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YVON CHOUINARD

RCJ

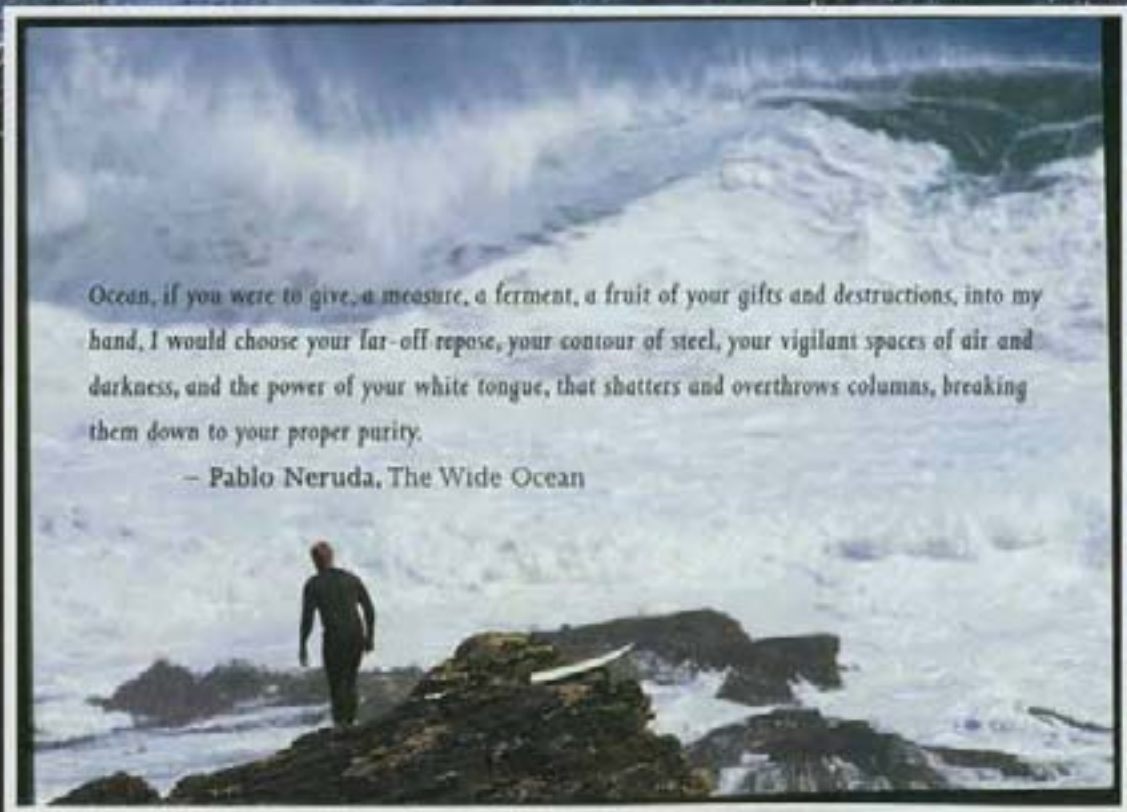
RIVER SURFING

YEMEN

CHILE

Main shot:
A lone pilgrim
contemplates with
another empty
Chilean left while
Mara, Saint of the
Sea, looks. There is a
sense of purity down
here, where there
are still more waves
than surfers.

Right:
Tom Houle plays for
a ball. La Punta.



Ocean, if you were to give, a measure, a ferment, a fruit of your gifts and destructions, into my hand, I would choose your far-off repose, your contour of steel, your vigilant spaces of air and darkness, and the power of your white tongue, that shatters and overthrows columns, breaking them down to your proper purity.

— Pablo Neruda, *The Wide Ocean*

Exploring Chile's nether regions

Words by Dean LaTourrette. Photography by William Henry and Dean LaTourrette.

A person wearing a dark, hooded robe stands on a dark rock in the foreground, looking out at the ocean. The ocean is a deep blue with white-capped waves breaking in the distance. The scene is captured in a cinematic, slightly desaturated style.

Save it for later



You never know

If there are three words regarding surf travel that I have learned over the years, they are these. Indeed, many a surf discovery has unfolded not just out of blind luck, but by a stubborn refusal to accept what is commonly known without actually seeing it for oneself.

Flying high above this remote, unspoiled coastline in the southern hemisphere, the five of us attempt to see for ourselves something, anything, that might resemble a rideable wave. We crane our heads from side to side like pilots straight out of a Top Gun flight-training exercise, straining to stay focused on the breaking waves below. A bending spoke-wheel lefthander emptying into a sandy bay? A rivermouth left and right? Maybe.

'El Diplomático', the perpetual stateside wanderer who had met us via overnight bus in Puerto Negro and who absolutely lives for the hunt, furiously sketches the coastline on a hand-drawn map, marking X's at each hint of promise. Nine years my junior, he barks out orders over the roar of the plane as if commanding the maiden voyage of a Spanish galleon. "Ask the pilot to circle lower!" he shouts. Maybe ... you just never know.

