



THE AIRBED EXPERIENCE

WORDS BY SEA VAN

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE DAYS THAT WE WAIT FOR, EXPECTANTLY. The air and the water were, in equal measure, clean and clear with a cool edge to the light off shore breeze that is something especially Scottish. A muscular swell was surging through the early morning scene and heaving onto one of the north coast's lesser visited slabs. Morphing from the pulsing onslaught of liquid energy that has travelled thousands of miles to arrive at that spot at that moment, to throw up and over and reel down the flagstone, exploding like heavy champagne as it then drained off either side of the slab. The low sunlight was slanting through the faces of the waves silhouetting the swaying kelp to those sitting in the line up. All this and only three surfers in the line up. Two were taking late drops and getting barrelled, both of them with the type of boards that you would expect to see surfers riding when conditions were that good, but there was also an unusual surf craft in the waves that morning. The third surfer was doing his thing too, also taking off late and getting barrelled but his choice of aquatic assistance was very different. He was there riding with flippers on his feet, laying on what to the casual observer might well have looked like a small airbed that had been partially inflated by a lazy asthmatic. He was riding a surf mat and it was blowing his mind.

The mat was the topic of conversation between the three surfers during the short lulls between sets. The two board riders were intrigued by the mat rider's choice. 'Is it like a new kinda body boarding?' asked one of the board riders. 'No, not really' replies the mat man 'I agree, it's a similar size, and I use flippers to get me moving but unlike a body board there are no rigid surfaces to use to drive off, the mat is infinitely flexible and requires a very different approach to wave riding. The other thing is that mat riding precedes body boards by quite a few years'. 'So what is it?' Asks the other 'a cut down air bed'? 'That's another No, mats are made out of some very hi tech materials with many mats being made as custom one offs, designed specifically for their riders'. 'Another great thing about matting', he said 'Apart from the massive stoke factor, is that a mat is so easy to transport, with mat and fins being packed into a small rucksack can travel as hand baggage on aeroplanes...no more faffing around with over size luggage.

About a year or so before this day the now mat rider had been looking through his social media feed and followed a surf related link that led to another link that took him to a video featuring mat surfing. The speed of the guy riding the mat in that clip was incredible, surfers on short boards and longboards were dropping in and the mat rider was all over it, he was travelling at warp speed and our man was interested. The early days of surf films, in the days before video, in a time when surfers had to go to a cinema or a village hall crammed with other likeminded folk who shared 'the stoke', hooting, whistling and shouting appropriate words of encouragement at the surfers on the screen. One of those films was 'Crystal Voyager' which is now recognised as a classic of its time. Crystal Voyager was a ground breaking film featuring 'in the barrel' sequences, the like of which had not been seen on the screen until then. The barrel shots were the work of surf pioneer and free thinker George Greenough and he had used a surf mat, amongst his quiver, to get into the right place on the waves to get many of those shots. This morning's mat rider remembered that film when he saw the online video. He'd done the short boarding thing and had been riding mostly long boards for years. He wanted a change. He wanted to explore something in surfing that I hadn't experienced before. He really wanted to try mat riding. Several internet trawls revealed a surfing sub-culture with practitioners of the art spread thinly across the globe, taking their places in line ups in some famous and some not so famous surf spots. Some of the things these mat folk seem to have in common are a well developed sense of humour along with the ability or desire to not take the whole thing too seriously but mostly to have fun in the surf. Watch just about any mat related film clip and you will see plenty of party waves with people bumping into, bouncing over and riding along side each other, with a sound track of laughter and banter and an overall sense of bonhomie. This friendliness and generosity of spirit in the mat riding world is alive and well here in the UK. In my own exploration of and journey into mat riding I contacted a guy whose name was popping up all over the place.

TIM CIASTRO AND IAN WRAITH
PIC BY MIKE HOLLAND



Graeme Webster of G Mat Custom Surfboards was very happy to spend an hour on the phone talking all things mat riding. He didn't try to sell me anything but instead hooked me up with someone who was moving on a second hand mat by another manufacturer- a Fourth Gear Fatty which is a great mat for most conditions. The guy who I bought the mat from then surprised me by including a pair of very high quality flippers at no extra cost 'just to get me started', I was stoked!

Another indicator of that stoke is 'The Phileas Project' *Phileas* was the 50th mat to come out of the G-Mat workshop. To celebrate this, and to say thank you for all the support Graeme had been shown by the global mat collective, he thought it fitting to send her off around the world for mat brethren to ride and to add their own artwork. You too can follow the adventures at <https://customsurfboards.com/phileas>.

It's as if more people are becoming switched on and tuned in to the whole mat riding experience and there are a number of mat manufacturers out there. Companies like Krypt Surf Technology, that recently introduced no other than ex world champ Tom Carroll to the art of the mat riding to rehab after his knee operation, Warpmats, who are based in Cornwall, and Neumatic are there to help you with your mat selection. There's also another conversation taking place, something that until very recently I never imagined myself being involved with, about the why's and wherefores of different flipper designs.

Other places to go to explore the world of mat surfing are <https://www.ukmatsurfers.com/>, and Low Inflation Nation on Facebook. Mat surfing; it's addictive! It could well change the way you think.

GRAEME WEBSTER
PIC BY MIKE HOLLAND



BOB BOOTH
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