



# WIRED FOR Adventure

## TRAVEL BEYOND LIMITS

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### NORTH AMERICA

A TREACHEROUS JOURNEY  
TO THE TOP OF DENALI

### ARGENTINA

EXTREME EXPEDITIONS IN  
PATAGONIA'S ICY WATERS

### SOUTH AFRICA

THE 'IRON WAY' OF THE  
DRAKENSBERG MOUNTAINS

✚ SURFING IN THE MALDIVES, MOUNTAIN BIKING IN BHUTAN, HIKING IN THE LAKE DISTRICT  
AND THE STORY OF THE MAN WHO CLIMBED THE MATTERHORN 371 TIMES

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# CATCHING A BREAK

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After a lifetime of fruitless practice, **Maxwell Roche** has yet to master the ancient art of surfing. Frustrated and feeling like a failure he decides upon an altogether more extreme approach to surf progression, heading to the Maldives for a unique and intensely expensive week of surf coaching, with world-leading professionals.



It's day two of the Tropic Surf - Progression Vacation, and as a particularly intimidating set of waves rear their dark and ever-steepening forms above the horizon's sharp edge, I gulp audibly. My fellow surfers, sitting much farther down toward the reef corner, like a group of beady-eyed meerkats, spy the oncoming danger, lay down on their boards and paddle with urgency toward the safety of the channel. Committed as I am with no option for an easy escape I remember the words of my instructor Ryley Haskell, 'It's always safer to commit, than to hesitate'. Deciding to heed his ever-sound advice I paddle toward the approaching menace, spinning nervously at the take-off spot to face the paradisiacal island shore and the angry boiling reef, which is now beginning to brandish its jagged coral teeth. As the first wave of the set slows in the shallows, and morphs into a gorgeous one-story cylinder of glass that grinds a deep furrow in the flat water below, time slows. The beauty of said wave, and the opportunity it affords seem to have left my tiny brain completely devoid of sensible thought. I'm only conscious of one fact, the fact that I've suddenly forgotten everything I've been taught. With nothing left but autopilot I paddle and pop up, eyes fixated on the sizey drop, and rocket in an embarrassing wide-legged stance directly down the wave face. All my speed squandered, I stand in no man's land, caught helplessly in the path of the approaching tornado and belly flop pathetically forward. Just as I do so the lip of the barrel descends with inevitability upon the back of my head, driving me into the reef below, firing saline water into my mouth, and out of my nose. Nature then goes on to teach me a further lesson in the form of a nasty strain across my inner thigh, and a sharp pain in my backside. Annoyed with myself for squandering what was undoubtedly my first ever chance at a proper big barrel, and determined to do less talking and more listening for the rest of the week, I make my way back to the support boat where Penny Willis (a.k.a Penny Pain), highly esteemed All Blacks rugby physio, is waiting to administer 'the magic touch', and treat my latest collection of injuries.

So how did I come to be five and a half thousand miles from home, helpless and prostrate aboard a luxury surf boat, receiving a much needed pep talk and slightly awkward inner thigh massage from the lovely Penny Pain? Well, a few years prior, during a short stay in the Maldivian resort of Anantara Dhigu, I'd made friends with two young surf guides, Travis and Erin. Legends that they were, during a surf session at a break called Nonyas, they'd secretly filmed my very average surfing. Later that night we'd watched the video over pina coladas, and Erin had made some simple but significant observations about my technique. It was the first time in my 23 year surf career that I'd ever seen myself surf, and... it wasn't pretty. However, the small nuggets of advice, led to an epiphany. Maybe a lifetime of practice was totally pointless, without analysis and coaching?



There's no need to hunt for the perfect wave. They just keep coming and coming



You're never far away from  
a pointer or two



After all, I'd spent a lot of time in the water around the world over the years and never really progressed beyond intermediate level. Erin's was the first lesson I'd ever had, and her kind advice really helped me improve. It made me realise that without tuition, a surfer can spend years getting into bad habits and making fundamental mistakes. Observing how delighted I was with the tips, Erin went on to tell me about a mythical trip designed just for people like me. Apparently Tropicsurf, an Aussie-founded luxury surf tourism company, offered guiding services in various locations around the world and crucially, where I was concerned, an annual 'Progression Vacation'. She then began to list all the unique facets of the trip which included coaching from professional surfers, video analysis, surf-specific strength and conditioning classes with a world-leading physiotherapist, nutritional advice and access to online tuition tools. "But you'll need to be quick" she'd said, slurping the last of her coconut cocktail "Spots on the 2024 course are filling up fast!". Suddenly convinced that expert

coaching, rather than just old-fashioned practice, was the secret to surfing success, I gave the crew at Tropicsurf a call and booked my slot; then all that remained was to sell the car and secure a loan to cover the colossal £9k price tag.

