drops in. Gasps and exclamations erupt on deck from those remaining onboard. The surfer nearly free-falls down the face but luckily catches an edge and pulls up under the curtain. The wave is easily twice his height and we can see him racing the falling lip until he disappears into the barrel and vanishes from sight. A few seconds later, the wave spits forth a plume of mist from its innards and then collapses onto near-dry reef. The surfer still can’t be seen, but his board is tomb-stoning near where he had disappeared. Just before the next wave lands on top of him, we see him surface and then quickly disappear under the next wall.

Kandui is not a wave to be taken lightly at any size. Often called “No Kandui” because of the ever-increasing speed of its barrels, it is scary even at head-high. I have no idea what the name means in Indonesian, although I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised to learn that it meant “Man-Eating Reef” or something similar. Needless to say, at double-overhead, it is downright terrifying.

My stomach is in knots. My muscles feel flaccid and weak, no doubt a result of a two-month flat spell at home and an overload of work, and I worry that my condition is no match for the ferocity of this reefbreak. I begin searching for a valid excuse not to paddle out.

Fortunately some of my colleagues are of a similar mind. As the rest of the set pours down the point all but obliterating the handful of guys who try to ride them, excuses begin to pour forth like prayers in a mosque.

We arrive at Katiet just two days after Wadi’s accident, and hear Scott tell the story of his tragic death. The accident had happened on the same day that we were at Kandui, and it dawns on us that we were enjoying ourselves on the same waves that a few miles away had brought immense sadness to an entire village. Scott is still deeply shaken by the tragedy, still trying to come to terms with the death of a friend. And for what? Surf. It seems a trivial thing to have wasted a life for. But surprisingly, Wadi’s family carries no ill-will towards this foreigner who had played a hand in the death of their son. To an Indonesian, death does not happen by chance; it is God’s will.

On this day at Lance’s Right the waves are a more manageable size, and 10 or so surfers are trading off across the clean, glassy rights. Dark rainclouds loom over the village of Katiet. A few minutes later the wind switches suddenly to sideshore and grows strong. Within seconds the waves become lumpy, the clouds move overhead and the sun disappears. A darkness descends and the rain hits like a sheet. The ominous scene only adds to the apprehension we already feel after hearing Scott’s story, as though the rain had moved in for dramatic effect.

Before long neither the island nor the waves are visible from the boat, enshrouded by the driving torrent. Some of the surfers can be seen paddling back to nearby boats. The rain falls for an hour, then dissipates as quickly as it came, and the sun pierces

through the clouds with blinding brilliance. The wind drops then switches offshore, and instantly the waves are good again. The only difference now is that there are no surfers in the water at all.

Anthony is the first one off the boat. "Bastard!" someone says, envious that he'll have it all to himself until the rest of us can follow suit. Hans and I are next, about five minutes behind Anthony. Daos, our local guide, takes us down the keyhole in the dinghy. But the lineup is mysteriously empty.

"Where's Anthony?" asks Hans.

"I don't know, maybe he got caught inside," I answer.

"I don't see him in there," says Hans with worry.

to get me," he says.

We look out at the empty waves, which are incredibly perfect. Hans and I grab the boards from the front of the dinghy and hit the water. We catch a couple of waves each, but neither of us can shake the fear from our minds. Big, glassy tubes race down the reef. Hans catches another wave and disappears from my view. I paddle up a bit further, now alone in the lineup, to wait for a set wave.

My feet dangle to the sides of my board in water so clear that it almost appears that I am floating on air. Coral heads paint the seafloor below, tinted aqua blue, spattering the bottom with brilliant reds, yellows and whites. The jagged fingers look as sharp as knife blades, millions of serrated edges that could cut through flesh like a ginsu knife. Sealife pulses beneath me. Electric blue parrot fish skitter through the crags of reef in small schools, flashing like neon signs between the set waves.

Suddenly the horizon goes dark. A big set looms far outside. I put my head down and paddle with all I have. The water starts to move off the reef towards the approaching wave. My God, I think, I was already sitting way outside, how big is this set? I crest the next swell and see it. Terror seizes me.

Just before reaching the trough of the wave I realize that I'm not going to make it. The lip is coming down in front of me. I push my board aside and dive as deep as my leash will allow, barely escaping the lip and surfacing behind it with my leash gripping and tugging my ankle. My board pops through the back of the wave behind me. I turn to see an even bigger wave approaching, and realize I will not have time to reel my board back in. Lamely I swim, my board dragging behind me, hoping I can at least save my hide. The amount of concentrated energy forming up in front of me has me in an utter panic. Again I dive deep and this time the wave grabs me, pulling me backwards, but I struggle against it with my leash straining and stretching. Then: Pop! It breaks and my board is gone.