Two nights before, in the midst of a torrential downpour, we had pulled into a gloomy port town and sought shelter in a dank, musty hotel room. Short days. Long nights. Apprehension crept in as I shivered cold and wet under the covers. Familiar pangs of longing loitered in my belly, and I wondered what we are doing here, so far south, at the beginning of winter no less.

Doubts were washed away the following morning as we awoke to crystal-clear blue skies and not the faintest hint of wind. Our first stop on this journey was Parque Pumalín, a private nature reserve created by clothing-mogul-turned-conservationist Douglas Tompkins (Esprit) — 738,000 acres of pristine native temperate rainforest, roughly the size of Yosemite National Park, stretching from the mountainous spine of the Argentine border to Pacific coast, making it the largest private park of its kind in the world.

I am traveling with an eclectic cast, including Will Henry,

professional photographer and executive director of Save The Waves Coalition. Save The Waves has maintained an ongoing interest in coastal Chile after a series of the country's best pointbreaks fell under threat from a since-scrapped marina development project.

Also on board is Terry Gibson, fishing and surf scribe and a recognized expert in coastal management issues. This is Terry's first trip to Chile, and between the bountiful fish to the south and the abundant waves to the north he is, in his own words, "happier than a dog with two peters." We do our best to absorb his seemingly endless knowledge of fisheries management and coastal ecology (as well as his penchant for southern colloquialisms).

'El Diplomático', the hardcore traveler personified, hails from California's central coast and has been circumnavigating the globe in search of waves — hard-to-find waves, obscure waves — for the better part of a decade. ED is the real deal, unfettered from a world of modern media and pre-packaged adventure travel. His personal video and still images library could fill a hundred magazines, yet he staunchly refuses to sell a single picture. His repeated and insistent requests for anonymity only serve to enhance his underground status in our eyes.

Flying south in a 1982 Cessna six-seater, we bump and lurch our way towards the famed Pumalín, much to the dismay of Terry, who quite seriously proclaims he'd rather be out at 20ft Mavericks on a 6'5" board than bouncing around in a Cessna like a puppet on a string. Salmon farms dot the fjords below in a succession of hula-hoops, while the reddish-green colors of autumn paint the jutting walls of the native forest. Snaking rivers continually feed these steel-blue inlets, which wind their way southward.

Our pilot, Rodrigo, expertly sets us down in the midst of all this beauty, casually floating into one of the many airstrips put in place by Tompkins & Co. There we are met with 4x4s by Boris, who leads us on a ground tour of the park. While we are mountains and fjords away from the nearest breaking wave, we

Top left: Flying over the southern Chilean coastline — the optimum way to chart its infinite potential. 'El Diplomático' diplomatically stays in the shade, diligently getting the goods.

Top right and opposite: The land is as pristine as the sea down here — in some cases thanks to protective purchases, like Parque Pumalín, the largest private nature reserve in the world. Should the waves be, too?



“OVER DINNER, WHILE PERUSING A SERIES OF BOOKS AND BROCHURES ON THE PARK, WE STUMBLE ACROSS PHOTOS OF THE COAST WHICH UNWITTINGLY YET UNMISTAKABLY REVEAL SURF POTENTIAL. REAL POTENTIAL.”

are nonetheless there with a purpose – to see the Tompkins operation up close, to see what has been accomplished through setting up a series of land trusts as private ecological parks in a developing nation, where the environment and progress are often at odds with one another.

