

# I REMEMBER THE WAVES MOST OF ALL

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I remember sand in the carpet, and long hot afternoons when the wind blew onshore with monotonous regularity. Sitting on the balcony watching the planes take off into a perfect blue sky in the distance, the heat haze over what seemed like an ocean of red terracotta, and the palm trees across the road fighting against the wind. Trying to study, but usually dozing, too tired from surfing all morning, or a bike ride, or a swim at the beach and quick run, or sometimes from having actually gone to classes at the university. Wondering if it was worth the two-minute walk around the corner to check the surf again, knowing that it was fruitless with the strong northeast sea breeze blowing, but desperately searching for an excuse to stop staring at the books in front of me.

I remember lots of waves, and the beach, sand in everything, friends laughing, lunch or dinner with the family, watching the cricket with my Pop. Trips up or down the coast always searching for that perfect wave or sometimes just a wave, lots of laughs, arguments, fun and some seriously stupid and senseless behaviour. Surfing with mates, or alone, warm bath-like water up north, frigid cold water down south, early morning offshore breezes, orange glowing sunrises and wet wetsuits hanging over tree limbs. Long nights at the pub, endless amounts of beer, loud music, sweat, sunburned skin everywhere and the sad desperate misguided hope that tonight would be the night. Miss Right had to live in the Eastern suburbs, didn't she? But to misquote the narrator in that highly underrated movie *Big Wednesday*, 'I remember the waves most of all'.

Little did I realise, or even guess, in those days where those books and the seemingly endless classes, assignments and exams would lead me. That everyone and everything I knew would be left behind. And that Miss Right, who became Mrs Right, was actually from a place called Vigo in Galicia, a province of Spain I am embarrassed now to admit I'd never heard of, and not from Sydney at all. Nor did I image where one of those planes would one day land, depositing me with little more than some ill-defined hopes and dreams, a bag full of clothes and a couple of surfboards in a foreign airport to begin a new life in a place I'd never even been to before.

Nowadays, I often sit on another balcony watching another set of palm trees fight a very different wind on equally hot afternoons. In summer it's almost invariably the *Nortada*, literally the North-wind, although the *Levante* (an easterly wind) sometimes rears its ugly head, bringing the warm air from the Mediterranean, turning into a hairdryer as it crosses the dusty dry plains of Andalusia. Whilst in the winter the wind comes humid and bitter from the west or southwest out of the Atlantic.

There's the terracotta still and a stunningly blue sky, but the houses here are gleaming, painfully white rather than brick red. Well, the three of them I can see from here anyway. Beyond them is salt marsh stretching into the distance where the dunes of the sand barrier islands stand out bright against the backdrop of the ocean.

It's a little bit longer than a two-minute walk around the corner to check the surf these days and I don't get to surf as often as I would like. But on the other hand I don't have to worry about studying now, since I work for the university instead of studying at one. The waves are there though when I get the time to go surfing and the drowsy feeling after surfing all day remains the same. A comforting constant. However, Australia this is not and as for being home, well...

I'd travelled quite a lot before I packed up and moved my life to Europe but almost exclusively in the search for the perfect wave. I'd been to some strange and exotic places, Indonesia, Fiji, Mexico, but always as a passer-by. Sure, I'd experienced some of the culture in these places, but more by accident than design. Most of the world's best surf spots are not in front of huge five star resorts, or at the end of a tarmac road with a convenient car park. And endless thanks to whoever is in charge up there for that. No, they're normally in out of the way, difficult to get to places. And even if they weren't we'd end up there looking for new ones. Travelling off the beaten track, by default, exposes you to the people and places that haven't been westernised or condensed into a travel brochure. But at the end we were just passers-by, here today gone when the waves drop. It is a very different proposition to live in a foreign country, even one that speaks your native language.