I surface and breathe in deeply, the salt air tasting even sweeter than usual. No one is around, no one bore witness to my nearly disastrous few seconds in the lineup at Lance's Right. The ocean has gone strangely calm, and it if weren't for the lack of my board, I would be wondering if it had happened at all. As I tread water, regaining my breath, I think about how we surfers live for moments like this. Why else would someone try to surf a death-defying wave? Because they give us a feeling of connection to the powerful forces of nature, and through this connection we feel more alive. When I consider the differences between our world and that of

"DAMN AM I GLAD TO SEE YOU!" YELLS HANS AS WE CLIMB OVER THE GUNWALES. ANTHONY IS BLEEDING FROM EVERY LIMB, BUT SMILING. A DEEP GASH RUNS FROM HIS WRIST TO HIS ELBOW.

We reach the inside section to see Anthony's board tombstoning on the most shallow part of the reef, nicknamed "the Surgeon's Table" because of its tendency to cut surfers to shreds. Large, jagged coral heads are poking through the surface, with deep channels between, and Anthony's board is about half out of the water, pointing straight up and rocking back and forth rapidly in the surge.

"Daos!" shouts Hans. "Get us in close!" Both Hans and I dive off the side of the dinghy and stroke towards the thrashing board. My heart is racing. If Anthony is still attached to his leash, he's been under the water for at least a few minutes. I am thinking of Wadi's limp body and hoping I don't see my friend Anthony in the same state at the bottom of the reef.

We reach the reef's edge simultaneously but Hans stops swimming and I hear him yell my name. I bring my head up. Hans looks relieved. "He's in there." He points to the lagoon on the inside of the reef, where I see Anthony treading water. I feel sick to my stomach.

Daos picks Anthony up and returns for us. "Damn am I glad to see you!" yells Hans as we climb over the gunwales. Anthony is bleeding from every limb, but smiling. A deep gash runs from his wrist to his elbow.

"I got caught inside and the current pulled me right in there. Then my leash got wrapped around a coral head and I was held down by four waves before I could get it off my damn foot."

I swallow but can't produce any words. "Thanks for coming



the Mentawai people, I see that they live amongst the rhythms of sea, while we are surrounded by an almost entirely man-made environment. Small wonder that surfing reconnects us to the things in life that are most important.

He who consumes the most calories, wins. Or so it seems onboard the Kiamana, our 100ft wooden ship, with 10 hungry, surfed-out animals attacking each meal as though it were their last. The moment food lands on the table a feeding frenzy erupts that would shame a pack of hyenas. After one particular lunch, as we lean back in our chairs and rub our satiated bellies, a cry is heard below deck. Anthony runs up the stairs. "There's a fucking gila monster in my room!"

We look at him like he is a little girl who just saw a furry white mouse.

"Don't gila monsters live in Japan or something?"

"I thought they were Pokemon creatures."

"I'm serious, guys, go look for yourselves."

A few of the guys go below to investigate. Seconds later they run back up the stairs.

"He's not kidding, it's huge, like a small crocodile."

"What? How the hell did it get on the boat?"

The table erupts into giddy conversation. "So where is it now?" asks Shane, the boat's owner.

"Well, uh, we locked it in your cabin, actually. It's under your bed." Laughs all around.

Two of the Indonesian crewmen grab cleavers from the kitchen and head downstairs wearing serious expressions. Moments later they, too, run up the stairs like a couple of schoolchildren, wide-eyed and giddy. No blood on the cleaver. Daos shakes his head. "Very big lizard."

Hans and I go downstairs to see for ourselves. Hans grew up in the forests of Mendocino and is now a commercial fisherman in Santa Cruz, so large creatures are in his repertoire. Slowly, we open the door to Shane's cabin. We hear a rustling sound coming from under the bed and lean our heads in when suddenly a large black reptile, at least three feet in length, leaps out at us. It lands on top of a pile of clothes by the door, then leaps again, this time towards the

window of the cabin, which it bounces off. Hans slams the door.

"Holy shit!"

"What the hell is that thing?"

"I don't know, but more importantly, how are we going to get it off the damn boat?"

After a few minutes of discussion, Hans constructs a makeshift noose out of some string and a fishing gaff, then ducks below and opens Shane's door once again. After a great deal of noise and commotion, Hans suddenly comes leaping out with a massive reptile bucking and writhing before him. He puts the giant lizard on the floor of the galley, and the others place a plastic laundry basket on top of it to contain it until we can figure out what to do with it next.

"It's a monitor lizard."

"Man, look at the teeth on that thing!"

Daos and the other crewmen want to hack it up with the cleaver, but we decide to turn the laundry basket into a temporary cage, then to return the monitor lizard to shore via the dinghy. After employing a bodyboard and an excessive amount of duct tape, we believe we have fashioned a cage sturdy enough for the task.

"Hey look, someone actually found a good use for a bodyboard."

"It's probably as close to danger as it's ever been."

The cage is lowered carefully onto the bow of the dinghy and Daos starts the motor. At the beach, we hand the cage down to Daos, who has just disembarked, when suddenly he drops it and runs up the sand and into the palm trees. The monitor had managed to wriggle out of the laundry basket and had landed at his feet. Daos had apparently decided that he liked his toes the way they were, and high-tailed it for safety. The monitor had disappeared completely.

