

THE SUPERWOMAN OF SURF

Words / Andrea Hunt
→ Photography / Dave Imms

Brazilian big-wave surfer Maya Gabeira has cheated death, conquered 21m waves and successfully challenged the gender inequality of her male-dominated sport. We met her to find out what it takes to do the impossible





Left & opposite
Brazilian surfer
Maya Gabeira lost
consciousness and nearly
drowned tackling this
wave at Nazaré in 2013

“People often ask me if I’m fearless. Not at all. But I accept fear and try to work with it”

Big-wave surfers are a lot like superheroes. They have serious powers, often performing feats so heroic they seem beyond human capability or comprehension. They are the outliers, even among their peripheral subculture. Out of an estimated 35 million surfers worldwide, only around 300 men and two dozen women qualify for this label.

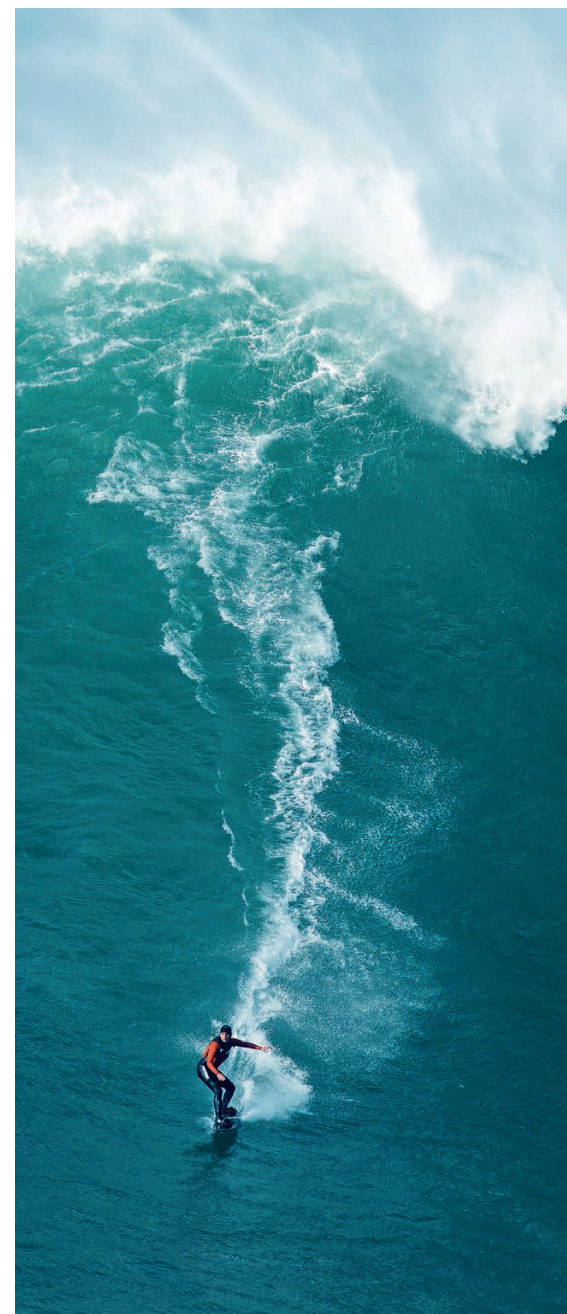
The language used to describe their exploits resembles that of mythical warfare – they ride “guns” to charge “giants” and “monsters” – and their battlegrounds often have mysterious, nightmarish names, like Jaws, Cape Fear and Teahupoo, or “place of broken skulls”.

In a way, the feats of these surfers go beyond those of superheroes, as the latter have the comfort of immortality on their side. Unlike Superman or Wonder Woman, they have to cope with the uncomfortable reality that the next wave could be their last. Mother Nature could take against them, and one slip could be fatal.

That’s what almost happened to Maya Gabeira, the world’s first professional woman big-wave surfer. On October 2013, she catastrophically wiped out while riding a 24m-wave at Nazaré on the Portuguese coast – an area known for its gargantuan breaks. Today, on the same beach, she’s reflecting on what it takes to get back up and out there, and how she came back to take the Guinness World Record for the largest wave surfed by a woman.

