

THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

CHRISTIE CARTER RECOUNTS HECTIC PIONEERING DAYS IN THE MENTAWAIS. AS TOLD TO MARA WOLFORD

In 1995, I was 20 years old. I played bass in a rock band, worked in a surf shop and a restaurant, and had dropped out of university in Central California. My mum lived in New Zealand and I went back to see her each year at Christmas. I met a couple of her friends there who had a boat and were looking for a first mate. Three days later, I had the job and was getting ready to head off to Phuket.

SWELL OF THE CENTURY

I joined the boat early in '96 and learned how to be a first mate. For the next year we sailed all over Asia: from Thailand to the Philippines, to Borneo and Malaysia. Then the owners wanted the boat in Sulawesi, mostly to scuba dive. The captain, chef and myself were avid surfers, so we decided to deliver the boat to Sulawesi via the west coast of Sumatra instead of directly down the Straits of Malacca. We found waves everywhere, from Pulau Weh through to the Telos, so we decided to call the owners and ask if they would like to fly to Padang and come visit these islands. Everything they wanted was there, great diving, beautiful beaches and solitude – with the benefit of surf for the crew, starved of waves for almost two years. The owners went for it and we had a month before they arrived. The boat was ready to go, so we used the time to explore the Mentawais.

We made it out to Siberut and found a safe place to moor based on our charts. The area looked like it should receive swell. The boat was rocking gently as I fell asleep thinking, “What if we wake up and the boat is rocking gunnel to gunnel? Now that would be *sickk*.” We woke up the next morning to the boat rolling to all hell. We motored out towards the open ocean and couldn’t believe what we saw.

Kandui Left had the biggest, most perfect waves I’d ever seen: 10 foot sets with bigger ones coming through, not a drop of water out of place. Up until then I didn’t know waves that perfect existed on this planet. That was still one of the best swells

I’ve ever seen hit the Ments. We spent the day motoring around, tippy-toeing around the reefs and trying to find safe places to moor.

The next morning I went back to check Kandui Lefts. It was big and perfect, but nobody wanted to surf with me. I was begging people on the one charter boat I saw to paddle out, but there were no takers. “Please guys, somebody surf with me – it’s so perfect right now!” The swell had dropped and it was about six feet of flawless perfection by then, so I jumped the dingy and surfed Kandui Left by myself all day long. I’ll never forget that first surf out at Playgrounds.

We spent the next four to five months in the area. I turned 22 on the boat and even without directions we stumbled upon a lot of other waves out there. That’s when I started thinking, “What if I could just live here?” But I knew I needed a way to make money to stay there, and I started kicking the idea around of a surf camp.

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I quit my job on the boat, went home, sold up, closed shop and moved back to Padang. I was living with Biggie and Aim, a couple who owned Hotel Carolina, and they took my project seriously. They refused to speak English to me, so I needed to learn Indonesian really fast if I had any intention of ever getting anything to eat! Aim took me under his wing. He was heavily involved in the tourism forum, and took me with him to his meetings. I learned Indonesian, as well as the slang and the culture.

I also met Matt Cruden, the owner of *Mangalui*, and his partner Greg. They were some of the few foreigners I knew living in Padang and I would rush over to see them whenever they were back from a charter, desperate to speak English with somebody. It must have really bugged them. They told me straight up that my idea would never work, and that even if it could work, Playgrounds was the wrong place to do it. It’s all a bit ironic, as both of

them have since built land camps out in the islands over the last decade, and I now own boats. So in the end we live our daily lives a little bit in each other’s world.

I geared up to go out and camp in the islands, surveying the area for the spot I wanted to build. I had a tent, a stock of food, some clothes, cameras and surfing gear. I jumped a fishing boat out and they dropped me off at Playgrounds, on Pananggalat Besar. We arranged that the fishermen would pick me up two weeks later.

I camped out on that island alone. In order to figure out how to move forward with my project, I needed to get a feel for the land, the ocean, the bugs, the tides. These were things I couldn’t learn about while staying on a boat.

Two weeks later, when I was waiting to be picked up, the weather packed in heavily and the fishermen didn’t show up. My food started to run out and I would spend the most part of my day collecting rainwater, coconuts and fishing for

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sustenance. I also had a really bad ear infection. The people around didn’t speak any English and I didn’t speak enough Indonesian to communicate with them.

One night the swell came up and I woke to a massive beach break coupled with a high tide that pushed over the berm and up into my tent. I must have woken up by the second or third wave. By the time the fourth wave came, I had managed to get out, but it broke the tent down with all my things in it. I was holding onto the corner of the tent in knee-high running water, but the poles washed away and my tent was now useless.

After that everything was wet or lost. I had a

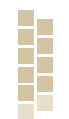
raging ear infection, no tent, no food or water and the entire experiment had gone more than a little pear-shaped. The next morning I swam out to the *karamba*, a floating fishing shack moored out in the bay, asking the fisherman as best I could for help. They understood I needed assistance and I brought what was left of my possessions onto the *karamba*.