We scan the beach but can see nothing, just white sand and the shallow blue water of the lagoon. "It must have gone into the water," says Hans. "Some kind of water monitor."

"Unbelievable," I add.

We wait. After a few minutes I spot it coming in through the shorebreak, its long neck peering out of the whitewater as it bodysurfs towards shore. It runs up the sand and hides under a log.

"Ever seen a lizard surf?" asks Hans. "You just did."



Two days left in our trip, eight days of perfect surf already under our belts. A storm brews and blows the surf out. The wind comes from the Northwest, ruining all prospects for surf in the area where we are currently anchored. We have to make a choice: stick around and hope for a change in weather conditions, or blaze to another destination that will handle the wind? As the Bintang's pop and the wind intensifies, we decide to look for greener pastures.

The journey northwards is extremely rough. The boat creaks and moans as each wave jolts the bow. Even simple tasks become painfully difficult as we toss and roll upon the uneven seas. This is one evening when the beer will not taste so sweet. Finally we retire, weary from trying to stay upright.

I share the forward-most cabin with Anthony, where we have thus far managed to co-habit in a queen-size bunk with no mistaken nighttime contact. Tonight I am kept awake by a sudden homophobic paranoia. It's like trying to sleep on horseback. I am worried that a big wave will throw me into bed with my bunkmate. Finally at 3am, I wander topside to get some fresh air.

The rain has quelled to a light drizzle. The bow cuts through black water, slapping against the swell, and lightning flashes in distant clouds. I sit in the rain and feel the cool mist on my face, and wonder what the Indonesian crew must think of us, risking our safety once again to look for surf. We could have stayed in our last anchorage and waited for the weather to turn favorable again,

but in our impatience decided to move onwards, despite the storm. The boat was taking hard hits in these seas. I would guess that most of these islanders would see us as foolish. To an Indonesian, the sea often brings death, and is a force to be feared. How strange that the same force is our main source of enjoyment.

I sit in the bow until I am wet, feeling the pulse of the weather. Finally I sense the weight of my weariness and head to the galley and stretch out on the sofa. I awake when I hear the diesel engines slow, signaling our arrival at the next port of call. The sun has just risen in the sky as I poke my head outside.

The waves are small, which after our stretch of perfect luck almost seems a reminder that we are still on earth, and not in some surfer's version of heaven. We spend the day snorkeling and fishing. The next day, the last day of our trip, the waves come back up, and we're treated to a series of fun sessions at Nipussi.

The following morning we are in Padang, a teeming Indonesian city on the west coast of Sumatra. The bemo carries us to the airport, weaving through the busy, dusty streets, narrowly avoiding the myriad bicycles, pedestrians and scooters that skirt in and out of traffic.

The scene, to a westerner's eyes, appears to be complete mayhem. I notice one guy on a bicycle in front of us, peddling along casually without a care in the world as cars come within inches of him at every pass. Our bemo driver is being

edged out of his lane by another car to his right, who is trying to pass a bus to the other side of him, and up ahead I can see that the bicyclist is directly in our path. I suck in my breath. The bemo driver honks his horn at the car to his right, but nothing gives. A group of cars approaches us from the other direction, seemingly in a battle of nerves of all their own, and the whole entourage appears doomed to a horrible, multiple-car collision.

I have seen this scene transpire time and again in Asian countries, but for some reason I never can get used to it. I am convinced every time that I am going to be flung through the windshield. My cohorts in the bemo also look nervous. Nonetheless, our driver does not let up on the gas, but instead accelerates to try to pass the car on his right. The bicyclist is now just seconds from being run down by our car. Everyone tenses up and prepares for impact. Our driver is gunning the engine and doesn't appear to be willing to give an inch, but at the last second, the car to our right lets up and our bemo slides in front of him, narrowly avoiding the bicyclist. I turn back to see the cyclist's face, utterly calm, either completely oblivious to the fact that he was almost flattened by our bemo, or completely unworried because if today were the day, it would have happened whether he wanted it or not.

I think back to the way that Wadi's family had handled the news of their son's death, and how in some strange way, their attitude mirrored that of the bicyclist in Padang. I realize that the

Indonesian culture does not worry about danger the way that westerners do. We live in a society that is obsessed with safety, forced statistics day and night, so much so that sometimes we fear life itself. Our mortality has become an obsession. On the contrary, Indonesians feel that if it is their day to be flattened by a bemo or killed by a rogue wave, then there is nothing they can do to avoid it. Perhaps we see this as naive, but then again, we are the ones living in fear.

Maybe if I could adopt the attitude of a Padang bicyclist I would have charged the surf that day at No Kandui. Perhaps, without that western apprehension I would have paddled out and gotten the best barrels of my life. Then again, maybe I would have ended up getting pitched over the falls and bottom-trawling the reef with my face. Endless scenarios to contemplate on the long journey home.

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