

# A fubb moon moment

## Dead ends, Big Macs and righthanders

Words by James Pribram • Photos by Will Henry

I felt the plane bank to its left as we began our descent into Panama City. The scene out the window reminded me of an old black-and-white movie – the full moon above cascading a white drape over the ocean below, some trace of a breeze giving the surface of the water below the texture of small goose bumps, which seemed to shimmer and dance, defining a running swell and a stack of lines marching in for miles and miles. As if this wasn't enough, larger-than-life freighters were scattered across the ocean, anchored and waiting for entry into the Panama Canal. Their lights only added to the festivities below ... as if Fourth of July had come early.



Of all of the amazing moments in my travel experiences – the sights, smells, and different cultures that I have been fortunate enough to know – the good, the bad and the ugly – flying into Panama City just past midnight under a full moon was a perfect jewel. I knew and felt that it was a moment to cherish, and I did, but there was also this emotional connection. This kind of moment seemed to translate into making me want to give something back to surfing, the sport of kings, and to the very planet that offers us these moments and this way of life that we live. Right then, I knew this trip was going to be special. I looked over at my traveling companion, Will Henry, the infamous director and creator of the Save the Waves organization, and we had one last “cheers” before landing.

## THE LIFE OF THE NIGHT

Once Will and I were on the ground, we had to figure out where we were going. We knew two things: We needed to find a guy named Doug and, more importantly, we needed to locate the Playa Teta, our primary reason for coming to Panama. We had received word that the government was planning to build a dam on this mighty stream, which would then interrupt the natural sand flow, thus threatening to eradicate an epic surf spot. Our mission was clear: Get the lay of the land, the flow of events, and do what we could to prevent this ecological disaster from taking place!

We were ready to go – to meet with our informant and investigate his claims first-hand, and then to mobilize the international resources necessary to halt this atrocity. However, our mission would have to wait until morning.

After securing our luggage and getting through customs, I caught the eyes of a







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Panama

man who claimed to be a cab driver; in Panama, you can never be too sure. I’d heard of criminals doubling as cabbies, who could turn a short ride to the hotel into your worst nightmare. But after a short conversation, it seemed that Daniel was the right man for the job. Get us safely to a hotel, please!

It was 2am and sleep was sounding great, but Daniel had other ideas. Regaling us with Panamanian tales of epic gambling and high stakes, we were whisked off on a nocturnal tour of Panama City – past the projects (which were everything and more than South Central Los Angeles) ... past the strip clubs and casinos ... we made our way to a bar in the middle of town – 3am and the place was just going crazy! People dancing on tables, techno music blasting loud enough to break windows, sinuous working girls working the room, armed guards watching over the scene. If Vegas is America’s Sin City, Panama must be its Latin relative.

### CHASING THE GOOSE

Later in the morning, we took things into our own hands, securing a rental car and getting directions from a helpful young woman, who advised us that it was very easy to get Playa Teta from here – it was a mere hour’s drive away. I should have known better. Any time you’re in a strange land, you know a simple drive is going to be a wild goose chase. ... or maybe an Easter egg hunt ... a search for the pot of gold at the rainbow’s

end. Our first mistake was thinking this would be easy. Our second mistake was heading off in the wrong direction.

The so-called “streets” of Panama City crisscross like a puzzle. The effect was dizzying, a feeling which intensified the deeper we got into the matrix. Some streets would just end. Others would split off into four or five different directions. Street signs were often (literally) made of cardboard. Traffic jams. Honking and more honking. Exhaust so thick it seemed the whole country was smoking. People driving on the wrong side of the road. It was maddening ... lost in a life-size maze.

The first hour was humorous. But with hangovers reverberating in our temples, driving around in circles got really old really quick. Luckily, in the third hour of this madcap driving mishap, we somehow found ourselves on the correct street, and then on a bridge that took us over of the breathtaking Panama Canal.

