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IF SURFING WAS EASY, WOULD YOU REALLY BOther AT ALL?

Maxwell Roche

The pathway of surfing progress is a never-ending journey, filled with innumerable challenges along the way. So how big a goal are you willing to set for yourself? Maxwell Roche sets off for Tropicsurf's first-ever Progression Week in an attempt to de-mystify surfing's snakes-and-ladders pathway in Maldivian paradise.

The second day of the Tropic Surf Progression Vacation is dawning, 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, bobbing much farther down the line 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, and 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: that I've suddenly forgotten everything I've ever been taught.

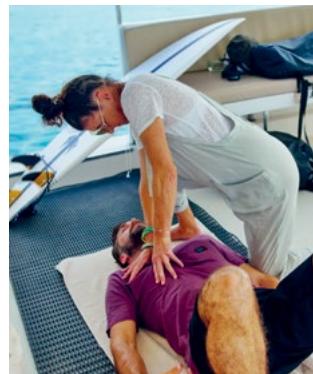
With nothing left to guide me but instinctive autopilot, I paddle and pop up, eyes fixated on the alarmingly sizey drop, and rocket in an embarrassingly wide-legged stance directly down the wave face. All my speed squandered, I stand in no man's land, caught helplessly in the path of the approaching 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 and firing saline water into my mouth and out of my nose. Continuing her relentless assault on my mortal being, 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 sheepishly make my way back to the boat where Penny Willis a.k.a Penny Pain, the highly esteemed All Blacks rugby physio, is waiting to administer 'the magic touch', and treat my latest collection of injuries.

The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.

– Michelangelo

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 Piña Coladas, and Erin had made some simple but significant observations about my technique. It was the first time in my 23-year surfing career that I'd ever seen myself surf, and... it wasn't pretty. However, these small nuggets of advice led to an epiphany: maybe a lifetime of practice was totally pointless, if without analysis and coaching? 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 realize that, without tuition, a surfer can spend years getting into bad habits and making fundamental mistakes.



TOP: Tropicsurf's Progression Vacation can tame even challenging waves. PHOTO: Maxwell Roche.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Hard to mask the stoke on Maxwell's fury face! Captivating cockpit views; Stormy shakas from head surf guide Ryley. PHOTOS: Maxwell Roche.

FAR LEFT: Video analysis session with surf guides Brad and Nicole. PHOTO: Localfilms

LEFT: When the body resists, 'Penny Pain' helps it obey! PHOTO: Localfilms

TIP 1: FOAM IS YOUR FRIEND

The faster you can paddle, the more waves you will reap. Thick boards glide, return you to the lineup faster, require less accuracy and effort to catch waves, lengthen your ride, and reduce energy expenditure. Additionally, they improve drive, acceleration and the ever-desirous spray out of turns. The only downsides are reduced sensitivity and greater challenge in duck-dives. It's a fine balance, but never underestimate the benefits of a little more foam.

Observing how delighted I was with the tips, Erin went on to tell me about a mythical trip designed specifically for people like me. Apparently, she said, Tropicsurf offers guiding services in various locations around the world and - crucially where I was concerned - an annual 'Progression Vacation'. The trip includes 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'd better be quick" she'd said, sipping the last of her 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 contacted the crew at Tropicsurf, sold all my worldly possessions, borrowed the rest up to my eyeballs in order to generate the funds required, and secured myself a place on this once-in-a-lifetime journey.

Six months after my encounter with Travis and Erin, my girlfriend Jenny and I stand expectantly on a long pontoon adjacent to Malé International Airport. We watch through squinted eyes as our 13:45 seaplane transfer touches down in the chalky blue harbor, swinging inch-perfectly into its parking berth. The pilot stops the engines and hops down to introduce himself; his gold-striped epaulettes, mirrored aviators and polished-peaked pilot's cap glinting brazenly 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 takeoff, twin props raging as the horizon drops out of view beyond the cockpit.

COMO Maalifushi resort in the southern Maldivian atolls is, by all intents and purposes, a myth. It's a place so far from what 99.9 percent of us call 'the real world' as to almost be beyond all hope of physical or mental reach; and 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 absolutely devoid of every known hardship associated with a tropical destination, including inescapable heat, bloodthirsty insects, lack of infrastructure and more. And finally, once you've imagined all that, expand this idyllic vision until you've got an eagle's eye view of an untouched island besieged on all sides by countless perfect breaking waves 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, proffering smiles for miles and cold towels that we press gratefully to our faces and necks. Ryley, our head guide, announces that we have an hour to unpack before departing on our first boat excursion of the week to

a spot called Farms, before returning for preliminary video analysis. Grateful to have met some of the other guests on the flight over, I ponder upon what a contrasting collection of surf students we are. Besides myself, there seems to be an extremely affluent dichotomy of financiers, airline pilots, movie producers and even an intriguing lady journalist who writes satire about 'money and power' for the New York Times. Contrasting job descriptions all, but with one common theme: the unquenchable passion to embark on such an adventure as this. As we climb into the golf buggy beside the legendary Ammadey, our personal butler for the week, I overhear another resort guest - 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 star-like between towering palms lining the sandy pathway and the scent of jasmine wafting over us as crystalline water laps upon the powdery shore, I silently attest that she is absolutely right.

