

Surfing

by Nik Peachey

I've spent most of my entire life surfing, the rest I've wasted." Anonymous

It seems that the oceans of the world have become many things to many different people. For some the ocean is a source of food and income, for others a source of inspiration and fascination, for some a beautiful garden with hidden depths to explore and for others a dumping ground for their toxic waste, but of all people the ones that probably appreciate, admire and perhaps even understand the changing landscape of the ocean best are surfers.

Surfing, which is thought to have originated among the Polynesian peoples of the Hawaiian Islands of the Pacific Ocean, has been around for quite some time. The earliest recorded account of it was made in the journal of Captain King, a contemporary of Captain Cook, in 1779, but there are pictures of surfers carved into volcanic rock that are thought to date back much further. Surfing was regarded by the Polynesians as the sport of kings. The Chiefs used surfing and other Hawaiian sports to display their strength and agility and even the types of wood used for the boards was determined by the person's rank in society.

Nowadays the hierarchy between surfers is determined more by their courage and none are more courageous than the surfers who brave the jaws of Maui, where 20ft is considered an average sized wave and big can go up as high as 60 or 70 ft. The huge waves of Maui are created by a mixture of unusual circumstances. There is a huge ridge deep below the sea's surface that was created by the lava flow from a volcano. This combined with the presence of a reef not far to the north of the island and swells created by winter storms some two thousand miles away in the Aleutian Islands can create the kind of waves that make a surfer's heart race. The people who regularly surf there are almost religious about the spot and they frequently monitor weather forecasts and wave readings from buoys for days in advance to calculate when the best conditions will be. A ride on the jaws of Maui can last less than half a minute, but for surfers who fail to keep pace with the 25 mile an hour waves extreme danger awaits. Trapped inside a wave they can become totally disorientated with little sense of which direction takes them up to the surface. They also have only seconds to head for the safe zone of calm water before being crushed by the next big wave. A British surfer who had this experience described the sensation as like having your whole body pulled in every possible direction at once.

The idea of surfing, however, with its images of sun-tanned youths and tropical beaches, has always seemed to me somehow at odds with the weather and culture of the UK, yet nothing could be further from the truth. The UK, being a collection of islands, has no shortage of coastline and rugged seas and is reported to have an active surfing community of some 250,000. Most of the surfing centres around Croyde Bay in North Devon and Fistral Beach in Cornwall. It was in fact, at Fistral Beach in 1989, where the world record for the most surfers on one board was broken, when 12 surfers rode on a 37-ft longboard. Britain was also home to the first ever University degree course in surfing to be offered and even has its own surfing film. 'Blue Juice', which was filmed in the south west of Britain, is a light hearted tribute to the lifestyle of Britain's surfers and counts Welsh girl Catherine Zeta Jones and Ewan McGregor among its cast. The lifestyle and the people it portrays are very different from the stereotypes of muscular bronzed young men listening to The Beach Boys as they wax their boards, but beneath the surface it is clear that there is still a common link that runs between them and that is their love and admiration of life and the sea.