Six months after my encounter with Travis and Erin, my girlfriend Jenny and I stand on a long pontoon adjacent to Malé International Airport. We watch through squinted eyes as our 13:45 seaplane transfer touches down and swings perfectly into its parking space. The pilot stops the engines and hops down to introduce himself; his gold striped epaulettes, mirrored aviators and polished peaked pilot's cap glinting in the afternoon sunshine. "You're a 30-minute flight from surfer's paradise guys, let's load the boards and get airborne". Soon we are strapped in for take-off. Twin props rage as the horizon soon drops out of view beyond the cockpit.

COMO Maalifushi resort in the south Maldivian atolls is, by all intents and purposes, a myth. It's a place so far from what 99.9% of us call 'the real world', as to almost be beyond all hope of reach; and



#### Who's writing

Maxwell Roche is a journalist/incongruous caveman (self-proclaimed) who spends much of his time in antiquarian bookshops taking great-long-sniffs. He also hurls himself off, down or into anything, for a story or a photograph, travelling in search of a view, because it's all about the view. He's a desperate skydiver, addicted surfer and frivolous cyclist, horrified by the prospect of missing out and tormented by indecision regarding his future.





yet we all suspect it's out there, somewhere beyond tangible bounds. Imagine if you will the most remote and beautiful tropical island in the universe. Then continue to imagine that island, only this time, absolutely devoid of every known hardship associated with a tropical destination, like inescapable heat, insects and lack of infrastructure. And finally, once you've imagined all that, please zoom out until you've got an eagle eye view of the place, and picture it besieged on all sides by countless perfect surf spots, just a short boat ride away. That is the reality upon which, by some miracle, I stumbled last month for the 2024 Tropicsurf Progression Vacation.

Waiting for us as we step from the seaplane into ankle-deep bath temperature water on Thaa Atoll is the whole team from Tropicsurf with smiles for miles and cold towels that we press gratefully to our faces and necks. Head Guide, Ryley, explains that we have an hour to unpack before heading off on our first boat excursion of the week, to a spot called Mikados; followed by the first round of video analysis. Grateful to have met some of the other guests on the flight over I ponder upon what a mixed bag we are. Besides myself, they seem an extremely affluent bunch including financiers, airline pilots, movie producers and an intriguing journalist who writes satire about 'money and power' for the New York Times. Contrasting job descriptions all, but with one common

theme, the passion to embark on, and the means to afford such a trip. As we climb into the golf cart beside the legendary Ammadey, our personal butler for the week, I overhear another of the new guests, not part of our group, a young girl clutching her father's hand on the beach say, "Daddy, is this the most beautiful place in the world?". I chuckle to myself as we buzz off into the island interior toward our villa, with the sun flashing between palms lining the sandy pathway and the scent of jasmine washing over us as water laps upon the powdery shore.

With no time to waste, we drop our bags and get ready for the afternoon's surfing. It's the perfect chance for the coaches to see where we're at, and for Sean, a pro surf cameraman, to capture us in action.

After a fun afternoon of sun, waves and getting to know yous at Mikados, we're all feeling that deep exhaustion that only a surfer knows; and with jet-lag setting in, we gathered around a widescreen TV adjacent to the beach-side bar to begin the first video analysis session. Miraculously, Sean, who we'd dropped in the water near the break that afternoon, with nothing but a sponge board and a drybag full of equipment, had filmed every single one of our rides, from start to finish. I ask him if he'd taken a flask of tea or snacks perhaps to kill the time between videos, but he stoutly replies "Nope. I don't want to get distracted and miss anything". Fair play I think to myself.

#### Top Right

Yep. They're the digs. There's no doubt that this is a luxury trip

#### Bottom Right

Big smiles after a big day on the water; it's a hard life but someone's got to do it

#### Middle

This is what you're really paying for. Wave after perfect wave...

#### Left

A focus on small groups mean that there's no fighting over waves here





SURF: MALDIVES





It's an intensive course, but clearly  
all the hard work pays off



Sean's the right man for the job. Soon after, Ryley begins to scroll through each of our rides in turn, critiquing techniques, often pausing and rewinding to highlight how we might have better executed the various manoeuvres. The camaraderie in the room is brilliant. We all hoot and holler when someone gets a good one, and a cacophony of 'Ooooo's' and good-spirited laughs breaks out when a nasty wipeout is witnessed. By the end of the session we've covered topics such as: angle of take off, the benefits of leg extension and compression to generate speed down the line, hand, head and shoulder rotation through turns and correct front and back foot placement. Following some astute questions from the students, Ryley continues his never ending stream of information, with a lesson in duck-diving, safety tips on the dos and don'ts of surfing reef breaks, info on accurate surf forecasting, and even the many nuances of board and fin design. It's clear by the end of the session that the man really knows his stuff and that we'd all do well to pay attention to him.