Feeling that deep exhaustion that only a surfer knows after a fun afternoon of sun, waves and 'getting to know you's at Farms, the wearying gnaw of jet lag is setting in as we gather around a widescreen TV adjacent to the beach-side bar to begin our video analysis session. Miraculously, Sean, a pro surf cameraman who we'd dropped in the water near the break with nothing but a sponge board and a drybag full of equipment, had filmed every single one of our rides from start to finish from the beach, by means of a telephoto lens and a drone. 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.

Sean's the right man for the job. Soon after the footage starts rolling, 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 maneuvers. The camaraderie in the room is infectious. We collectively hoot and holler when someone gets a good one and a cacophony of 'oooooh's' and good-spirited laughs erupts when a nasty wipeout is witnessed. By the end of the session we've covered a gamut of 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 sage-like wisdom with a lesson in duck-diving, safety tips such as the dos and don'ts of surfing reef breaks, the art of 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.

TIP 2: BACK FOOT BACK

Fins steer your board but only if you stand on top of them. Apply a deck grip above your fins as a method of positioning your rear foot and navigating to the correct position. Intermediate surfers typically stand too far forward, so at first, aim to stand on the grip. Over time, you will be able to shift back inch by inch until your foot rests against the kicker. It takes years to perfect correct foot position, so Tropicsurf has designed a three-color grip to help you gauge your progress. Each increment towards the tail will make your turns sharper and easier.





TOP: The Maldivian archipelago is filled with such empty lineups waiting to be discovered. PHOTO: Localfilms

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Camaraderie fuels progression; The tranquility for COMO Maalifushi; Smiles for miles. PHOTOS: Localfilms.

LEFT: Mid-session video analysis. PHOTO: Localfilms.

BOTTOM LEFT: The inimitable value of Ryley's real-time instruction. PHOTO: Localfilms.

FOLLOWING SPREAD, LEFT, RIGHT: Alex Korchien about to get shacked; Teresa Fernandez Valdes showcasing that the better you get, the more fun you have. PHOTO: Localfilms.



TIP 3: LEARN TO FOOT SURF

Try keeping your hands behind your back as you climb and fall along the wave face. Steering and control should come predominantly through the bottom of your feet with a subtle transition of weight from toe to heel and back. Connect with your board through your feet and master this less-is-more mindset.



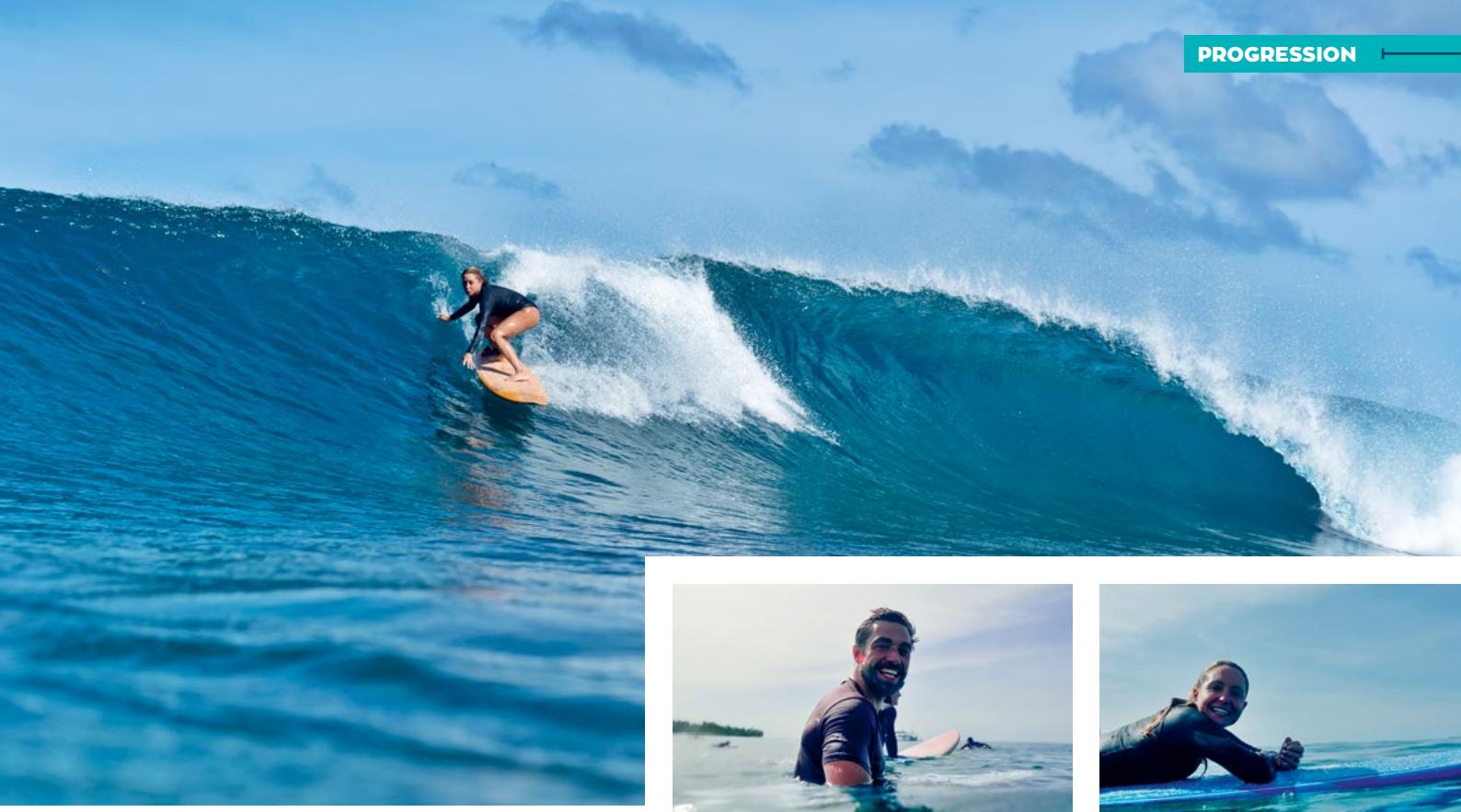
The third day of our sojourn finds us at a break called Machines on Laamu Atoll, so named apparently due to its mechanical predictability as it reels gracefully along the reef. What Ryley hadn't told us before we arrived there for the first time was that you also require machine-like fitness to paddle relentlessly against the sweeping current. After ceremoniously dropping our hawk-eyed videographer paddle-distance from the beach, Ryley whips out an iPad from somewhere and provides 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 Saffa, 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 subtle gestures, and many other little details, are what make traveling with Tropicsurf considerably more luxurious than your average surf trip.