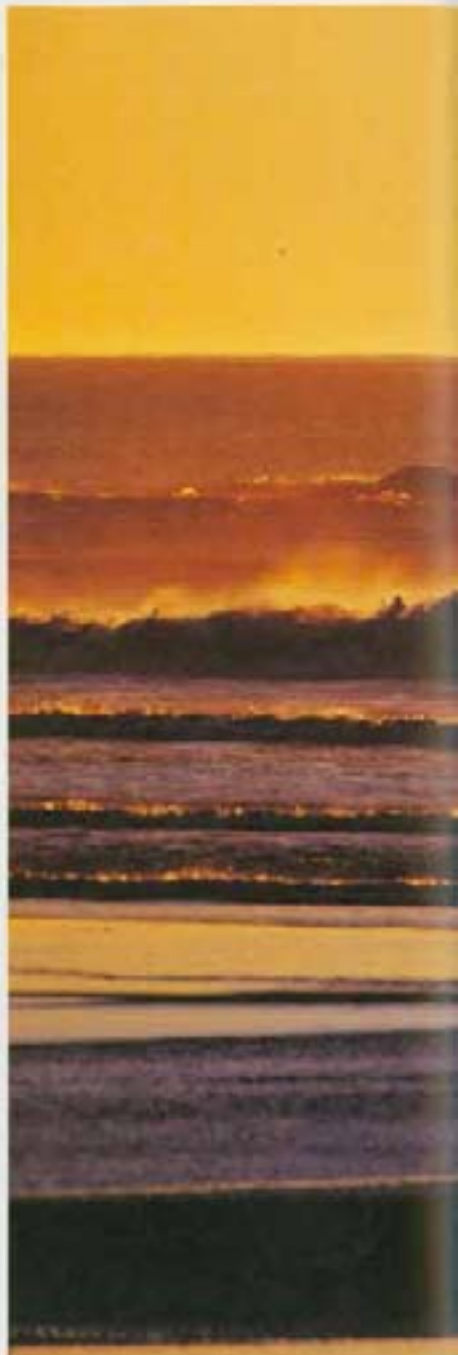
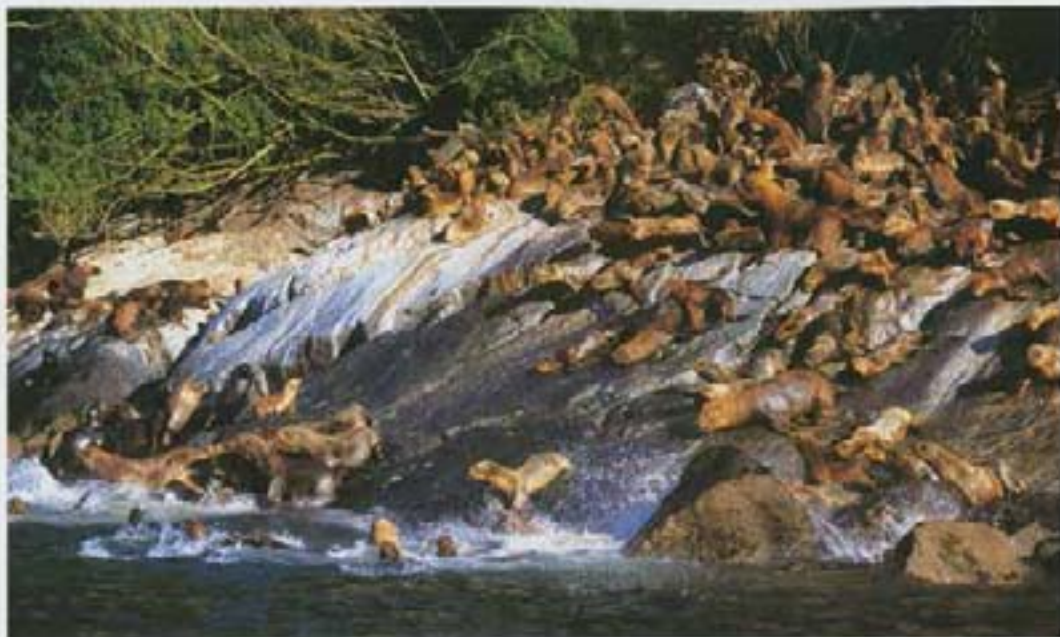
Drifting in the back of our minds: could something similar be done on a smaller scale to protect cherished surfing breaks? The concept of creating a “surfological preserve”, as Terry put it, no longer seems a pipe dream. To Will and Terry, who collectively have seen and fought to save dozens of threatened surfing waves throughout the world, the idea of proactive conservation to protect breaks before they ever fall under threat is a keen one.

We spend the day touring the riches of the park, a naturalist’s fantasy realized. While Chile has relatively low

faunal diversity, it is host to thousands of endemic plant species, most of which are contained within the park’s borders. With approximately 20ft of average annual rainfall in the park, the surrounding evergreen forests are true temperate rainforests. And with the sun shining brightly upon us on a late-fall afternoon, we would be wise to appreciate our good weather fortune.

On impulse we choose to stay the night in the park, in cabañas at the edge of the fjord. A grand decision. We’re treated to stellar cuisine, a warm fire, and a steady flow of Chilean cabernet. Over dinner, while perusing a series of books and brochures on the park, we stumble across photos of the coast which unwittingly yet unmistakably reveal surf potential. Real potential. For all our group’s environmental pedigree, at heart we are still surfers on the hunt, and we jump around like school





Top -
Seal party. The shark debate continues among surfers down here: are there many great whites in these waters? In ecological terms, there should be.

Above -
Local señorita.

Right -
Another golden surf moment. It seemed that a new reefing left lay in wait around every corner on this serrated coastline.