On day three of the course we hop aboard the boat back to a break called Machines on Laamu Atoll, so called apparently because it peels along the reef with all the predictability of a finely tuned machine. What Ryley hadn't told us before we arrived there for the first time was that you also require machine-like fitness to paddle relentlessly against the sweeping current. After ceremoniously dropping off Sean the camera man paddle-distance from the beach, Ryley whips out an iPad from somewhere and starts giving us a spot briefing, based on the specific wind and swell direction of the day. Briefing over, I do a double-take as I witness Brad, one of the other surf guides, a warm and kindly Saffer, giving my board a fresh coat of wax. "You really don't have to do that Brad," I say to him, trying to take the board politely. "No, no," says Brad grinning, "It's all part of the service". I haven't even got time to express my gratitude before one of the boat crew begins to ply me with ice cold water and tropical fruit. These, and many other little details, are what make travelling with Tropicsurf considerably more luxurious than your average surf trip.

Mercifully for me, that day at Machines, the waves were slightly smaller than on the day of my fateful injury; but still glassy, clean and perfectly formed. It gives us all a chance to put into practice, without undue fear, everything we've learned thus far. By the end of the day I'm taking off at an angle on steeper waves further up the reef, knifing down the line and pumping and generating good speed to set up for turns. I'm even adjusting my feet between manoeuvres, surfing with my hands ahead of me for drive (instead of flailing them around like I used to) and allowing my shoulders and then my hips to follow my line of sight through manoeuvres, adding a little more snap to my style in the process. In general, after all the advice and inspiration, and after watching Ryley and the other guides surf to such an impressive level, I'm starting to feel more assured and confident in my abilities, and so seemingly are the other students. Joost, for example, a Dutch airline pilot who's been surfing less





than a year gets called onto an overhead wave by Brad and streaks past me at pace, locked perfectly in the power pocket of a gorgeous wall, his zinc-encrusted face and bloodshot eyes alive with delight as we all whistle and shout encouragement.

The syrupy sun sinks and surrounds us with honey coloured light as we clutch cold beers and squint into warm winds on the foredeck whilst motoring back to the resort after our last day of surfing at Machines. I spark up a conversation with one of my fellow students, a Spanish lady named Teresa, who's been surfing at a very similar level to me all week. I discover her to be perhaps the best living advertisement for the speed of progression a dedicated surfer can achieve at the hands of Tropicsurf. She tells me that after selling her business she'd decided on some down time, and made it her mission in life to learn to surf. A grand total of two years and six two-week trips with Tropicsurf later, she could ride a wave better than me (even though I'd been practising intermittently for 23 years). "But you need to be passionate," she said, and we both agree that the 'Progression Vacation' isn't exactly a vacation. On a few occasions, I'd been quite sternly told off by a guide named Nicole in the interest of the group which was a tough pill to swallow at the time, and felt a little bit like being back at school. So nope, ultimately, the progression vacation is less of a vacation and more an intense structured week of paddling, information and concentration, at the mercy of an alarm clock and a strict schedule, with minimal downtime. A willingness to listen to instruction, commit and be brave is required, but most of all a strong desire to progress. It's not

for anyone who isn't serious about surfing. You can be a beginner or an advanced surfer, but what you need is passion. That's who this course is for. People who want the best tools and training available on the market, who've hit a wall on their surf journey and who are determined to improve. At COMO, we lucky few punters, who were willing to invest in progression, achieved a weekly wave count beyond all belief. And in the Maldives with Tropicsurf the typically arduous search for perfect surf doesn't exist since the secrets, thanks to Ryley and the rest of the team, through skillful interpretation of swell, wind and tide, are right in front of you day, after day, after day, making sure you have the best canvas and foundation of opportunity upon which to stage your learning.

So, for a surfer of sufficient means, is a stay at a super-luxury five-star private island resort like COMO Maalifushi for a week of private surf tuition with Tropicsurf worthwhile? Well, the tears that welled in the corners of my eyes immediately preceding our departure are testament to the sort of time a surfer can have, and how much a surfer can learn, if he or she is willing to really commit. Personally I'll be putting into practice what I've learned on the course for the rest of my earthly days and for me, that more than justifies the investment. Two decades worth of surf-related questions were answered and even more info is now available to me thanks to 'Surf Better', the online tuition and progress mapper that comes free as part of the trip offering. My only worry is that I've gleaned all this priceless info two decades too late. So... don't be like me, get there ASAP because sometimes plain old practice doesn't make perfect, and you need to spend time in the company of experts. 