Mercifully for me, the waves at Machines are slightly smaller than yesterday's shameful performance and fateful injury. Smaller, perhaps, but no less glassy, clean and perfectly formed. It gives us all a chance to put into practice, without undue fear, everything we've learned thus far. As the session progresses, I'm angling my take-off into steeper waves further up the reef, knifing down the line, and pumping to generate speed in preparation for sweeping turns. I'm even adjusting my feet between maneuvers, surfing with my hands ahead of me for drive (instead of flailing them around like dislocated sausages) and allowing my hips to follow my shoulders down my line of sight through each turn and adjustment, adding

significantly more snap to my style in the process. After such expert and acute 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, bathing us in honey-colored 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 waves at Machines. I initiate 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 in 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, and she could surf rings around me, despite my intermittent practice over the last 23 years. "But you need to be passionate," she said, and, with a shared chuckle, we both agree that the 'Progression Vacation' isn't exactly a vacation.

Ultimately, the Progression Vacation is less a vacation and more an intense, structured week of paddling, tuition 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 all but obligatory, but most of all, an eager desire to progress. It's not for those not serious



about surfing, but is suitable for all levels; you can be a beginner or an advanced surfer, but what you need is passion. That's who this course is has been impeccably crafted for: those 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 Maalifushi, we lucky few punters who were willing to invest in progression achieved more than we could have imagined as we first set foot on the island's snow-white sand, all whilst in the lap of the most exquisite luxury and harvesting a weekly wave count beyond all belief. In the Maldives with Tropicsurf, the typically arduous search for perfect surf doesn't exist. Thanks to Ryley and the rest of the team, through their skillful interpretation of swell, wind and tide, perfection is right in front of you day after exquisite day, making sure you have the best canvas and foundation of opportunity upon which to stage your learning journey.

The tears that well in the corners of my eyes immediately preceding our departure are inadequate testament to the experience a surfer can have, and how much a surfer can learn, if he or she is willing to truly commit. It is an experience that lasts far beyond its few days, carried with you long after your departure from paradise. I'll be putting into practice all 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 in these few, all-to-brief days, and even more information is now available to me thanks to 'Surf Better' - the complimentary online tuition and progress mapper provided to all guests. My only worry is that I've gleaned all this priceless progression two decades too late.

Sometimes plain old practice doesn't make perfect; to truly progress you need to spend time in the company of experts. 

TIP 4: FIX YOUR WEAKEST LINKS

Working with a coach and video analysis allows you to pinpoint your most significant weaknesses. Plot your abilities on the Surfbetter Progress Map, then take a step back to basics to remedy what's holding you back. Bad habits can form over years, and will take some time to correct, but don't overwhelm yourself with too many different priorities. Keep a narrow focus and practice just one skill only for 20-30 minutes at a time.

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TIP 5: TRAIN YOUR BRAIN

Your final thought in each sentence is very important and should be positively charged. Eg: instead of saying "Don't chicken out," re-phrase that to say 'I've got this - commit.' Your brain best remembers the last word it hears and takes that as its command. Would you prefer it to hear 'chicken' or 'commit'?

Are you interested in progressing your surfing? Join Tropicsurf in the Maldives, September 2025. Email info@tropicsurf.com for details.