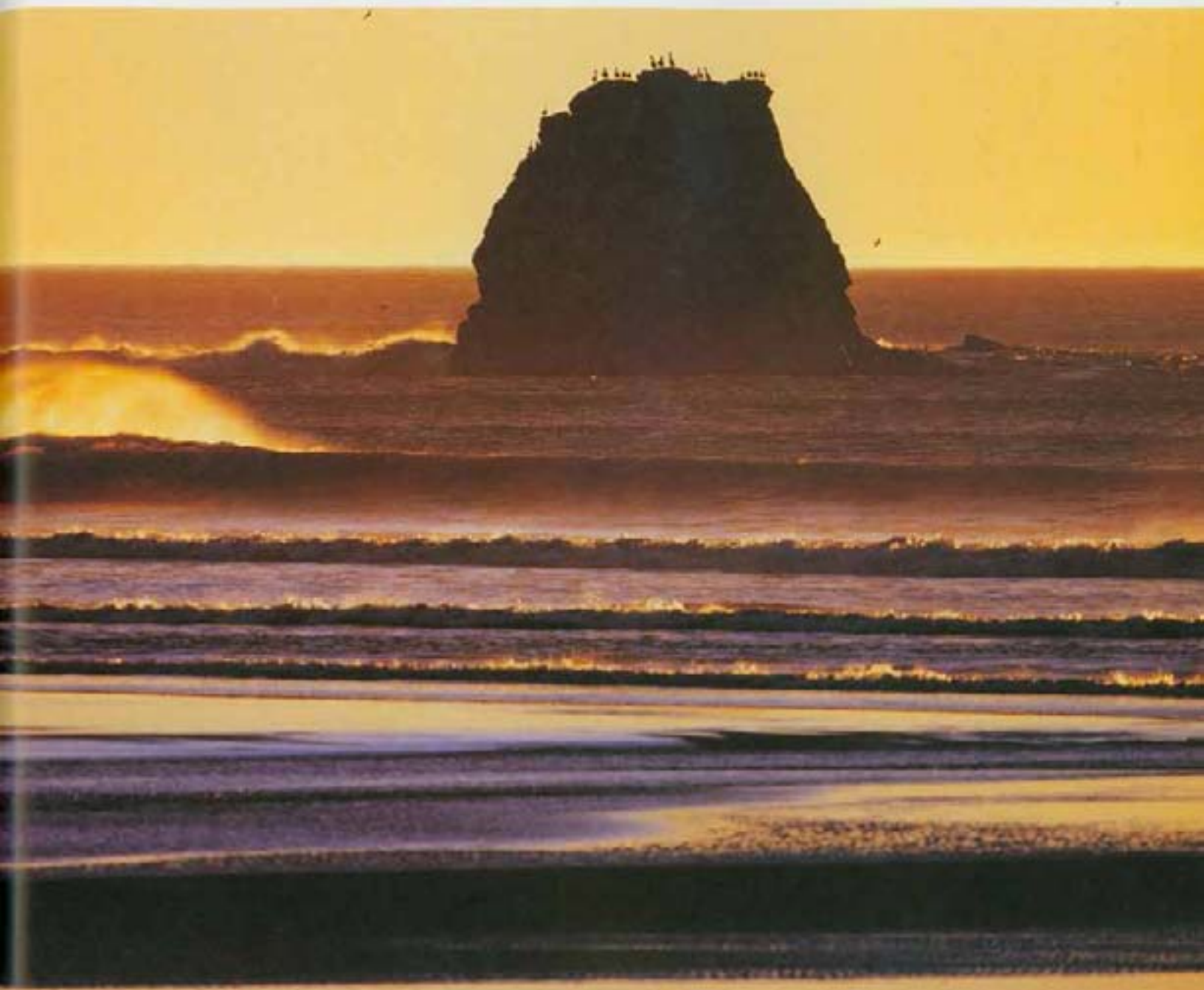
kids, trying to pinpoint said locations on the map. We overwhelm poor Rodrigo with inquiries, not relenting until we're satisfied with exact coordinates and access points.

The following morning, after saying farewell to our hosts, we move eagerly to phase two of our campaign: surf exploration, beginning with aerial reconnaissance of the southern coastline. It is here where, led by E.D. we feverishly circle and point and notate. We spy rivermouths and beachbreaks and reefs and points. Quality is difficult to ascertain, particularly with little swell in the southern Pacific. The Roaring Forties and Furious Fifties, which feed consistent swell year-round to Chile's astounding 4300km of Pacific coastline, seem to be taking a short break on this day. Access is

difficult or impossible to most of the shoreline, save by air or by sea. A day's worth of data collected (several year's worth of exploration possibilities), and it's time to get our feet wet, so to speak, albeit from within the comfort of five-mil booties.

"Cambisew (police) at 12 o'clock," squawks Will over the walkie-talkie from the other car.

"Check that," I respond, easing our speed. After two days in small planes, we welcome the ground and familiar comfort of road travel, setting out in search of the few spotted locations that have road access. Chile's highway infrastructure for the most part is good, and north-south miles are chewed up in large strides. East to west passage is an altogether different



matter, and the few roads that lead to the coast often rival the rutted washboards of central Baja.

"We pull into our first coastal 'X' on the map late that night and hunker down in the only *cobans* in town, hosted by the maternal Lidia, who affectionately becomes known as 'Mamacita.' Morning brings sunny skies and funneling offshore winds, but little swell. The same ridge of high pressure accounting for Santa Ana-like wind conditions appears to be squashing any swell-generating systems offshore. The picturesque sandy bay atop which we are perched presents gorgeous yet minute half-meter peelers. We opt for a leisurely café and breakfast prepared by Mamacita, while hardly noticing that two of our band have slipped out with one of the vehicles,

boards in tow. A few hours go by, but they don't return.