“For a long time, I had wanted to establish a world record in my sport,” says the 32 year old, who turned pro at 20 and is a five-time winner at the World Surf League Big Wave Awards. “I’d been in my career for many years and I thought the record belonged to me. I went to Nazaré and surfed that day like it was mine.” »

PHOTO: HUGO SILVA / RED BULL CONTENT POOL





Big-wave country

Nazaré first became a sensation among big-wave surfers in 2011, when Garrett McNamara rode a record-breaking 23.8m wave at Praia do Norte.

The town, on Portugal's Costa da Prata, 122km north of Lisbon, is overlooked by the lighthouse at clifftop Forte de São Miguel Arcanjo, and its supercharged beach breaks blow most others out of the water.

Thanks in part to the funnelling effect of an offshore trench that plunges to a depth of 5,000m, oceanic topography and unhindered Atlantic swells during stormy winter months combine to create huge waves that climb on top of each other to create colossal 'A-frame' walls of water up to 30m high.



That particular morning, she'd woken hours before sunrise to meet with her tow-partner Carlos Burle who would jet-ski her out into the waves. Their aim was to catch the earliest swells they could before conditions changed. Storm St Jude was on its way.

She was soon tearing down a 24m beast – a wave so enormous that most would consider it unsurfable. Waves this size are gruelling rides. Strong winds create huge bumps on their surface, and with each bump she hit, Gabeira air-dropped, losing contact with the wave and hoping for a safe landing the other side.

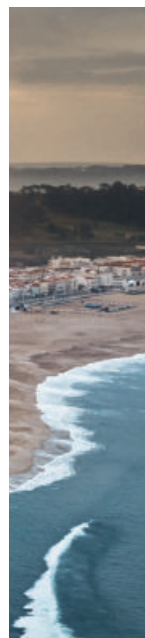
On the third, she broke her fibula and fell off her board, resurfacing just in time for a second wave to hit her full force, ripping off her life jacket and pushing her deep underwater. By the time she was pulled towards shore by Burle, after nearly 10 minutes in the water, she had stopped breathing.

"It feels like another lifetime," she says today, laughing – she laughs more about nearly dying than

you'd think possible. "Of course, it was hard. But there are certain aspects that are very funny. Like when I took that first breath, which hurt like hell, my first thought was: 'I can't believe I get to have sushi and coffee!'" She laughs again. "Life is very basic."

Her five-year-long comeback through rehab and three spine surgeries is the stuff of modern legend. "People often ask me if I'm fearless," she says. "Not at all. I suffer from severe anxiety and nightmares, though they're not to do with surfing. I have alopecia. But I accept fear and try to work with it."

One of the hardest things to recover from was the public criticism from male counterparts in her sport who said she was out of her depth by attempting big waves. "It was that last period when guys could say what they wanted and didn't get much scrutiny for it," says Gabeira. "It was okay to judge women when they made mistakes, even when guys were making them all the time. When you're the one woman, you stand out."



Clockwise from left: Looking over Nazaré from close to the lighthouse; a signpost on North Beach covered in surfer brands; Gabeira at the spot where she surveys the waves

"I don't know exactly how big a wave will be. I just make an assessment. But I'm also praying"



Her determination not to be cowed was typical of a career trajectory that saw her turn pro at just 20. The second daughter of fashion designer Yamê Reis and Fernando Gabeira, one of the founders of Brazil's Green Party, she had a privileged upbringing in Rio de Janeiro. "But I never did well in school and changed almost every semester," she says. "So maybe there were some signs that I would choose a more unusual path. I wasn't what you'd call a mellow person."

At 13 – in pursuit of a boyfriend and in escape from her parents' turbulent divorce – Gabeira was lured towards surfing. She left home at 15, moved to Hawaii at 17, and turned her focus to big waves. "I was driven by what I wanted to achieve and experience more than by being professionally successful. Big-wave surfing wasn't seen as a profession then, especially for women."

