

‘Clann na Farraige’ The Ocean’s Family

The family

The black van in which we are about to head on our ‘Search’ down the coast reveals the common passion of our family: surfboards stacked in the back, surf magazines reflected in the windscreen, a long board overhanging the handbrake and the back door plastered in surf stickers collected from all over the world. Dad’s favourite reads, ‘Age and Treachery over youth and skill’!

My Dad, Barry, and his brothers, Brian, Conor and Willie, were some of the first surf pioneers in Ireland. My grandmother once brought home two boards from a trip to the USA, thinking that they might be useful for the German tourists or at least they could decorate her hotel in Rosstown. My Dad and his brothers had other plans. They plunged into the water and never came out of it, taking lots of Irish people towards the waves of a coast they themselves deeply explored. They were at the origin of Irish surfing, which they keep stimulating.

My mum, NC, was also born and bred on Donegal’s wild coast and growing up she spent all her money on her legendary ‘Blue Mermaid’ surfboard and defied her parents surfing at some of the more gnarly spots with my Dad. She’s a dedicated ‘surf mom’ bringing us surfing after school and trekking all over the country with us to surf contests. She’s a great story teller and loves to narrate a legend stopping the car to investigate 5000 year old ‘wedge tombs’, older than the Great Pyramids of Egypt. She likes to introduce people to our culture, which she feels a deep and non-exclusive interest for. In this respect, she cannot bear narrow-mindedness.

My ‘little’ sister Becky-Finn is sixteen and already towers over me! She is Ireland’s top long boarding surfer-girl. She’s fun-loving and her look is at the same time thoughtful and sparkling, she’s got freckles and a gorgeous mane of curly hair. I miss her lots when I’m away surfing and competing and I’m always awed by her maturity and her permanent concern for others. I love our surf sessions together at the Peak and our local beach. When I come home from my travels I’m always impressed at how fast her surfing is progressing and her fearlessness in big surf.

The Search

The Search is an essential component in a surfer’s life. Our trek down the coast highlighted the elusive conditions of surf in Ireland... we drove for the whole day, me, my Dad, uncle Willie and Becky-Finn from 8am to 6pm, over 10 hours on the road searching for surf.

We pulled up at Easkey and the swell was smaller than expected, it looked too small for the one and only spot that works on a west wind, the wind that was tearing the surf everywhere to shreds.

We stopped off at Zoe and Spike’s cottage for some local knowledge, a hot cup of tea and a look at the weather charts... According to Spike a spot around the bay would be “oily glass, barrels of perfection...the height of the ceiling,” but (there’s always a but) the whole world and its dog would be there, “2 vanloads of English, a bunch of weekend warriors from Dublin and the Mayo lads who are always on it.”

In Ireland not everything is what it seems. I seriously doubt the accuracy of on-line swell predictions and weather forecasts (according to Bouyweather.com the swell was due to peak today, showing perfect conditions for this part of the west coast). When we eventually pulled up an hour later the ocean was flat. Not a soul in sight. Skunked!

We parked at a secluded little bay round the headland, another spot with 'potential' given the 'right conditions', a little right and left breaking onto a shallow slab of rock, (often too shallow), left hand tube sometimes spitting or dredging onto dry reef. As soon as the word 'picnic' was mentioned a cold front came in, rain poured down and the wind switched to icy NW. We had faint hopes of throwing ourselves in at Easkey Left on the way back but the wind had switched onshore and there were no takers. I wrapped up in my snow jacket, hat, scarf, gloves, jumped back in the van and flicked through the latest issue of Surf Europe with Ian Battrick's sequence at the G-Spot. I read Sharpy the photog's comments on surfing in Ireland, "Any surfer who has spent much time in the Emerald Isle knows that patience can often be the key. As a relentless procession of miserable weather fronts sweep across the coast, only the most devout of surfers are left when the weather finally does break."

My first 'dry run' since I've come home from Australia. Back at the Peak I look out at heaving, cold, onshore sea...We meet Podge coming out of the water. Personally I think surfers are the worst source of honest, un-exaggerated, accurate information. He tells us it glassed off for an hour and was really quite good. I hate the 'you should have been here an hour ago' surf mentality.

I contemplated all this on the way home. We were cold, hungry, worn out from disappointment and had long ago given up hope of a surf.

If I were in Australia or warmer climes I'd surf anything. 2ft onshore bring it on. No sacrifice is needed, just slap on sun block, wax my board and I'm ready. I can run in and out of the water all day long, my body never seizing up with cold, my skin never being turned to raw leather by the elements, my fingers never going numb, no loss of circulation or ice-cream headaches! No wet wetsuits, or thick rubber to contend with. This was it I was getting post-travel blues.

My sister made it a lot simpler and clearer for me, 'I used to think like that but then I remembered why I surf in the first place. The buzz of that perfect ride, of every wave. So I just went out and didn't care what it was like and always had much more fun than I thought I would.'

And as dad said, "at least we'll have dry suits now for the next surf!"