Curiosity peaked, Will and I follow suit and drive over the hills to the next bay south, stopping at an overlook. Peering through the trees, we spy a protected bay sandwiched by rocky headlands. At the north end is an uneven yet intriguing right breaking on a sand bottom. To the south is a left rivermouth/point peeling off a pointed rock outcropping. Is that someone in the water? A lone surfer wheels around and takes off on a small but zippy left and deftly carves his way up and down the face, all the way to the beach. El Diplomático.

We slip and slide our truck down the remainder of the treacherous track to the revelation of a dramatic cove and valley with native forest growing right up to the edge of a white,

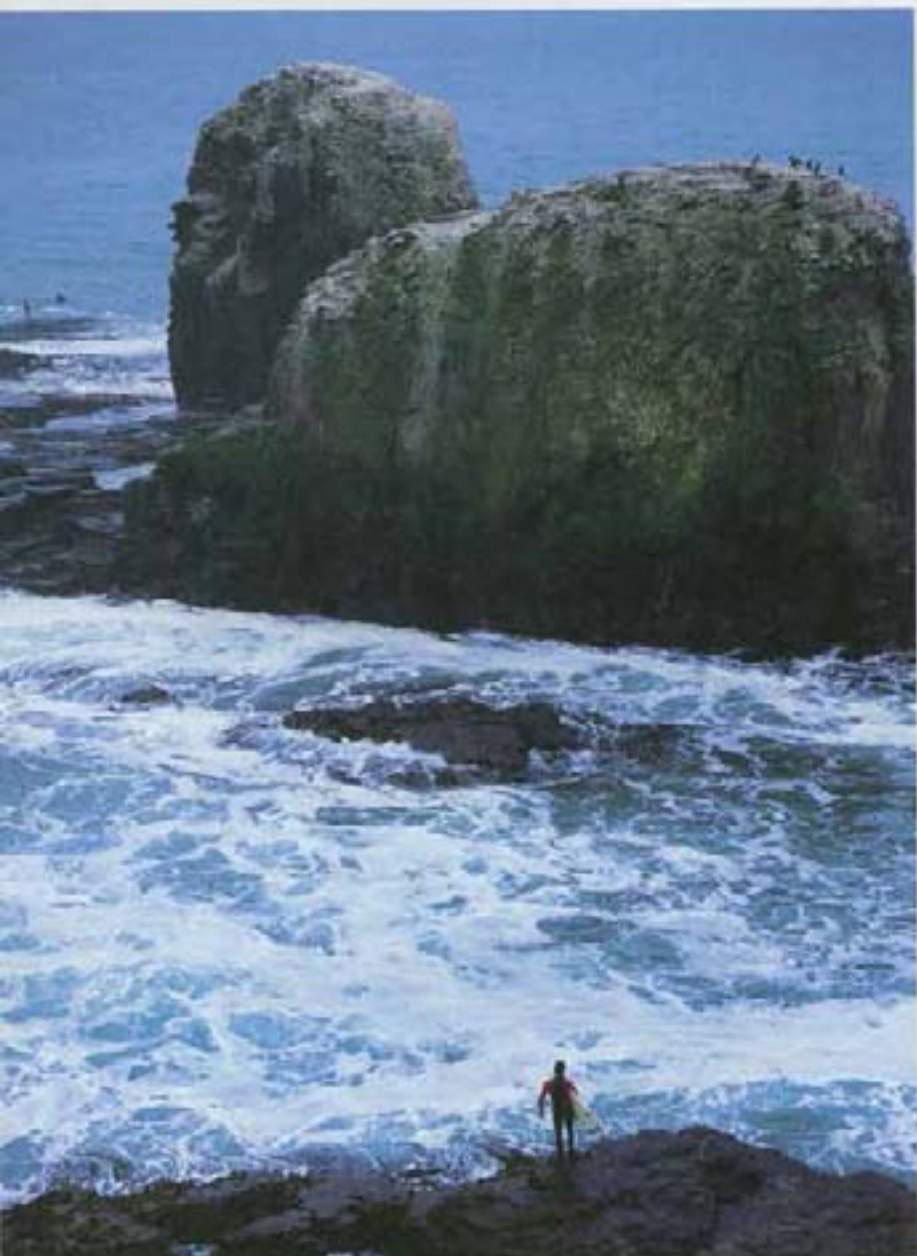


sandy beach. Black, kelp-covered rock at both ends of the bay frames blue-green swells as they lethargically wrap into the inlet. As the tide continues to drop, we watch it breathe added vida into the right. We're on it (a right in Chile!), and gleefully surf the sandy rights for the next few hours – two tiny specs in a vast ecosystem, paddling around attempting to latch onto a few of nature's swells – until an extreme low tide begins wreaking havoc with the head-high waves.

Wandering down the beach, we come across an indigenous fisherman scouring the rocks for mollusks, and finding plenty to fill his bag. We inquire

about the area, and he answers in silent nods and one-word sentences. At first we think he might be upset by our presence or irritated by our questions, but he simply smiles at us in the late-afternoon sun and listens politely, intently. His piercing gaze is unsettling – those charcoal spheres penetrating deeply. Does he know something we don't? When asked where he lives, he points to a small ramshackle house up on the hill. Has he ever seen any surfers here before? He shakes his head, no. Has he ever seen surfing or surfboards before? Yes, he nods, and points to the north.

