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RUBEN ROXBURGH

ON THE COMEBACK TRAIL



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JARRAD BATZA CHARGING GIANTS
DAVE KALAMA AUSSIE EXCLUSIVE
WINDSUP TIME TO SAIL

Rider: Ruben Roxburgh 'tip time' by George Ierodiaconou, Merimbula, NSW.

ILHA FORMOSA

TAIWAN - THE HAWAII OF ASIA. GABI STEINDL REPORTS

Researching the globe for a new destination for my next explorer-mission, I was astounded to discover that this island in the Pacific lies pretty much exactly on the same latitude as Hawaii and with surf hitting from a 225° swell window it seemed absolutely blessed with promising conditions for wave-addicts and conditions all year-round.

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Photographer Chiu Hsien-Chin snaps Jose Chuang at Jialeshui Beach, the place for SUP in Taiwan.

It was midnight, when I arrived at Taipei, Taiwan's capital. I was warmly welcomed in the arrival hall of Taoyuan International airport by the country's "Godfather of SUP'ing" Tony Fish and his wife Li-Ming as well as their two small children Sean and Dora. Tony has been windsurfing for most of his life and was one of the first to bring SUP boards into Taiwan. A true waterman, he also kites and surfs and is the owner of the "Spotclub" - www.spottaiwan.com - in Chunan, Miao-Li province, on the west coast, Taiwan's only little kite, wind, surf, SUP school.

Tony kindly invited me to stay there. A good hour after leaving the bustling city lights behind, we arrived at his enclave, an oasis to the people from the capital and their busy city-lives. I could make out palm trees in the dark walking through the gate of the club and a big shed entirely made out of surfboards.

The next morning after a quick coffee I took a stroll down to the beach which is only a minute away. The spot boasted an incredibly wide, sheer endless fine sand beach, with a rather slow and soft beach break. The water here was brownish but not because it's dirty but due to all the sand moving and strong winds in the Taiwan Strait. Due to consistent winds nearly all year round, Chunan is very popular amongst wind and kitesurfers. April to September is the best time to come here for surfing and SUP'ing. There was also another break that is protected by the harbour wall when the NE'ly trade winds blow from October till March.

The island Taiwan lies approximately 160km off the south coast of mainland China in the Pacific Ocean. With Korea and Japan in the north as well as Hong Kong and the Philippines in the south as its neighbouring countries, it is an important platform for travels into Asia. It's easy to see why Portuguese seafarers who reached the coast of Taiwan for the first time 400 years ago, called the island "Ilha Formosa" - the beautiful island, and why I think there will be more people coming to SUP here in the future.

Next stop on my adventure was Taitung on the east coast, aka "The Hawaii of Taiwan". The ASC (Asian Surfing Championships) Taitung Open was about to start, the country's largest surfing competition and Tony had organized a booth to promote SUP and his school at the event. The road-trip there took us past several bigger cities, yet Taiwan is generally a relatively small island - only 394 km long and 144km at its widest point. However it is not so easy to get from one side to the other with the Central Mountain Range forming a steep barrier running from north to south.

Paddling out the next morning and looking back towards this coast for the first time (this might sound cheesy but it's true!) I felt like I was in Tahiti. The view of the tropical palm-lined mountains directly lining the Pacific Ocean shore was mind-blowing. Everything around me was so different. It was absolutely "Formosa".

Taitung has a really unique flair. Small chilled out, groovy cafes, surfboards and surfers everywhere on mopeds with surfboard racks. The area is lush and abundantly covered, radiating in many colours with tropical flowers and vegetation. There are a lot of longboarders here as the majority of waves in the area are rather fat and slow. Everybody is incredibly welcoming, I felt extremely safe and I had no trouble whatsoever hitching a ride back from a late sunset-session at Donghe Bridge. Most of the surf action in the area is concentrated around Donghe Village.

Surfing got really popular here in the last 10 years, a complete contrast to two decades ago when the few westerners (US soldiers were the first to ride waves in the country) brave or foolish enough to attempt to surf in Taiwan often found their fun curtailed by warning shots from an ROC coast guard boat. Generally surfing and other water sports are developing here only very slowly. The tense relationship with China affects the people here and the country. The use of the beaches and activities along the coasts were severely restricted for a long time. But not only politics slows down progress, it also affects the attitude of the older generation who are scared of the water. They superstitiously believe there is a monster in the water that will pull them under and drown them. Thus many parents warn their kids of rivers and beaches, instead of teaching them to swim.

In Taitung Tony introduced me to Mark, a rather unique character and awesome guy. Originally from South Africa and 1000% passionate windsurfer, he moved to Taiwan several years ago for the wind. However today, he loves surfing and SUP'ing nearly as much as his sailing. He's "the man", who knows all the best spots around here.

There are a number of kick-ass spots around here, with clean, peeling waves. The most popular place to SUP was Donghe Rivermouth, a joy beach break that's best during autumn, winter and spring (Sep-May). Due to its location you will, however, be able to find conditions along the east coast all year round with waves for SUP'ers of all levels: river mouths, point and beach breaks. This coast gets a decent share of groundswell plus windswell from storms in the North Pacific that have enough fetch to arrive here well groomed in corduroy lines. Besides, just cruising up miles and miles of breathtaking coastline or on one of the stunning rivers will make for an unforgettable experience away from the surf.

Following this unforgettable experience, it was time for a new chapter in my Taiwan-adventure. I accepted the invitation of a new found friend Jose Chuang, the president of the Taiwan Ocean Recreation Sport Association, who kindly offered to show me his home Kenting, another hotspot for surfing on the most southern tip of Taiwan. Located on the Hengchun-Peninsula, surf can be found on either side, i.e. it's nearly always offshore somewhere! Jialeshui Beach is "the place to SUP" in this corner of the island, most likely the country's most reliable spot, with a range of waves for surfers of all abilities. June to October is the time to come here, after that the NE'lys start setting in, which can get rather strong (30-40 knots) during Taiwanese winter, however, there's normally always still a spot to be found to get wet.

The last stop on my tour took me to the most northern tip of Taiwan. The setting there blew me away: A gigantic golden sand dune flowing into the estuary of the Shuang River with a beautiful traditional old bridge spanning across. Right next to it is a stunning, super wide beach splitting the river from the ocean. A clean left-hander was peeling its way directly in front of a breathtaking temple, sweet offshores were blowing, a few surfers in the line-up, high mountains as backdrop. I met Evan Wang here, of Tidal Force SUP - www.ilovewsf.com.

As a very experienced wave windsurfer, he's pushing the limits on the stand up board today and plans on travelling to some competitions in Japan next year as there aren't any official SUP competitions in Taiwan at this stage. SUP'ing is still in its baby shoes here, which is one of the beauties of the island as it's so easy to score uncrowded line-ups.



Right: Gabi takes her sup to the water to explore the towns of Taiwan. Photo by Tony Fish.