1997 was a very volatile time in Indonesia. After 32 years, Suharto had been deposed and his dictatorial regime dismantled. It turned out that during my last week on the *karamba*, there were riots across the nation. The rupiah devalued radically, going from 3 000rp/\$1 USD to 15,000rp/\$1 USD in the space of a few weeks. Suddenly lobster, one of Mentawai’s main export products, had quadrupled in value and was being sold in US dollars for export to Hong Kong and China. The gold rush was on. Speedboats were racing around the islands to all the little *karambas*, desperately seeking lobster and picking up

anything they could find. The lobster were kept in very large nets that were placed around the floating fishing shacks. The lobster fishermen were contracting other fisherman to go out and catch as much fish as they possibly could, just to feed their precious cargo.

The lobster fishermen would chop up the fish supply and feed it all to the lobsters in order to fatten them up in the space of a week so as to get a better price. All that was left for us to eat were the fish heads. There I was, the sick, sopping Kiwi/Yank kid stuck on a floating lobster shack, eating fish heads and sleeping on a small bunk bed. I was far from home.

EARLY EXPLORATION, THE TITLE DEED, AND SETTING UP THE FIRST LAND CAMP IN THE MENTAWAI | ALL PICS COURTESY CHRISTIE CARTER



No one knew what was going to happen to the nation, but they knew they were going to make a fortune from all the trouble. There were stories of men buying speed boats in Padang, going out to the Mentawai and filling the boat with enough lobster to pay the boat off in full on their first run. They would get to Padang and repack the lobster with fresh newspaper and sand in cardboard boxes, and throw them straight on the morning flight directly to Hong Kong.

One of the boats finally came to get our stock of lobster, and my ride back to Padang was on the prow of the boat in the middle of the night, plowing across that channel as fast as the boat could go on water that was sheet glass, under magnificent starry skies.

I chose not to build on that first island I stayed on, but found another one close by.

THIS IS INDONESIA

Once re-supplied in Padang with equipment, food and water, I arranged for the same speedboat to take me out to another island that I thought might be a safer bet to build my resort on. The trip coincided with the wedding of one of the sisters who owned the island that I was interested in. We left Padang in the afternoon and I noticed massive storm cells forming on the drive out of the harbour.

We were about 45 minutes out of Padang, just losing sight of the mainland, when the massive squall finally struck. It turned out to be the biggest storm to hit the area in 15 years. We turned back around towards Padang.

The storm smashed Padang, and the amount of rain that had fallen would make navigation back up the river difficult. The captain decided not to motor back up into the river, but rather hide behind a nearby island, waiting for the storm to pass to make another channel attempt before dark.

It was raining so hard by then that we had to bail constantly to keep the boat afloat. The crew were all part of the boat owner's extended family, all headed to the wedding party. I was the only foreigner aboard, the only other passengers being a Padang woman who was the wedding singer and her husband.

Just before nightfall, the captain decided to bail on the trip, the conditions were not improving. He headed back to the river mouth that serves as a port. We failed a first attempt to motor up through the mouth. The conditions were fodder for nightmares: 15 knots of current, howling onshore and standing waves at the mouth.

The captain made a second attempt, making a little headway up the river, when suddenly a

gigantic tree appeared under the boat, taking out all three of the outboard motors at once. The engines wouldn't restart and we drifted backwards into the standing waves. The boat was completely swamped and I started throwing everything on the boat overboard, my sailor's instincts kicking in. We were carrying large supplies of fuel and I jettisoned them into the sea. I looked up and realised I was alone on the boat. All the other passengers were overboard.

The floodwater was carrying me, alone on the boat, past the last point of land before the open sea: next stop, Antarctica. I'm a good swimmer and I jumped overboard and beat everyone else to shore, clambering through the trash-filled water that made swimming more like crawling. There was a person having trouble in the last few metres, so I literally threw him onto the rocks.

We did a head count in the dark: the five crew members, the captain and I were present, we had lost the singer and her husband. I ran up and down the houses along the riverfront, pounding on doors and screaming in my useless Indonesian that there were two people lost at sea and we needed a boat

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to go find them.

There was thunder and lightning and it was pissing down with rain. I was running in the dark with only my boardshorts and watch on, my last two remaining possessions. I ran back to the river mouth and calculated that if I threw myself back in the water, with the current I could swim across and end up at the police station on the other side and they would be able to do something. I had to be physically restrained by the crew from jumping in.

I was hysterical with panic and somehow knew those two people were dead. The singer's body was found the next day. The husband's was never found. The owner of the boat was thrown in jail – for his own safety – as the singer's family was after him. The boat was later found floating out to sea. Much of the gear was still aboard, but a large amount of money was apparently missing.

This event cemented my relations with the boat owner's family. I had saved one of their brothers by getting him to shore, and now I was a part of the family for life. Incidentally, the family owned the island that I'd chosen to start building the resort I would eventually call "Wavepark".