Just passing over the canal is intense. The hundred-year-old man-made waterway is massive. The water looks murky and brown. Huge freighters are stacked up below as you pass a hundred feet overhead. Suspended in mid-air, eyeballing the scene below, it almost feels like a roller coaster ride.

### THE RIO MAR SURF CAMP

Four hours after the canal, we finally we reached our destination. Many surfers dream about saving up money and

staying at a surf camp with perfect waves. Our dreams weren’t fulfilled at the so-called Rio Mar Surf Camp. Walking this stretch of beach with Will one day when it was flat, it looked as though there could be a few fun spots to surf when there was swell – nice sections of cobblestone bottom and potentially good reef setups. But the camp itself sucked.

The operation was situated on a slope a few hundred yards north of Playa Teta, which appeared to be the nearest surfing spot. The place looked like a small roach motel, with the guest rooms sharing common walls. Although it was located above the beach and overlooked palm trees, there was no beach in sight. We stayed in a tiny, dirty room with barely enough space for our two beds. The walls were plastered with stickers and old surfing posters. The bathroom stunk to high heaven, and there was a leaky air conditioner for which we paid extra. And this was the so-called “luxury room.”

As a bonus, the owner of this fine establishment was rude and acted as if he was doing his paying customers a favor by letting them stay there, and his “help” was just as bad. The kid who worked there was more inclined to hang out sleeping in a hammock than get up off of his lazy ass to help. Funny – we paid to stay there, but they acted like it was an inconvenience for them to have us around!

One night the owner was hammered and blaming the gringos for cutting off public access to some of the nearby beaches. He even named Surfrider Foundation in some sort of conspiracy theory, but Will and I couldn’t begin to decipher his



drunken babble.

It gets worse.

Imagine a surf camp with no water. No food except a little leftover cold beans and rice. Even worse was the first morning’s cup of coffee ... and having to pick out the ants before drinking it, because that was easier than trying to get the kid to pour a new cup ... and, yes, the coffee was cold.





out of the '80s and smiled a lot. As I recall, his first words to us were, "Hey dudes, glad you could make it!"

So ... perhaps he exaggerated a little in his emails. For all of his constant chatter, once we got up to the Playa Teta, I was quite simply confused, and so was Will. Where is it, we wondered.

"Dudes, you see across the river up there? That's where they started digging. Can you see that?"

I could see where someone had dug into a slope on the other side of an open space of dirt and trees. But where was the river? I wondered aloud.

"Dude! It's right down there under the brush," he assured me. "It's hard to see right now because it's the dry season, bro."

At best, it appeared that the Rio Teta might, in fact, be a small stream in the rainy season, but a river? Doubtful. How, I puzzled, could they be planning to build a dam here? It was flat on both sides with no defined channel or gully. More importantly, what were they going to dam? There was no water!

### BAZOOKA SCOTT

After the letdown at Playa Teta, we stopped by the home of a friend of Doug's, who makes his own homemade moonshine. An expat surfer and a man who is apparently never short on laughter, Scott Williams told us some great stories as we enjoyed a few beers and whiled away a few hours. I enjoyed listening to Scott and Doug arguing over which swell was best for Playa Teta. A classic dropout surfer, Scott showed us a trophy that he'd won in the Bells Beach Pro in the early 1970s: third place. Not bad.

Leading us on a tour of his house, Scott showed off his collection of poisonous snakes, guns, and then the almighty bazooka that was sitting on his mantelpiece? Who was this guy? I wondered. Some GI Joe? I knew there was more to him than met the eye, so I asked, what else do you have?

He looked me right in the eyes and, with a devilish smirk, stated: "I have 25 pounds of C4 buried in the back yard!"

C4 is a very high-velocity military plastic explosive. I asked him why he had it, and Scott answered: "In case they come."

I never learned who "they" were.

Scott's was a nicely faded, white, two-story house on a big piece of land with a long, gated driveway. It was a classic bachelor pad on the beach that was messy and dirty with fond memories captured and framed on the walls. What I loved most about this home was that you could tell from everything around that Scott was always doing something: playing with his guns or making moonshine or working on a new project in the garage. Scott reminded me of a true handyman or, better yet, '80s television character, MacGyver.

