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## SOUL SURFING IN COSTA RICA: A Tenderfoot's Ride

By Brie Iatarola

*Soul surfing is what you do when you are thoroughly in the moment enjoying and expressing yourself on the wave and being one with the ocean.*

—Tom Carrol, former surfing world champion and pipe master



Witch's Rock beckons all surfers to ride her wicked waves. All photos by Brie Iatarola

Sometimes when I close my eyes, I remember how it feels to soul surf. In fact, I even remember the first time my spirit found freedom in the balmy waters of Costa Rica. It happened July 17, 2002, about 45 miles north of Tamarindo, a coastal town in the province of Guanacaste that has exploded into a mecca of yachts, tourists, and pricey condos.

That particular morning, the shrieks of cara blanca monkeys replaced my alarm clock. As I showered outside in my ratty bikini with my surfboard, Midge, I drank the view of the Pacific's waves faster than a cup of coffee. A slight offshore wind, no clouds...another gorgeous day.

The clock read 5 a.m.; right on time. With Midge under my arm and a backpack stocked with sunscreen, a towel, and snacks, I hustled down the dirt road to meet up with the crew. The crew included Chrystian and Carlos—two skilled surfers from Canada—and Dan, a light-skinned British chap who seldom talked.



Chrystian



Carlos



Dan

We each shelled out \$50 for breakfast, lunch, and a boat ride to Costa Rica's famous treasure: Roca Bruja (Witch's Rock). The mythical spot has appeared in Surfer magazine's South of the Border video, the famous wave flick Endless Summer II and just about every major surfing magazine on the planet.

Parker, our Californian driver, ambled out of the bathroom, dazed from last night's fiesta. "Here," he said, pushing a piece of paper toward me. "You need to sign your life away. We can't be held responsible if anything happens to you." I signed the sheet and grinned. "I'd rather die surfing anyway."

As we passed the puebls of Huacas, Belén, and Filadelfia, occasional stretches of the jungle steamed with morning mist. Two hours later, we pulled up to a ramshackle house facing Playa del Coco and unloaded our gear.

"OK guys, we're gonna get some food first, and then we'll get El Capitán to take us out to the spot," instructed

another surfer named Pat, who pointed to a young tico—the nickname for Costa Ricans—with a slight beer belly.



El Capitán

I gave El Capitán a quick smile and greeted him with the slang I learned while living with a tico host family for six months. He told me his real name, but I quickly forgot it.

After scarfing a plate of gallo pinto with huevos—the ticos' breakfast of champions—my body shivered with excitement. "I can't believe this is really happening," I marveled. "A whole day of perfect waves."

I looked around before wading through the water to hop on the boat. A baby wailed from a stroller outside the house next door; no one was there to comfort her. Down the bay, two kids wrestled in the marina's polluted waters despite the early hour. I said a quick prayer, thanked the higher spirit, and leapt into the boat.



The crew gets set for the Roca Bruja adventure.

#### Off we go

As we sped across the water, I searched for dolphins, sharks, and whales but didn't see any. Rock castles that had weathered eons of tropical storms stared at me. Several kilometers north of Playa del Coco, the distant shoreline of Playa Naranjo emerged. Forty-five minutes later, stretches of the protected Santa Rosa National Park appeared to my right. Then, I noticed it: the menacing mountain of jagged rocks that stabbed out of the ocean. John, a cute American surfer with a degree in French literature, announced our arrival. "This is it," he said, grinning. "Welcome to Witch's Rock."

El Capitán cut the boat's engine, and we all sat for a few moments, assessing the conditions. No sunbathers peppered the beach; boogie boarders competed for waves elsewhere. Any signs of life hid inside the lush rain forest that shielded Playa Naranjo.

"God, look at that," John suddenly whispered to me, pointing to the way the swell bundled its energy, reached the cusp and then released its fury to the left and right sides, forming a beautiful, liquefied letter 'A.' It was more stunning than any picture in my collection of surfing magazines.



A silly John shows us what's for lunch.

Before we hit the water, John gave us a brief geology lesson: When a small estuary from Playa Naranjo merged with Witch's Rock centuries ago, a sandbar formed and the three-mile stretch of its hollow bottom created the ideal beach break. The waves weren't boasting 20-foot faces as they did during the winter; but they weren't small, either—just enough to tube us if luck prevailed.



Curious, I asked El Capitán about the legend of Witch's Rock. "Long ago, a married couple decided to camp on the shore of Playa Naranjo," he said solemnly. "One morning, the wife wanted to see if she and her husband could swim to the rock. They made it out, but she never made it back. Got stuck in the current and drowned. Now her spirit beckons all young men to join her at the rock."

The fable made my heart rate quicken, and I stopped listening. Death—the mere possibility. Maybe I wasn't

ready to leave Earth this way. The fact that I'm a female somewhat comforted me, but was this spirit really gender specific? I glanced at Chrystian; he just smiled. He didn't understand a lick of what El Capitán had just said. In the distance, I spotted three surfers. Aside from us, they were the only people out there.

Before the anxiety could fester, Pat tapped me on the leg. "You ready?" he asked, sliding Midge's 6-foot-9-inch body across my lap. "Yep," I replied as I pulled out my Sex wax and began to rub swift circles across the my board's surface.

Minutes later, I tossed Midge overboard and jumped in the water—a pleasant 76 degrees, with hues of sapphire mixed with turquoise. I strapped the leash to my right ankle, hoisted my body onto his, and paddled over to the action. The ocean's immensity made me feel like a lonely checker on a gigantic board.

#### The wave connection

Three hours elapsed before I finally scored a great ride. The swells were larger than what I usually surfed, and a miserable onshore wind seemed to spawn from nowhere. Set after set, the waves swiftly closed out, leaving no room for barrels. Each nasty wipeout shoved death down my lungs and out of my coughing mouth.

By noon, both the conditions and my surfing had improved. I spied a new set forming afar, and El Capitán's whistle signaled its pending arrival. I glided over to the sweet spot. With Midge angled slightly to the left, I paddled until I could feel the wave begin to inhale me. Though my arms ached, I kept paddling until the timing seemed right; and then I popped up.

Finally. That was it: the moment to enjoy and express myself. For the first time all day, my soul connected with the ocean. I shifted my weight onto my back foot and cut more to the left. Midge's fins sliced the water until the wave dissolved in the sandbar. Although the moment lasted less than a minute, I remembered why I never smashed my board out of frustration. Pat hollered, and I raised my fists before somersaulting off Midge into the water. Like a kid, I giggled all the way back to the boat.

"You're lookin' good out there," Pat said during lunch. "You definitely have it. It's there. Just stay relaxed." Good enough for a tenderfoot, I guessed, so I thanked him before listing all the ways to improve: faster paddling, more weight shifting and less thinking. The last ride reminded me that I possess an athletic soul, and only my mind could defeat me. The wisdom unleashed another grin, and a peaceful silence followed. After the break, I realized something else: It was just past noon, and I still had the rest of the day to surf with the souls of Witch's Rock.



Nothing beats a great day of surfing.

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