

# WIRED FOR ADVENTURE

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THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM

**“I’m always wondering what’s around the next corner and over the next hill. That’s taken me here, there, and everywhere.”**

ALDO KANE - ADVENTURER

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# Surf's Up

Photography is, at the best of times, an incredibly difficult discipline to master. Surf photography, on the other hand, is a whole new level of challenging. In this piece, Maxwell Roche heads off to the Maldives to try his hand at shooting snaps whilst tackling the waves. As you can see, his efforts were handsomely rewarded with breathtaking imagery.

WORDS AND IMAGES: MAXWELL ROCHE







*"Surfing! Ocean waves! Likely one of the most unpredictable incarnations of water, with the most potential to surprise."*



**A**s the six-foot barrel of crystal liquid rolls over me, I'm laid flat in thigh-deep water. My left hand maintains its vice-like grip on the camera as my right-hand clings to the jagged reef. Suction generated by the passing vortex gives me a Croydon facelift and, for a few fleeting seconds, I look twenty years younger.

The wave explodes on my calf muscles, giving them a nice massage in the process. A hawksbill turtle flashes me a friendly flipper before I break the surface to see the laid-back Californian outline of Nathan Kemp, Niyama resort's resident surf guide, screaming towards me deep inside a silver tube. As he crouches in the curl above the boiling reef, the wave takes on the look of liquid mercury, reflecting high-striated clouds in the evening light. I point my camera, purse my lips with contempt like Dirty Harry, and pull the trigger.

### Drawing with light

Some learned soul once told me, over a cold beer and platos pequeños, that the word photography is derived from the Greek words 'photos', meaning light, and 'graphos', meaning drawing. Given my enthusiasm for said art form, this precious fragment of knowledge thrilled me greatly. 'Drawing with light' certainly sounded romantic.

I started to recount all of the dodgy photos I'd taken over the years and ponder upon my favourites, asking myself, why were some more successful than others? I remembered the images taken on misty mornings, or in the moments before sunset.

Long exposures in the metropolis at night or, better still, the wilderness during a storm.

It was then that I understood: the success of a photo has less to do with the subject matter and far more to do with the quality of the light therein. Capture even the most mundane of subjects, bathed in photons of rare and unfamiliar wavelengths, and you've got yourself something worth looking at.

I relayed these philosophies back to my learned friend and she readily agreed, adding that, if light is the key, surely water is the most intoxicating subject matter, given its dynamism and ability to project, reflect, split, and bend the sun's rays.

I could tell she was onto something, and I immediately started exploring the recesses of my tiny brain for a cunning plan. After all, water exists in so many forms. What did I know about any of them? Except for, maybe, twenty misspent years of my life failing to be a decent surfer.

That was it! Surfing! Ocean waves! Likely one of the most unpredictable incarnations of water, with the most potential to surprise. Turbulent and hard to access. I wanted to gain a less-accessible perspective, somewhere with a bit of zhuzh. And so, it was decided. I'd have to go on a uniquely physical photography adventure.

I'd combine my limited skills as a surfer with my limited skills as a photographer and demonstrate just how limited I really am by taking an expensive and uninsured camera where all electronic devices fear to go: the salty sea.

### 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, traveling 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.



## Heaven on earth

Of course, one does not just turn the washing machine up to 1,400 rpm, pop the camera on auto and hop in. I think it's wise, however qualified a person may be in the water, or behind the camera, to secure the services of someone who has experience doing both at the same time.

So, where do all the friendly surf photography gurus hang out, the patient ones especially, the ones willing to spend time with a total amateur liability like myself?

Well as it turns out, just like the rest of us, despite their mythical status, they too need to make a living from their craft. And to make a living they need customers, and by customers, I mean surfers; more specifically, surfers who want their picture taken and are willing to pay handsomely for the privilege. And where do those types of surfers hang out, the moguls, the magnates and the CEOs prepared to pay top dollar for that once-in-a-lifetime dazzling dream wave and photographic evidence to prove their eminence?

Well... to heaven-on-earth of course. Namely, the Maldives - a wave-rich playground, eternally warm and, crucially from a photography perspective, abundant in crystalline water and luxuriant light.

## Surfer's paradise

I stand expectantly, camera bag over my shoulder, on a long pontoon adjacent to Malé international airport and watch through squinted eyes as the seaplane transfer touches down in the chalky blue harbour and swings inch 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 together in the afternoon sunshine.

"You're a 30-minute flight from surfer's paradise, my friend. Load your kit and let's get airborne," the pilot instructed.

Soon, I'm strapped in for take-off. Twin props rage as the horizon drops out of view beyond the cockpit. The pilot, who's sitting within arm's reach, turns around to peer over the rim of his shades and bare his pearly teeth. As he does so, my gaze drops to his feet, working away on the pedals beside jettisoned flip-flops.