### GOOD MEMORIES

After spending a couple of sleepless nights at the Rio Mar Surf Camp and having zero luck finding good waves, Will and I headed up the coast for Playa Venao, which was located about six

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### FINDING DOUG

Doug was the reason we came to Panama. His repeated pleas for help in preventing the damming of the Playa Teta River had been emailed to Will at Save the Waves headquarters. Doug had reached out to Will for help in saving the "perfect" wave of Playa Teta, which would be threatened by the proposed dam project which would shut down the natural flow of sand that makes Playa Teta the wave that it is. Luckily finding Doug proved to be much easier than crossing the Panama Canal.

Doug was a funny guy, literally. An expat, out of shape and wearing an old pair of beige corduroy Op shorts, he was straight



hours away, on the Pacific side of the country. We arrived just before sunset, and the waves looked fun as can be – chest-to-head-high, high tide double-ups reforming on the inside ... and only three guys out. Frantic to get into the water after our drive, Will and I traded waves until dark.

Serendipitously, Playa Venao is a place that I will always hold close to my heart. It was here, in good 3-4ft waves, that I surfed against my childhood idol Tom Curren during the 2001 Billabong Pro. We battled for three heats in a row. After one of them, in which he placed first and I took second, he came up to me, put out his hand, and said, "You won that heat. I'm not sure what the judges were watching, because every time I looked up you were catching the best waves and ripping."

The whole time Will and I surfed there, I kept thinking back to that day and that contest. I could still hear the roar of the crowd and see the people lining the beach cheering. It was surreal to be there again ... without the contest, without the crowd ... like it was all just a dream.

### THE ZOO

After surfing Playa Venao, we checked into this funky hotel that was more like a zoo. I can't remember the name of the place, but we called it the Zoo anyway. There were wild monkeys that peed on you while you were eating, emus that attacked you, wild parrots hollering at you ...

plus other exotic animals. A few days here would be plenty for anyone who doesn't enjoy being attacked by huge birds – birds that don't fly but they chase you when you run from your car to your room. The only safety from these raptors came the moment you closed the door behind you!

It was not uncommon to see one of the Zoo's staff fighting off the birds with a broom. Nothing like a good old chicken fight in Panama, si?





## THE SWELL OF THE DECADE

Two days before we were to leave Panama, we got skunked. Although we had seen those tantalizing swell lines the night we flew in, and it was rumored that there was a good swell on the way, you tend to hear a rumor like that every day on a surf trip. But for days on end we had driven and driven – perhaps in circles, but driving for miles and days, just the same – trying to find good waves.

And then one morning – suddenly – the waves were just freakin’ huge. So huge that we saw outer reefs breaking with thundering 30ft faces. So huge in fact that we saw a giant left peeling into a row of boats. Will tried to get me to paddle out.

My only board was a 6’5”? No thanks.

So we were on the road again, heading towards Playa Teta, hoping the swell might be a little smaller there – a place we hadn’t given much thought to since leaving it



some days earlier. We drove for six and half hours. Starving, we hit a McDonald’s along the way. Yes we did, because it was nice to be somewhere – anywhere – we could actually get a meal ... even if was McDonald’s. After all, we’d been living for days on PowerBars and extremely overcooked chicken (or something). I proudly ordered five Big Macs that day, and Will laughed at me, asking what was I gonna do with five Big Macs? Save them, I answered, as I polished off two.

Deep into our drive, we decided to take a dirt maze (a.k.a road) to try to find some surf. Left, right, left ... we went zig-zagging our way down towards the coast. Making one final left, I looked over my shoulder and saw a peeling righthander. I squawked for Will to stop the car and before he could I was out the door and gazing out into the ocean in complete shock at a perfect right point that was a mile long. No kidding.