While coming across wetsuit-clad wave riders clearly isn't likely to be an ordinary event in the fisherman's day, he seems neither overly impressed nor disinterested by our appearance. We all stand in silence for a moment ... only the sound of waves crashing against the rocks behind us ... before finally saying goodbye.



Returning to the car, we discover that in our enthusiasm we've managed to abandon it in deep sand. Attempting to power our way out only leaves us further buried, and so there we are, alone with our thoughts, our newly discovered cove, and a stranded vehicle. The second 4x4 and our cohorts are nowhere to be seen.

The search for help finds us at the front door of Mike, an English Argentine transplant, who's built a beautiful house and cabaña up on a hill overlooking the small cove. His enthusiasm suggests our visit is not a common occurrence, and he emphatically offers to tow our car out of the sand. But just then, the second vehicle in our regiment comes roaring down the hill, having returned to our previous night's residence to collect the remaining stragglers in our crew. Relieved that the support team has arrived, we run down to the beach to greet them, only to watch them whisk past both us and our stranded truck, and park directly in front of the lefthander. There's at most an hour left of sunlight, and with the lower tide and calming winds, the left has begun to fire. As they scramble out of the car and into their wetsuits, we notify them of our predicament, only to have them glance briefly at our buried car, shrug innocuously, and scamper down to the water. Sun setting. Wind slackening. Waves improving. Will and I look at each other and, without saying a word, reach into the bed of the truck and grab our wetsuits. Fuck the truck.

"Most of the land here is owned by the Huilliche Indians, a southern branch of the Mapuche people," Mike explains over a glass of Gato Negro wine later that evening. We're staying at his cabaña for the night, an amalgam of rustic utility and European charm. Having left his former life as an educator in Argentina, Mike and his wife Isabel moved to this pristine little cove six years prior. He seems fascinated with our surf travels and, until this day, had never really thought about surfing on this isolated stretch of coast. Not surprisingly, he finds it curious that we would travel so far in order to simply ride waves, yet he appears enamored with the concept.

Living among the Mapuche has brought him a newfound respect for their culture, as well as empathy for



their plight. Mapuche literally means "people of the land" and, not unlike indigenous people in other parts of the Americas, they have been locked in a bitter struggle with the federal government for the very land that is their namesake. It's a touchy subject on both sides that has occasionally sparked violence, with the Mapuche attempting to reclaim once occupied territory from private industry, while the government struggles to find compromise.

"A lot of the Chileans look at the Mapuche as being lazy, but I don't believe that," Mike says. He tells an ironic tale, wherein some local Mapuche of influence were sponsored by the government to attend a high-profile environmental symposium in Ecuador, in the hopes they would be able to better care for newly-conceded coastal property. Upon their return, they were asked how they found the conference. After a long pause one of them replied wistfully, "They went to a great deal of effort to teach us the things that we already know."

Two days later, with the swell on the rise, we journey north in search of a rumored lefthand reefbreak that reportedly can hold some size. As it turns out, the wave is not difficult to find. Located in the heart of a port town, it breaks outside of a large cement pier in full view of fishermen and schoolchildren alike. A cemetery looms ominously on the cliffs overlooking the

break, giving us all pause prior to paddling out. The swell has hit, and dark gray sets are rearing up and heaving on a series of reefs far offshore, but the wind is blowing briskly from the north, a death knell for most Chilean lefthanders. Although not completely blown out, wind-chop is hacking the line-up.

We decide to wait it out, and our patience pays dividends – tide and wind drop, and the sun begins to peek out from behind the gray gloom. Bigger boards are unsheathed for the first time on the expedition, and one by one we enter the water from the end of the pier like lemmings leaping off a cliff. The waves crest slightly bigger than they appeared from shore as we paddle out to greet thick, silvery sets marching militantly towards us. We surf alone.

The reef here, in reality, faces north, but the wave freakishly bends almost 180° – from south to north – before detonating on a rocky shelf. From the line-up, you can look towards shore and watch sets come from virtually the opposite direction, before bending and warping their way toward the take-off zone.

After five or so solid waves, I'm caught inside. With a dredging bowl bearing down right on top of my head, I decide to bail my board at the last second. Mistake. My leash snaps like a dried string of kelp, and I'm left floating in the channel a half-kilometer from shore, at a spot I've never surfed before.

Above – E.D. racing the curtain on a smaller day

Opposite top – The Huelche Indians, native to these shores, are struggling against an onslaught of land grabbing developers. A local fisherman, who'd never seen surfers in his bay before, but didn't seem to mind us borrowing a piece of ocean for a while.

Opposite bottom – Access to some parts of the coast is extremely hard. Access to some of the waves themselves is often even harder. Jump, paddle, rock-hop, jump... between sets.