Niyama Private Island Resort on Huluwalu, in the central Maldivian atoll of Dhaalu, is for 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 yet we all suspect it's out there, somewhere beyond tangible bounds.

Imagine, if you will, the most remote and beautiful tropical islands in the universe. Then, continue to imagine those islands, only this time, absolutely devoid of every known hardship associated with a tropical destination (i.e. heat, insects, lack of infrastructure, etc.). And finally, once you've imagined all that, please, if you will, zoom out until you've got an eagle's eye view of the place and picture it besieged on all sides by perfect, private surf. That is the reality upon which, by some miracle, my camera and I happened upon last November.

## Living like a king

Waiting for me as I step from the seaplane into bath-temperature water is the lovely Amira, my personal Thakuru (butler). Vague, clichéd conceptions about stony-faced butlers in starchy white gloves are blown clean out of the water as she floats across the beach, silken blue hijab caught by the breeze, green eyes ignited by the sea to stretch out a manicured hand in greeting.

"Welcome to nature's playground," she says, stressing and softening the syllables iambically. "Your luggage will follow. Let me show you to your villa where you can settle in before I introduce you to your photography instructor".

Another butler dives in stage left with a cold towel that I press gratefully to my face and neck before climbing into the back of a golf buggy. As I do, I overhear another of the newly arrived guests, a young girl clutching her father's hand on the beach, saying, "Daddy, is this



*"Welcome to nature's playground," she says. "Let me show you to your villa where you can settle in before I introduce you to your photography instructor."*





the most beautiful-est place in the world?"

I chuckle to myself as we buzz off into the island's interior, the sun's rays flashing as I walk alongside palms lining the sandy pathway.

Before long, I'm sat at a waterside restaurant named Dune, washing down fresh tuna steak with cold Corona, contemplating the mindboggling magnificence of the room I've just been handed the keys to. A room with beds bigger than full-size billiard tables, indoor and open-air bathrooms sporting rain showers that could be mistaken for waterfalls, a sundeck on which you could land a light aircraft, a swimming pool fit for Phelps, a banging Bose entertainment system, a fully stocked deli to rival most small high street supermarkets, and a humidior crammed wall-to-wall with Cuban cigars.

As the last exquisite piece of tuna vanishes off the end of my fork a relaxed guy by the name of Louis approaches my table.

"Hi," he says, "I'm your surf photography instructor."

## Meeting the expert

Tall with shoulder-length blonde locks, Louis Ruben struck me as a warm-natured guy, quiet in his confidence. A quick scan of his Instagram the night before (@onebreath.images) had revealed him to be the genuine article. It was clear from Aussie-born Louis' portfolio that he knew his aperture from his elbow. What a treat this would be; an apprentice to a true master. The tropical climate also seemed congenial to his low-key style and he appeared pleased to meet a human who shared an interest in his vocation.

"Unlike normal photography," says Louis, "you can't control the environment. The water is always moving and you're moving too. The light is constantly changing

as the waves do. Everything is in flux. You need to anticipate, which is why it helps to have some surf experience, and if possible, work with your subject".

He goes on to explain that getting the perfect shot is about teamwork and unexpectedly offers to surf whilst I take pictures. "Positioning is key. Timing is everything," he says.

"When I catch a wave, I'll line you up. Since you have a wide-angle lens, I'll need to get as close as possible, to within a few feet ideally. When you need to go under, kick up and out of the water first and use the momentum to sink, but keep your camera arm at the surface and keep your finger on the trigger. The last few images of a burst are always the winners."

"And what about settings?" I ask, ears smoking from all the info. Louis narrows his eyes like a Michelin-starred chef who's just been asked the ingredients to his secret recipe.

"I'll leave that to you."

## As good as it gets

"This is as good as it gets here," says surf guide Nathan as we pull up to a spot called Kasabu on the last afternoon of my trip. "Hope you're ready!"

Just beyond the bow of the boat, big, dreamy, mechanical-looking waves are thundering along the reef into a light offshore wind which carries the scent of hibiscus flowers seaward from the distant beach. As I pull on my swim fins and helmet, securing the camera to my wrist using a tether, I'm feeling far from ready after nearly a week spent treading water.

One thing I'd underestimated regarding surf photography was the level of fitness required. Continually swimming against currents to stay in position for the



shot, low on oxygen due to the constant need to dive under. Even on the small wave days, I'd been burning some serious calories. Louis and Nathan slip their boards from the rack and cannonball off the boat with glee, paddling towards the waves, leaving me to doggy paddle lethargically behind with my chin on the blissfully-buoyant camera case.

As they disappear out of earshot, I hear Louis say, "Give me a couple of extra waves today man. My girlfriend's watching from the boat".

Louis, Nathan and I head out to dinner on bikes slightly tipsy that evening following après surf beers at the beach bar. They race ahead, dicing dangerously with the staunch-looking roots of the Ficus Benghalensis trees that skirt the path. I watch them disappear and slow down to take a moment to myself.