I first came to Europe on a backpacking trip, *de rigueur* (the fashion) for most young Australians. I enjoyed the experience but almost always was left with the feeling after leaving a place or city or country that I'd somehow missed something. Oh sure, I saw all the sights, the endless churches, monuments, ruins, historical buildings but actually experiencing a place and its people is much more difficult. It requires a lot more effort and besides, there's never time is there? I remember clearly being told, in a matter of fact tone, by another self-important fellow traveller, in yet another generic youth hostel conversation somewhere along the way, that you can't really know a

place or it's people unless you live there. I never thought about it much then, but as time went on I began to see their reasoning.

Well now I live here and I find that Portugal is a strange place for an Australian to live; with no real historical ties to Australia, a different language, culture and attitude to life. In fact Europe as a whole is a strange place to live if you're from the Antipodes, including the UK, which was my last place of residence. Well, let's face it any place that's not your home can be strange at first, and sometimes they remain strange no matter how long you live there. And it's not just the big differences either, oftentimes it's the small differences that confuse, confound, and make you want to call the nearest Qantas office for the next flight home! The big differences you're forced to deal with; like learning the language, figuring out a strange currency, driving on the wrong/other side of the road from the other side of the car. But, the small differences are more insidious and tend to sneak up on you, just when you think you got yourself sorted out.

Let's go backwards a bit though, how did a boy from Maroubra, Sydney, NSW, end up sitting on a balcony in a place called Faro in the Algarve, southern Portugal staring out at the distant ocean reminiscing about home and wishing he had more time to go surfing?

At the end of 1997 I was finishing my PhD in Marine Science at the University of New South Wales. My scholarship had finished some months before and I was starting to run out of money, so I was also doing some consulting work, teaching and building web pages for the Internet to make ends meet. A busy time to be sure, but in the back of my mind was always the question, what I am I going to do when I finish? I'd started looking for jobs with no great success, and then suddenly within the space of a month I had to choose between three offers! It was a difficult Christmas period, but after some serious soul searching and long discussions with my parents and some close friends I decided on taking a job at the University of Plymouth in Devon, England. It was an opportunity I felt I couldn't pass up, the work looked interesting, the people I was to work with are world renowned in their field, and besides it was the change of scene I felt I needed after nearly ten years of study at the same university. And besides all that it was an opportunity to go and live overseas, at least temporarily, something I'd been aiming and hoping to do for quite some time.

So off I went to become a small cog in the big machine of a European Union funded marine science project. Living and working abroad is a real eye opener, even in England, our supposed 'mother' country. But what really made me realise just how far from the familiar I'd moved was when it came to working with the other groups in the project. There were people from universities and institutes from all over Europe, a

big mix of different cultures, languages and ways of doing things. The place where we would be working taking measurements in the field was a tidal inlet in southern Portugal. So no sooner had I started to settle into my new life in England than I found myself at my first project meeting, in the minority as an Anglo-Saxon native English speaker, a strange sensation. The meeting was held in Coimbra, a city in central Portugal dating back to before Roman times with one of the oldest universities in Europe, at least 500 years older than our humble little colony on the edge of the planet! Another strange sensation. Looking back, that meeting was a major turning point in my life for two reasons; the first is that I realised just how challenging the next three years were going to be professionally and secondly because I met a colleague, Ana, who would become first a friend, then something more than a friend and now is my wife and soul mate.

I was right one hundred percent on the first point, the three years I worked in the UK pushed me to my limits, and a few times beyond. The work challenged me, scared me, overwhelmed me, but in the end satisfied me in a way I wouldn't have thought possible beforehand. The same can be said, and perhaps more so, of the other aspects of my life. At first living abroad was difficult and I remember many mornings waking up to cold grey skies, howling wind and horizontal rain and being on the point of packing it all in and going home. But after awhile I discovered, with no little surprise, that I enjoyed living abroad.