The elements of Irish surfing

Howling gale force wind and rain pounding my attic roof startled me awake at 5.30am. Usually its comforting to know I can snuggle back into the duvet covers safe and cosy letting the storm rage on outside. Not this time. Today was the final day of the National Championships! I got up and hit the road at 6.30am. The contest was due to start at 8am in Easkey. The weather was wild; trees and branches lay broken on the road, telephone poles leaned dangerously and power lines were down. Driving past the Peak I could see a group of crazy surfers huddled together the wind whipping up White Sea horses around them and flattening any swell...

I arrived at Easkey Left wondering if the rocks would start flying off the top of the ruined castle. The contest was postponed until 11am. The gale force SE winds were slowing down the swell and the waves hadn't arrived yet. I wasn't a bit surprised by the conditions, every year at the time of the nationals one is guaranteed adverse weather conditions; big ragged onshore swell or calm seas. So I was pleasantly surprised when the wind began to drop and the surf picked up.

It was shaping up to be one of the greatest National Championships ever. There was a huge gathering of surfers from every area and 'era'! The Men's Open was a showdown between the 'senior' ex-surfing champs who were back on the scene, Colin O'Hare and John McCarthy and the young-guns fresh out of the juniors like, Cain Kilcullen and Fergal Smith. We were witnessing the dawn of a new era in Irish surfing, the younger crew out-surfing their seniors. The standard of surfing was through the roof, the best surfing ever witnessed at an Irish event.

By the time it came round to the Women's Final there were some decent 5ft sets and the wind light SW, Showtime!

Usually during the women's final the guys use it as an excuse for a break and no one wants to judge... Whatever about the men's surfing it was agreed by all that the Women's final was without a doubt the most exciting. It was the first time that everyone stayed to watch it, that crowds cheered on the shore and the photographers jostled for prime position. It was said to be one of the most hotly contested surf offs in years.

Zoe Lally, Irish Surfing Association Administrator, and a long-standing women's Champion herself in the past, said the women's final was the best example of Irish women's surfing she had seen.

"They were just totally head to head. Catching set wave after set wave and riding them all the way almost up onto the rocks on the shore, it was a great final. In the end it was Easkey who took the title after catching a wave that also won her the Best Wave Award."

It really was a showdown between me and Nicole. We both grew up surfing the Peak and Bundoran's reefs, we had committed ourselves to surfing, travelling and competing all over the world, training in Australia. We were pushing the limits of our surfing and with it the standard of women's surfing. The atmosphere was electric in the water. So much adrenaline was pumping through me I wanted to hoot and yell. Finally I thought, women's surfing is getting the respect it deserves. Every time Nicole caught a set wave I was on the next one answering back and vice a versa, a

Wimbledon match on steroids! I came in knowing it was close but already stoked and proud that I was part of a big shift in Irish women's surfing that just took place.

The results weren't announced until the prize-giving ceremony over an hour later. I had more butterflies in my stomach anticipating the outcome than before the Final!

My first Senior Nationals was in 1995, I was the youngest ever runner-up for the National title aged nine! Finally after 10 years of hard work, training, dedication and challenges, I was ready to take the title. And to win at my namesake wave, it's never been sweeter! I took the Cup back home to Smugglers Creek in Rosstown to be filled with Arthur's finest and celebrated!

Girl Power!

Last weekend Ireland's 5th annual Wet n' Wild Water Women weekend revolutionised the state of women's surfing yet again. 400 women from all over the country turned up to get involved in the free non-stop surf lessons for surf girls of all levels, age and ability coached by all-female instructors. The atmosphere was electric, beach barbecue, surf demos on wave forecasting, competitive surfing, board repairs, surf fitness and flexibility – it was a holistic approach to surfing with a fun, relaxed vibe. Word has also spread among the other half of the surf population and vanloads of curious males came to check out what it was to be a 'wet n' wild water women' on the Saturday night with live performance by Surf Chixxx!

Sunset in Donegal Bay...

Becky-Finn and I moved into our caravan today, only 5 mins from the house but right on the beach, spitting distance from the surf. Becky and our friend, Anne-Claire, a long boarder from Brittany, got nice long board sessions while I gave surf lessons at my cousin's surf school, Finn McCool's. Anne-Claire says the spectacle of me preparing panels for teaching surf theory when there were no waves, equipped with marker pens, reminds her of a sentence she read in Eddie Aikau's biography: '« the beach is my classroom. » This sentence doubly applies to you Easkey: you teach and learn there.'

That evening the bay was illuminated, the sinking sun turning the fun-sized waves a golden rosé colour, the sky a fiery riot of colour. One of those rare, clear evenings when man's pollution is transformed into something beautiful. All the local surfers gathered together in the line-up, family and friends on our long boards, chatting, sharing stories and waves, having the 'craic'! Surfing is a solitary pursuit and yet I couldn't deny the wonderful sense of community I felt.

You have to put the time in. All those weeks trapped in doors by gale-force onshore winds and rain is worth enduring for the few hours of golden light and flawless waves. It's cold, inconsistent and fickle, but I love it!"