Flashing through pools of light welling below the path lights, I enjoy the warm wind across slightly sunburned skin, feeling that kind of joyous lethargy and freshness only a waterman knows; the one that comes from hours of exercise in a cool briny sea followed by a warm shower and freshly donned clothes. I tilt my head back toward the Milky Way, breathing deep the aromas of spice gardens hidden deep amid the forest.

As I bring my head back level, I notice the wooden plaque between my handlebars with my name skilfully engraved thereon. I can't help but smirk at this. It sums up perfectly the lengths to which the resort will go in the interest of customer comfort. They know full well that when

I'm stumbling drunkenly along the bike rack later that evening, trying to figure out which of the contraptions is mine, I'll be in desperate need of a name tag.

Soon, we arrive at a solitary pontoon, at the end of which waits a small boat. I say a boat, it's more like a motorised floating couch. We climb aboard and begin our journey, reclined in luxury, guided by submerged lighting in the reef channel. We're headed to a uniquely located restaurant called Edge, which stands stilted and alone below sweeping white canvas, one kilometre offshore, hemmed by the unbroken horizon.

A dinner of absurd decadence is waiting for us. Our table hovers, inches from a vertical drop into the deep blue and we enjoy all the succulent delights of the Indian Ocean. Fresh oysters followed by coral lobster and tiger prawns. Our private sommelier (I never thought I'd say those words) recommends wine to compliment every dish.

## Dark swell on the horizon

Having set the TV to timer mode, I woke the next morning to the flashing infographic of Ni-yama's dedicated surf-forecasting channel. Conditions are looking perfect for Kasabu (the right-hand surf spot that breaks off the neighbouring island of Kudahuvadho) and my WhatsApp plinks continually with excited messages from Louis telling me to get my butt to the boat transfer.

As the electric curtains whir open at the end of my bed, I'm temporarily blinded by the morning



sun; detail soon returns to reveal a line of ten guys with rakes, reversing methodically across the beach in front of the villa, smoothing out every imperfection in their path.

Sublime quickly turns ridiculous as I notice another group of island workers wheeling a fumigation machine through the beachfront foliage. As they progress, thick blueish smoke billows from a long tube killing every insect within a twenty-foot radius. With mixed emotions regarding such extreme levels of meticulous extermination, I check for mosquito bites, realise I haven't a single one, and set about preparing my camera gear.

On the horizon looms a dark swell, one of the biggest of the day. Louis paddles and pops to his feet at its zenith, putting his weight forward to accelerate down the face, one eye on me and one hand in the wall of the wave to adjust his speed. Meanwhile, I swim, poised and ready, right to where the water starts to shallow, waiting for the wave to steepen, pitch, and curl over the man within.

Much like flowers, waves are at their most beautiful just before they meet their end. With that beauty comes a significant amount of power. The true art, I'd learned from Louis, was to get as close to that power as possible, without getting consumed by it.

Swimming fast toward what is now a vertical wall of plate glass creating a perfect window to the reef below, I hold my camera aloft inches from Louis's outstretched hand before diving deep, porpoise-style, before the lip of the tubular wave throws forward and descends like a guillotine.

Narrowly escaping the turbulence, I look back over my shoulder below the surface, allowing the energy to sweep through me, resisting like I'd been taught, just enough, so that I'm carried along behind (but not devoured by) the underwater tornado.


Woah. Suddenly I've been transported, like a fairground fish. I'm now looking out from within at the palm-fringed coastal panorama, beyond Louis's silhouetted form. The windless afternoon has allowed the water's surface to stretch tight for total transparency. I fire off 20 shots toward the man in the maelstrom and decide there's nowhere I'd rather be, drawing with the singular light that travels through a wild tropical sea.

### To the aspiring surf photographer

Whatever you plan to shoot, be it surfing, kayaking, swimming or scuba, the same terms and conditions will undoubtedly apply. Water photography is a demanding hobby and would suit strongly committed swimmers who are cardio-fit and comfortable in/understanding of their element and sport (i.e. comfortable enough to dedicate a significant portion of their attention to the photography and still remain safe).

You'll also need to be prepared to make a £1,000 - 3,000 investment for basic, good-quality kit, flippers, helmet and waterproof housing for your camera, but weirdly, the more you spend, the less risk you take and therefore the more fun tokens and fewer grey hairs you end up with.

Before your first foray, I'd definitely recommend looking up Tom Woods' YouTube channel Dream Life Through Photography for further info/inspiration. That, and, seeking the priceless guidance of a pro like Louis, ideally but not essentially, somewhere like Niyama Maldives, because every lesson is preferably learned amid the warmth and pain-reducing luxury.

I can't promise you won't expel a significant amount of puff but I can promise your images will be among the most absorbing and rewarding you've ever taken. 





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