This was the moment that all surfers travel for. This was gold unreeling at the end of the rainbow. There was a rat pack of guys surfing it, but it was gold nonetheless!

The wave broke over a long, shallow, cobblestone reef, and the point looked just like Jeffrey’s Bay. Seriously. It was hard paddling out as wave after wave zippered over the reef, and the wind was howling offshore, making it difficult to see once you were on a wave. But after my first wave a bodyboarder paddled up to me and said, “This is a miracle, enjoy it!”

I surfed for hours and was getting seriously dehydrated. After catching a wave that I rode for a mile, I ran to the car and got a bottle of water. I drank it while walking back up the point to paddle out again. About halfway up I finished the water, chucked the bottle, then looked around to see if anyone was watching, which there wasn’t. I felt bad, but justified it to myself, promising I would pick it up after surfing. But being a big believer in karma, I was worried.

And then it happened. While walking out over the rocky beach at the point, staring at the perfect waves, I stepped on a sharp rock that sliced through my right foot like a hot blade through butter.

It was now Will’s turn to surf. Indeed, the pent-up, surf-stoked little kid in him relished the opportunity, and he surfed the mile-long perfection into darkness. The same bodyboarder who had told me to enjoy this miracle befriended Will as well. He invited us to stay the night at his house along with some of their friends. After a huge Chinese dinner feast at a local restaurant we partied into the sunrise.

## PLAYA TETA

Although we were feeling a little hung over, we were stoked to have finally got such good waves! We had decided to give Playa Teta one last look to see if it was getting any of the swell action. I wasn’t too up for surfing, though; my foot was swollen, sore, and taped together ... and we were both hungry ... but it was early, so there would be nothing open for a while. Will began to tell me how starving he was. The whole time I was laughing, and then I started talking more and more about food, and Will was getting more and more voracious the more I teased him. So when I whipped out two of the three Big Macs that I’d stashed wrapped up in a towel under some trash in the back of the car, his eyes lit up like a little kid on Christmas morning. After one bite, Will confessed that there was nothing in the world better than a cold Big Mac.

As for me, with my lacerated foot, I was over surfing; I just wanted to head back to Panama City and wait for our plane. But somehow Will talked me into taking just one more look at the wave at Playa Teta. It was high tide and mushy, nothing too special, but Will was fired up. I told him to go surf.

When he finally returned to the car three hours later, Will was stoked and asked me if there was any way I could surf on my foot? I asked him if it was good, and he said “Yes!” – with the same squawking voice that I’d used the day before.

I was out there in minutes, for hours. Now I knew after



surfing that wave why the locals were so worried about saving Playa Teta. It’s not much of a river, but it’s a damn good wave.

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# Panamania

By Will Henry

In late 2005, Save the Waves Coalition received a series of desperate messages regarding the threat to Playa Teta, a rivermouth break near Panama City. After concocting a seemingly bogus environmental impact study (EIS), an independent company had begun construction of a hydroelectric dam that would block the Rio Teta, and local surfers were afraid that the dam would affect the waves by robbing sand flow to the high-quality reef and beachbreak at the river's mouth. Another familiar story. Another case of private interests trying to make a profit at the expense of the environment, and a local government ignoring a legitimate plea from surfers, fishermen, and landowners who stood to lose a special place so that somebody else could get rich.

Doug Allen, a Panama-born, gringo surfer, had taken up the cause of fighting the project. He had already written numerous letters to the government of Panama; he had demanded an independent environmental study of the dam's downstream effects, which had been completely ignored in the original assessment. The private company, Hidroeléctrica San Carlos SA, had hired their own cronies to write the EIS, but had not addressed any of its downstream effects, including reduced sand flow to the ocean, saltwater intrusion into the lagoon, and impacts on fish and other wildlife.

Save the Waves leapt into action and contacted the government, as well as initiating a letter-writing campaign from surfers around the world, to demand the project be stopped until a better study could be conducted. The government listened and the project halted, as Save the Waves funded the first stage of a secondary EIS, which was completed in early 2006. This first study has already illuminated faults and omissions in the preliminary EIS. Luckily, it appears that the project will remain in limbo until all stages of the new study are complete.

