

The perfect

The waves are huge, vertical and hurl their victims on to the solid rock of the reef below... for bodysurfers, Banzai Pipeline is the final frontier



storm

For the performance bodysurfer, there is no higher calling. In the winter months, storms in the far North Pacific produce impressive swells that may build across thousands of miles of unbroken ocean before breaking on the hard, stony reefs of the Hawaiian islands' northern shores. These swells consistently produce some of the biggest waves in the world.

At one place in particular, the Banzai Pipeline, a confluence of favourable geographic factors creates a wave that is legendary for its size and shape. Pipeline is perhaps the most famous surf beach in the world, and host to the biggest surfing contests of the international calendar.

Since 1973, bodysurfers – who surf without boards – have gathered here in late January or early February for the Pipeline Bodysurfing Classic. They assemble for a two-week holding period, and wait for a big day. For the bodysurfing aficionado, it is probably the most dangerous and testing event of its kind. This year, I happened to phone the organiser midway through the holding period, just three days before they were expecting a big swell. I was in Sydney, and realised that if I caught the next flight to Honolulu I'd arrive just in time to enter the contest.

That was the principle. There are some things in life that require an unnatural measure of foolhardiness. In short, I was about to learn that nothing can prepare you for the Banzai Pipeline. Though everyone will try.

My travel agent stared at me closely, as if appraising my thin, writer's physique with a mixture of respect and stupefaction. "You're going bodysurfing at Pipeline? You must be a pretty darn good bodysurfer," he said. But his voice carried a worrying hint of irony – as though what he really meant was "You're a bloody idiot." It was even worse when I went to my local surf shop to pick up a backpack. The assistant was a sun-hardened surf chick: tough, gum-chewing, bored. I couldn't resist telling her where I was taking the pack. Her eyes widened. She told me that her friend, a professional board surfer, had taken part in a surfing championship at Pipeline. He'd been hit by

a king-sized wave and spent so long underwater that when he surfaced he was unconscious. As for the woman who sold me my car hire when I got to Honolulu airport, when I told her what I was going to do, she looked as if she wasn't going to let me take the car. (Is this man sane enough to drive?) "Well, whatever you do, just don't turn your back to the surf," she said. She wasn't smiling.



By now, as I drove through the dawn across Oahu (Honolulu is on the south side of the island, Pipeline on the north), I was feeling like the protagonist of a B-grade horror flick, who must be warned at every turn of the danger that lies ahead.

Then suddenly, there it was. The deep blue Hawaiian sea. The first beach after a 5,000-mile-long ocean. And already I could make out the swell, though the odometer suggested I still had a good 10 miles to go. When I finally got to Pipeline, I found a group of bodysurfers – bodies like nuggets, skin a mosaic of shards – nervously toeing the sand. It was big. It was so bloody big, in fact, that the

lifeguards had wanted to call off the contest. The waves were coming up out of the water, rearing up above the reef, a monumental four to five times the size of a man. And they were breaking, not with a gentle, graceful curl, but with a huge and terrifying lip.

There were ominous signs, moreover, planted the length of the beach, reading: "WARNING. Dangerous Shorebreak. Waves break in shallow water. Serious injuries could occur, even in small surf. IF IN DOUBT, DON'T GO OUT."

"Even in small surf..." I'd never surfed on a reef before. I grew up riding the waves of Sydney's sandy beaches. I had a sense that, for someone with my ability and experience, riding Pipeline would probably be a bit like upgrading from a Morris Minor to a Formula One racing car. I sidled up to a wild-looking guy with a wiry frame, darting feral eyes and unkempt hair. He introduced himself as Adam Sanchez, from Kaua'i, one of the more rugged, less populous, outer islands. Was he competing? He pointed to a tattoo on his shoulder. It read, "Mea Kaha Nalu", which, he explained, means "bodysurfer" in Hawaiian. I asked if he'd done this before. He informed me that it was his first time in the contest: he was entering as a tribute to a friend who had drowned the previous year.

Mr Sanchez might as well have filled my stomach with plaster of Paris. I guess he didn't realise that already I was overawed by the waves. But the effect on my self-confidence was all too palpable. So when Alan, the organiser, came and suggested that it probably wasn't the right day for a journalist to experience Pipeline first hand, I had to agree. My dream of surfing at Pipeline was shipwrecked. It looked as if I'd have to catch my waves vicariously from the shore.

So the next day, as the 45 competitors from Australia, Brazil, California, France, Japan and Hawaii lined up in the morning sun to be briefed, I found myself standing among them, merely a privileged spectator. And I felt a hint of cowardice and slightly ashamed. Not for long. Not after the head judge informed the participants of the risks and the rules: "You go out at your own risk. If you have any doubt, stay back." Or when Alan asked the competitors three times whether they'd signed "the liability waiver". He

sounded tense. "If anyone wants to pull out, we'll give you a full refund," he said. It was a last desperate plea for common sense to prevail. But nobody paid any attention. After which, with horns and flags and plenty of noisy announcements, the contest began.

The judging rules for bodysurfing are simple. Competitors must swim out unassisted, with no surfboards, no bodyboards, not even a handboard. Fins are permitted. In each heat, competitors must try to catch as many waves as they can and their performance is scored for each wave. The rules state: "Highest scores are given for the most radical controlled manoeuvres in the most critical section of the biggest and/or best wave for the longest distance." The idea of being able to control anything in a wave that is up to 30ft high on the face, and breaking with a pummeling, thundering lip straight down on to rock was almost beyond belief. But as I was about to learn, these guys were extraordinary.