As I begin the long swim with a couple of curious sea lions looking on, I'm dolefully reminded of the previous night's conversation about great white sharks and the debate over whether or not they inhabit Chilean waters. Thankfully, save for a long swim, the drama is short-lived, as my board avoids the rocks on the inside and is retrieved by an ever-eager El Diplomático.

Exiting the water, we're treated to a hero's welcome on the wharf by *ninos* in their school uniforms. They surround each one of us as we clamber back onto the pier, excitedly flooding us with questions. As relatively anonymous surfers not known for our surfing ability, we bask in the attention, and sunset is a giddy recount of the afternoon's events, giggling teens hanging on our every word.

That night we sat our hunger by devouring *complots* ("the works") – Chilean hotdogs and sandwiches with an alarming mixture of ingredients: avocado, tomato, sauerkraut, chili sauce, ketchup, mustard, and – oh yes! – enough mayonnaise to lubricate a tractor engine. After surfing long hours in cold water, our calorie-deprived bodies crave the slovenly concoction as if it's the last food on earth.

With short winter days and the clock ticking, we resign ourselves to driving at night to maximize daytime surfing

hours. Solid idea. Difficult execution. Our next passage to Pichilemu, proverbial epicenter of Chilean surfing, requires a ten-hour, white-knuckle overnight drive through mountainous, foggy terrain. Arriving at La Punta at five in the morning, we spill out of the vehicles and collapse deliriously in our sleeping bags on the sand.

The final phase of our journey involves a rendezvous with a crew led by Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia Inc. and environmentalist extraordinaire. Yvon is traveling with and showcasing his brand new set of employees: the brothers Malloy (Chris and Keith), Hawaiian lifeguard and waterman Jeff Johnson, and surfing legend Gerry Lopez, collectively to be known as the Patagonia Posse. Joining the cast and upping the star-wattage are musician Jack Johnson and writer/producer Chris Carter of X-Files fame.

Later that morning, asleep on the beach, one by one we awaken to the sound of cars arriving at the point, and we rise bleary-eyed as an eager, freshly-rested team Patagonia pulls up to check the surf. They eye us suspiciously until realizing who



Above -
After several days of journeying north through unknown territory, we finally rendezvoused with the Patagonia all-star crew – Gerry Lopez (top), Jack Johnson (below), and two of the three Malloy brothers.

Opposite top -
Another view of the La Punta, an attraction becoming increasingly popular among surfers, for good reason.

Opposite bottom -
Greg Brunson late, great take-off at La Punta.





we are. Our road-weary, decidedly feral squad seems oddly out of place in the presence of this all-star review. But any differences quickly melt away in the surf, as we share a long, satisfying day surfing long, satisfying point waves.

Over the next several days, observing the crew play in and out of the waves is inspiring, not so much for their surfing ability but for their mastery of that all too elusive element in modern surfing: sheer, unadulterated fun. Jack and Chris sharing a wave together, zig-zagging across a shimmering face; Keith bodysurfing and scoring 100-meter rides; Jeff drawing out long flowing lines on his 5'4" "red sled"; Lopez surfing longer and harder than anyone, Cheshire grin beaming brightly from underneath his neoprene lid. Chile's rugged beauty serves as the perfect backdrop for a patently grounded crew, and music blurs to art blurs to graceful flow in the ocean. Fluid lines all, and one continues where the other ends. Crystal. Refined. Aesthetically evolved.

It's been asked before whether or not surfing's soul can be saved. I don't know about being saved, but watching the Patagonia Posse frolic in the pristine pointbreaks of central Chile offers, at a minimum, reason to pause, even for the most jaded of critics.

The following day, Yvon — age 65 and famously crowd-shy — joins the crew for a surf at La Punta. The left point *à jour* is notorious for its tricky entrance, which involves first jumping off a rock outcrop, paddling across a surging channel, pulling oneself with board out of the water onto a large *muro*, then walking to the tip and launching off the end directly into the line of fire of grinding waves. With a medium swell, it's intimidating. With a larger swell, it can be downright terrifying. Almost every surfer who has surfed La Punta at size, including yours truly, has a story of near calamity to tell. The day before, while waiting in line patiently behind some rocks on the morro, I watched with alarm as a surging swell swept Jack Johnson from the tip directly in front of me — just like that he

was gone. Shaken but okay, he was deposited unceremoniously into the line-up in time to take an oncoming set on the head.

As a group of us chit-chat on the shore this cold day, biding our time and waiting for La Punta to recover from a bout of morning sickness, the Patagonia Posse slowly makes its way into the water. In the blink of an eye, disaster. A loud "thwack" reverberates down the point, and we look up to see boards and bodies scrambling into the channel between the first jump-off point and the *muro*, attempting to rescue a wayward surfboard and its orphaned owner. It's Yvon, and he's missed the exit point to get up onto the *muro*, a powerful surge throwing him and his board into a crevasse in the rocks before then ripping his leash from his board and depositing both back into the channel. Surfboard trashed. Body and pride bruised. An inauspicious introduction to La Punta for the environmental pioneer.