Our visit to the Rio Teta in June 2006 proved how necessary it is to visit the places we are working so hard to save. Doug took us to his house by the river, and we walked down the hill through the trees to the river's edge. The area was strikingly beautiful, and we could immediately understand Doug's motivation for wanting to preserve his own little slice of paradise. We swam in the cool river, its water brown and murky, surrounded by a jungle alive with birdsong and the buzz of insects. After our swim, Doug drove us to a lookout above the proposed dam site, and the early stages of excavation were visible on the opposite side of the river valley. Deep cuts had been gouged out of the red earth and some heavy equipment idly stood nearby.

What immediately puzzled me was: why in the world would anyone want to dam this little river? The river's flow was minimal – by most standards a medium-sized stream – and furthermore the banks of the river were obviously composed of soft dirt, which would never provide the support to hold back a large body of water. Even more puzzling was the fact that the amount of electricity generated from such a dam would probably only power a few light bulbs – hardly worth the expense, let alone the damage it would cause to the environment. We asked Doug what he thought about our observations.

"It's just a land grab," he replied. "I've heard rumors that the land around here is owned by a bunch of developers who want to build new homes. This is the driest part of Panama," he explained, "and if they want to keep building houses, they are going to need more water." The claim the dam's proponents were making about generating electricity was obviously a con, intended to get



support from the government, to make it look like their project would benefit the population at large.

The more we explored the area around Playa Teta, the clearer the bigger picture became. Panama is being carved up and sold to the highest bidder. The beachfront is crammed with what seem to be vacation homes for the world's wealthy. Billboards litter the highway, advertising new resorts, golf courses, homes, and condominiums for sale. The place seemed to be in the throes of a literal feeding frenzy of real estate development.

We stayed at the Rio Mar Surf Camp that night and met Allen Barnes, the camp's owner. Barnes, a native Panamanian who pilots ships on the canal by day, has surfed the area for decades. Over the years he has seen the worst side of this rapidly paced development, and his anger was palpable. "These fucking gringos come here and buy up all the land, and now the local people can't even find a path to the beach to go fishing or surfing or whatever," he practically shouted at us, as we sipped lukewarm beer under the camp's palapa. The fact that we were gringos didn't seem to faze him a bit.

"What about Playa Teta," I asked, "and the problem with the sand?"

"It's all the same shit," he replied. "For years they were taking the sand off the beaches with bulldozers, for cement to build all these houses, and now there's almost no beach left. And then the gringos start whining about their houses washing into the sea."

Point taken, but who is really to blame? Further thought would place it squarely on the government of Panama, which has the responsibility of creating and enforcing proper environmental policy, as well as protecting the rights of the common citizen. The problem, however, is nothing new. The same mistakes are being made all over the world, as those with the biggest balances in their back accounts seem to have the greatest influence over the politicians that make the laws and the agencies that enforce them. Look almost anywhere – Costa Rica, Nicaragua ... hell, even Florida – and it's the rich guys with houses on the beach that seem to call the shots, even if it ends up screwing the rest of us.

By the end of our trip we had a better grip on the real problems that Panama faces in its immediate future. Panama is a prime example of how big money can corrupt government policy. Short-term gains are almost always given precedence over long-term sustainability. The problem is not confined to Panama, either. The same mistakes are being made all over the globe, over and over again, and those of us who love the ocean are getting shafted. Our responsibility as the world's citizens is to support the groups that are fighting to protect what is left on this planet. A dam on the Rio Itata is only a drop in the world's bucket, and the bucket is spilling over.

*Will Henry, a frequent contributor to **The Surfer's Path**, is Executive Director of the Save the Waves Coalition. For more information about Playa Teta and threats to other surf spots in the world, visit: [www.savethewaves.org](http://www.savethewaves.org)*