In fact, I was about to learn it the hard way. By the time of the sixth heat, one of the contestants due to

Still, as I put my flippers on I took consolation from the fact that you'd be hard pushed to find a better place to die. Palm trees, the silhouette of a mountain, beautiful sand, sparkling water, plentiful sunshine – this place has the lot.

The water was warm and less salty than I was used to. To get to the break you had to swim through a cross-shore rip that was moving at about one metre per second with a messy, churning current. In a couple of the heats, I'd seen some of the competitors carried a good 500-600 metres downshore in its swirling eddies. I could feel the adrenalin pumping and realised I was swimming faster than I could sustain. But there was no time to think about rationing energy, for the white roaring walls of death had begun to bear towards me.

Before I left the shore, I had asked Peter, an Australian contestant, if he could suggest a strategy –

I thought it might be wise to establish a rapport. After all, if I was about to be mangled in a 20-footer, chances were that the next time I met this guy I was going to be out cold with two lungs full of water. So I caught his eye as I crawled through, and gasped out an embarrassing "Howdy". I needn't have bothered. The fact is, when the heat started and I moved back from the deep ocean into the impact zone, I was a thousand times too scared to catch anything.

How can I do justice to it? Imagine you're pitching about like a cork in the sea, then suddenly rising from the deep is this monumental, moving cliff-face. The first thing you note is the height. The second is the sheer nature of the drop. I'm used to surfing down waves with an incline on them. These were drop-dead vertical. And, in the shallow water being sucked up beneath you, you can see every detail of the reef, just waiting to break your fall. The third

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thing you note is the way that each terrifying lip forms a giant tube that advances along each wave as it breaks.

If you are too high on the wave when you try to catch it, you are liable to be thrown out on that top lip, like grape seeds spat from the mouth of a giant. If you are too low on the wave then the lip could crash on top of you, grinding your bones into the reef, knocking you out if you take it on the back of the head. (One contestant was a Vietnam veteran, who took up extreme bodysurfing as a substitute for the excitement of the jungle. Even he surfed in a helmet.)

And yet it was in the midst of this that these extraordinary watermen began dropping headfirst down waves, sticking to the sheer vertical wall. And on the way, they would do tricks as though in mockery of the danger: they would spin, turn, roll and even come riding out the tube at the end of it all.

Of course, I also positioned myself a number of times to catch a wave. But it's difficult to catch a wave without looking down, and in looking down one is aware of the height and of course one sees the reef, and if one then looks sideways there is that horrible tube coming at you. I pulled out of half a dozen waves before I resigned myself.

Needless to say, I came last in the contest, scoring a total of zero points. But as the experts reassured me, that's not really what matters. What matters is each man's private contest with the wave. And, on that score, I figure I won at least a partial victory.

Hey – I swam out at Banzai Pipeline on a big winter's day. I survived a radical bodysurfing heat. And afterwards, somehow, I made it back to shore, unassisted. There aren't many people who can say that. **FT**

come up in the seventh lost his bottle and pulled out. Another had been rescued, someone else had wrenched a knee joint and another guy had cut up his ankle on the reef. Moreover, Adam Sanchez kept saying things like: "It's definitely a sizeable day. You've got to respect Mother Nature."

Following the withdrawal, it was announced that a slot had come open for a last-minute entrant. Now, I don't know exactly how to explain this without seeming a lunatic. Over the course of the morning, the swell had gradually been easing to just under the 20ft mark. I figured that was only three times my height. So I walked up to the organisers' table and, with a tremolo that verged on coloratura, told them: "I'll do it." As I signed my waiver, however, the girl at the desk, no doubt perturbed by the pallor of my skin and my general absence of muscles, asked me: "You do know what you're doing, don't you?"

"Not really," I said. Why lie?

"Have you swum in these sorts of conditions before?" she asked, with mounting concern.

"Er... no."

"You can swim at least, can't you?" she said. "I'm not completely stupid," I replied. But I knew very well that I was.

not to win, but just to survive. "Yeah," he'd said. "Don't take the sets on your head." The good sense of this became apparent, the closer I came to those cliffs of ocean breaking ahead. The other thing Peter told me was to keep my eyes open at all times, even underwater. This is so you can watch the reef and also judge when the foam of a big wave has dispersed overhead.

As the first rolling wall of white charged inwards, I slowed and dived then looked up and waited for the turbulence to clear. It took a long time. But the sea above eventually lightened. Quickly, I rose – into a glaring field of snow, the whole ocean white. I sank a couple of times in the swirling froth, then it quietened and I found time to take a breath, before the next thundering turbulence rolled in.

I repeated this half a dozen times and kept swimming away from the shore. It was hard going, but the rip helped me. By the time I made it outside the break, I was a long way downshore from the contest. With a profound sense that I was swimming in a league well beyond my ability, I turned round in the deep ocean and began to swim back up the coast. After a long period of solid freestyle, I drew level with a lifeguard. He wasn't there just for me – more's the pity. His main duty, I believe, was to fly in should any one of us become trapped underwater, be knocked unconscious, or suffer a broken neck.