Sure there were lots of negatives, the climate of the UK not the least amongst them along with the difficulties of going surfing from Plymouth. The reality of at least an hour and a half drive, when I could get a lift, to find more often than not small, cold, uninviting waves really began to wear on me. Not to mention missing friends and family! But there were lots of positives as well. I made lots of great friends, had a lot of fun times, and got to see lots of new places. As well as surfing some really good waves on occasion, despite my whingeing to the contrary! But above all of this I found Ana.

My work involved a lot of travel to Portugal and a lot of logistics to arrange which would have been impossible without the help of the people at the university there. As a consequence I got to know Ana as a colleague, a relationship which rapidly turned into friendship. She'd arrived at the university in Faro from Vigo, her hometown in Galicia, at about the same time I arrived in the UK, to work on the same project and begin her PhD. We got on famously from the word go, and the more we got to know each other the stronger our feelings got. However, we were both unwilling to take the relationship beyond friendship, both having had some recent bad experiences and not wanting to mix work and play so to speak. Looking back now though, it was like trying to stop the tide! Something we both should have known better than to even try.

I proposed to Ana on a trip to New York and we were married in Vigo in July 2000, ten days after my 30th birthday. I'd only been home once in the two years previous to the wedding, for my brother's wedding, so I was extremely fortunate in that most of my family were able to make it. It was a very emotional, gratifying and often funny experience having my family around me in a foreign country, not to mention getting married in one! Especially for somebody who, if you'd mentioned marriage to five years before, would have reacted as if you wanted to remove certain private parts with a rusty and blunt spoon. Ana and I are extremely happily married and coming up on our third anniversary our relationship continues to grow stronger. Sometimes that surprises me given the differences in our upbringing, culture and experiences.

Once my contract was up in the UK I moved here to Portugal, nine months living apart from my wife was too much, and I felt that three years in the UK was enough. I've been here now over two years and overall I enjoy living here, the climate is great, the waves are good and the country and people have grown on me. It's very often difficult however, the way of doing things here is very different and the language barrier is sometimes just that, a barrier. But I am slowly getting a handle on speaking Portuguese, well if truth be told I speak more Spanish and so normally conversations are in *Portuñol* (a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish) with some English thrown in. I get by, but it sometimes makes for some very confused and amusing situations! The Portuguese way of doing things, however, can be tiring and extremely frustrating, bureaucracy here for example is almost an art form. But the positives outweigh the negatives, most days anyway, and I think that the experience of living in a non-English speaking country has been, for me, an extremely challenging and rewarding one.

So here I sit watching the palm trees fight the wind, on the other side of the world to my home, 'a stranger in a strange land' to quote Heinlein. Drowsy from a morning surfing, thinking to myself sure this is not home but I had a nice little reef break to myself with a good clean swell and caught all the waves I wanted. Not easy back in Sydney let me tell you! I think about getting up for a beer, and even though it won't be a Tooheys it'll be cold and it'll taste all right. I'll see the Australian flag hanging in the kitchen window, something I wouldn't dream of doing back in Maroubra, and think about home because I am an Australian and whether I live abroad for the rest of my life or fly back to Sydney next week, Australia is and always will be my home.

Where to next is unsure, but at the moment Spain or Australia are on the top of the list. Occasional bouts of homesickness, *morriña* as the Galicians (and Spanish) call it, make me lean towards heading home. But then again I have grown accustomed to

and in fact enjoy living abroad, plus I still have strong feelings of wanderlust that call me towards new places. All of this on top of the fact that Ana's family and friends etc. are here tip the balance back toward staying in Europe, and moving to Spain in particular. I suppose in the end the availability of work will dictate our destination. Sadly, Australia is no longer the 'lucky country', at least in terms of marine science, opportunities are a little thin on the ground at the moment. Whilst here in Europe even though there's been quite a bit of belt tightening there are still many more opportunities.

Time will tell though, and who knows, maybe I'll be avoiding broken glass on McKeon St running back from an early surf at Maroubra, trying to figure out an excuse for being late for work again before I know it!



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