The entire group ventures to nearby private land that is allegedly home to several world-class waves. We drive through a seemingly endless maze of dusty fire roads before landing on a string of remote beaches. Wide-open spaces. Our trucks are dwarfed in the shadow of giant headlands and five-kilometer banks of sand. With several surf options at our disposal and no one to be seen for miles in either direction, the challenge becomes one of wave judgment — without the benefit of context provided by surfers in the water. Consensus forms, the squad choosing a fast but erratic left breaking off a pointy bluff, and Jeff, Keith and Jack provide us with some visual perspective. They make very average head-high waves look enticing.

While they surf, curiosity draws a small group of us to the north, and we follow the tracks of Chris' distant 4x4 through a series of rolling wind-blown sand dunes. The tracks very suddenly veer to the left and, just as I open my mouth to wonder why, our car launches into the abyss, flying off the precipice of a near-vertical wall of sand. Will yanks the wheel hard to the left, but it's too late. Gravity has taken over and the car careens sideways, threatening to roll its way down the entire embankment. I brace myself for impact, but as Will guns the engine the entire vehicle miraculously sideslips its way down to the bottom and comes to rest with a soft, sickening thud. *Shit.*

We spill out to assess the situation and it's not encouraging. The vehicle is buried deep in a hole with thick dunes on all sides, front end wedged, hiding its head in the sand in humiliation. But the embarrassment is ours, another boneheaded maneuver in an environment where help is not merely a cell-phone call away.

With the hour late and the tide on the rise, we start digging. And digging. Part of the crew heads off to a nearby ranch to look for oxen or a tractor, anything to drag us out. We have to dig through almost an entire dune to clear a path to freedom, but we finally manage to lift the car from its sandy depths, not stopping the vehicle until we've got four wheels planted safely on firm ground.

Over dinner and *piu suu* that night, talk drifts back to the theme of surf conservation. Chile, with a relatively undeveloped

Below -
Weary bones, resting with the onset of high tide.

Opposite top -
Roaring in from the Southern Ocean, the waves here are unforgiving. Respect is due.

Opposite below -
The author, satisfied with the life he's living.





DEAN LATOURNETTE

coastline roughly equal in length to the west coast of North America, is in a truly unique position. Think California in the 1930s and '40s, and you can begin to understand the vast changes that are likely to come to this sparsely-populated nation in the coming years, for good and for bad.

An emphatically pro-business government has largely disregarded environmental concerns over the past two decades in favor of mining the country's substantial natural resources. Yet in the midst of pro-development rallying cries such as "pavimento el progreso" (paving progress), there are positive signs.

Matias Lopez, writer for Chile's burgeoning surf magazine, *Metrada*, along with a local surf club, launched an educational media campaign to help alter developers' plans for a proposed marina project in Rancho Topocalma, which would have destroyed one of the country's best pointbreaks. While the final verdict is still out, it appears the marina portion of the project has been scrapped, in large part due to the value placed on surfing. Furthermore, current landowners have negotiated a deal with local surfers to provide basic



facilities such as primitive lodging and toilets, in exchange for collecting a usage fee from visiting surfers.

Then there are people like Joshua Berry, a California transplant who's been living in Chile off and on for years. Josh has recently founded 'Proplaya', a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of Chile's littoral zone and its surf spots. "Proplaya was formed to counteract Chile's ill-conceived coastal development plans, silicone and credit-fueled business magnates, a good-ole-boy network of status-seeking cowboys and corrupt politicians, and plain old ignorance, which are all adding up to a recipe for ecological disaster." Spoken like a true activist, Josh's zealous and infectious attitude towards the environment is bound to reverberate throughout the Chilean surfing community.

And with companies like Patagonia (whose namesake was born of the dramatic terrain of southern Chile and Argentina) attempting to redefine a surf industry and culture that has on the whole lacked environmental leadership ... well, who knows what full-circle impact that might have on its spiritual homeland?

On our final night, after a full day's surfing, we settle around a campfire at La Punta - wine flowing liberally. A guitar inevitably finds its way into Jack's hands, and we all beam warmly in front of the fire, our stories melodiously backed by an impromptu soundtrack. Alex, a Chilean surf doc doubling as local host, surprisingly upstages Jack with his dramatic renditions of Latin love ballads and musical bravado.



As I sit and stare into the flames, taking a mental inventory of the trip's events, Yvon leans over and whispers to me. "These guys [Malloy & Company] are the future. I'm getting out. I'm done."

A surprising statement, I think, from a clothing mogul whose company only recently added surf equipment to its product line. But, on further thought, I suspect he speaking of more than Patagonia, or even surfing in general. Yvon is looking to pass the environmental baton to a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts, a new generation of surfers. And as we look across the fire at the Malloy brothers, laughing and sharing wine and song with Jack Johnson and a handful of Chilean surfers, it's not hard to imagine them leading the way.

Above -
Oye! People here seemed either indifferent to our presence, curious or just plain friendly.

Below -
A chilly, but perfect, Chile morning.

Opposite -
Keith Malloy jumps high enough to catch the last rays of sun on a fest little left we discovered not far from base-camp.



DEAN LA TOURNEE/TTE