

# MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

*Laird Hamilton made history when he rode Tahiti's Millennium Wave*

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Impossible is a term that is overused, often to describe the unlikely or the improbable. In the world of big wave surfing, elite athletes tend to use the word "unrideable" to describe a wave that cannot be tamed, even by the best surfers in the world. Perhaps the epitome of this is the famous, or infamous, surf break known as Teahupo'o, located on the south coast of Tahiti. A few times a year, monster swells form on the horizon before growing into one of the truly unique and previously "unrideable" waves on the planet. That was until Laird Hamilton, arguably the greatest surfer of all time, produced one of the most famous rides in surfing history, on August 17th, 2000, now known simply as the Millennium Wave.

He had heard about the mysterious Teahupo'o back in the 1980s, as visiting Tahitian surfers tried to convey the ferocity, energy and danger of a wave that was mythical amongst locals. "I had some Tahitian friends that used to come to the North Shore of Oahu every season and surf in the Pipe Masters," Hamilton recalls. "Those guys had always talked about [Teahupo'o]... It was at the beginning of it being ridden when they talked about it. Most of the time, I think people didn't think it was that rideable when it was doing its thing."

When Teahupo'o "does its thing," it's a sight to behold. Unique sea-floor topography, and the shallow reef on which the surf crashes, team up to create a wave unlike anywhere else on Earth. Deepwater swells hit a steeply rising coral reef to create monsters that, while not as tall as some other famous waves, pack more energy, ferocity and destructive power due to their unique shape. Whereas many big waves are tall and thin, the waves at this Tahitian reef appear to be as thick as they are tall, increasing the wave's power exponentially.

Add this to the concentrated time and space in which the wave forms, barrels and crashes down, and it produces a ride unlike any other. The same shallow reef that creates this supercharged wave also provides the worst possible landing zone for surfers who wipe out, as the sharp, jagged coral sits just below the surface. Simply, it's as if Mother Nature saw the progression of big wave surfing and decided to answer the challenge with a perfect storm of risk and reward, and of skill and bravery.

Hamilton finally gave in and traveled to Tahiti, originally on a photoshoot. But the week spent at a nearby Tahitian surf spot shooting images for one of his sponsors at that time only made him more determined to check out the mythical Teahupo'o nearby. "I went there every day and we had some incredible sessions there leading up to that giant swell," he recalls. "Then, about a day or so before I was set to leave, two guys that were on the photo shoot were like, 'Hey, there's a big bomber swell coming in two days!' Being a surfer and not wanting to miss the opportunity, because you never know when they come, I postponed my trip [home] and waited."

Hamilton's patience paid off with one of the most iconic rides in surfing history, the Millennium Wave. "Then, on the second or the third day after I was supposed to leave, that big swell came," the Hawaii-bred Hamilton explains. "Actually, on the particular day, all the Tahitians and everybody were like, 'Yeah, no. We don't surf Teahupo'o when it's this size. We go to some other break.'" Whether through stubbornness, or perhaps thinking that his new technique of being pulled onto a wave by a Jet Ski, known as tow-in surfing, could potentially shift the line of what was possible, or rideable, he wasn't going to miss the opportunity.





While the ride he completed that magical day will forever be immortalized in images, videos and firsthand accounts, it had the biggest impact on the surfing community by reestablishing what was rideable and opening the minds of countless other surfers. Redrawing the line in the sand of what's possible and impossible seems to be a driving force behind Hamilton, combined with his lifelong love affair with the ocean and all of the board-related sports and activities associated with it. Now likely past his surfing prime, Hamilton is still a groundbreaker in ocean watersports, especially in the relatively new sport of foiling, or hydrofoil surfing, in which an underwater blade with wings allows the rider and his board to stay above the surface while tackling diverse marine environments in never-before-riden ways.

"Right now everything I'm doing is really focused on foiling," he tells us. "And so, foiling is at the forefront of almost all of my ocean pursuits. I mean, first of all, my relationship with the ocean and being in the ocean and being around the ocean will always take precedent over everything. My personal pursuit in my evolution as a surfer brings me to foiling. I really enjoy being a beginner. And not that I'm a beginner in foiling, but it's evolving quickly and we're evolving as riders."

The one area where Hamilton is certainly not a beginner is business, as he's crafted his personal brand for decades and was one of the few surfers to break into the mainstream. As such, it's not surprising that one of his current ventures is Laird Superfood, born of years of traveling the world and discovering foods and recipes that fit his active, health-conscious lifestyle. "I think that coming from a culture like Hawaii, where [the concept of] aloha is all about giving, it's all about hosting and sharing and that's one of the great things about an island culture. That's one of the most positive sides of it: the generosity of island culture, from which I've benefited my whole life. And so, to be able to kind of incorporate that into a business that makes things that are good for people and have a profound effect, it just has all of the right recipes for a very incredible kind of business."

As for Teahupo'o, and Tahiti as a whole, there certainly exists a deep connection with Hamilton, one that goes beyond big wave surf-

ing alone. "I was raised in Hawaii and you know, Tahiti is the beautiful sister of Hawaii. It's just that she carries a sharp knife, you know? Being raised in Hawaii, your connection with Hawaiians and Tahitians and the culture and the island mentality, the island upbringing, the values, all of those things make you feel very at home. So when I've gone to Tahiti, I've felt very comfortable there."