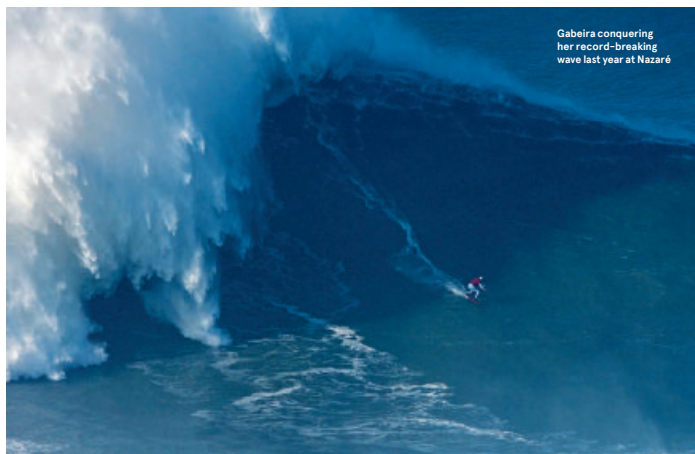
Although she'd been defying expectations since she first jumped onto a board, the accident was a major setback, particularly mentally. "I felt very exposed. I was scared of being criticised again, I was very shaken. I questioned myself. Was I capable? Would I ever be able to perform?"

The most important factor in her recovery was her training, which eventually allowed her to silence her critics – both internal and external. She moved to Nazaré, where she took to the water day in, day out, getting to know all its waves intimately "in all kinds of conditions, when it's two feet and when it's 80", waiting for "nature to give the opportunity" for a second chance.

Then, on 18 January last year, it came. This time she was more cautious, waiting for more than three hours in cold water for the right wave. She tries to describe the indescribable – what it feels like to face and ride that kind of monster wave.

"I don't know exactly how big it will be until I'm on it, I just make an assessment based on the amount of water coming towards me and the »





Gabeira's favourite surf spots

Near Lisbon

The rock/reef break at Coxos is part of the World Surfing Reserve of Ericeira and arguably the best wave in Portugal, with an international reputation. Expect skills to be tested by strong rip currents, sharp rocks and sea urchins.

Near Rio

"Praia is about 40 minutes from my house back in Brazil, with beautiful waves and a remote setting." A favourite among experienced Carioca surfers, this beach is in a protected area – a captivating crescent bay surrounded by cliffs and rainforest. Best of all, it's relatively uncrowded in comparison to other Rio beaches.

Near LA

The first World Surfing Reserve, and birthplace of 1950s and '60s Californian surf culture, the scene at Malibu Surfrider Beach's three-point break is laid-back and welcoming, despite the crowds.

"I chose to do something different and dangerous. I've chosen to do what I want"

kind of day it's been. I'm thinking technically. But I'm also praying. What I hope for, once I'm on it, is that time slows down. Because otherwise I'm not in control."

At 20.72m tall – nearly as high as a seven-storey building – Gabeira's wave was "very large" by anyone's standards. But it was another eight months before it was validated as the largest surfed by a woman. Not only did no category exist for women's big-wave surfing for the Guinness World Records, but her wave couldn't be submitted unless it was first certified by the World Surf League, something that didn't happen, despite repeated requests.

She started a petition and drew on her connection to a greater power – the groundswell of popular support that had buoyed her since the criticism surrounding her accident in 2013. "I don't think I would have had my record recognised were it not for a wider movement for gender equality," she says. "I was protected by the shield of the feminist cause."

In the months since her Guinness World Record, she's been elevated to the level of feminist icon,

listed by Forbes as one of the 20 most powerful women in Brazil, and even had a Barbie doll created in her likeness. Yet any reference to her iconic status makes her uncomfortable.

"It's not how I see myself at all," she says. "I'm proud that I followed an unusual path and trusted my instincts. But I struggle. It's just that I chose to do something different and dangerous, that I faced obstacles. I've chosen to do what I want without interference from other people. It's a little removed from society."

As befits someone who values the small pleasures, she says her next challenge is simply to enjoy more of what life has to offer. "I feel it's time to experience other things, to allow myself things I didn't before," she says. "I'll keep surfing for as long as I'm able but my body is also telling me to slow down. I've learned you have to make the most of the waves you can be present for and let go of the rest." mayagabeira.co

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