

What I Learned on My Summer Vacation French Surf Expedition with the Fireman, the Nudists & the Shampoo Addict

It was supposed to be a dream trip: a week along one of Europe's last empty coastlines, riding waves, drinking wine, and sleeping on the beach. And it (mostly) was. BY MARK ANDERS

Photographs by BY MARTIN HARTLEY

Team members roll a homemade rickshaw loaded with surfing and camping gear down France's Atlantic coast.





Trip leader Pat
Audoy in the
rickshaw harness

Pulling a rickshaw is harder than it looks.

I'm not talking about the people haulers you see on the streets of Calcutta. Ours was designed to carry surfboards and camping gear, and it was integral to our five-man team's mission: a weeklong, 30-mile trek down France's southern Atlantic coast, on a surprisingly unpopulated stretch of beaches west of Bordeaux that also happens to offer up some of the best surfing in Europe. Pat Audoy, a thickly built 47-year-old Bordeaux firefighter and the leader of our trip, had constructed the cart with this specific intent in mind. He used two nine-foot lengths of stout bamboo, stainless-steel piping, green plastic netting, a pile of hose clamps, and two black rubber tires that looked like pumped-up doughnuts. It was awesome.

It was also brutally difficult to move when high tide pushed us off the hard-packed sand and into the deep stuff, or when there was a headwind, which was pretty much all the time. On these occasions, we'd switch from a one-man engine, which worked nicely with a guy between the bamboo poles pushing a connecting bar forward, to a three-man team. We'd yoke the rickshaw to our backpacks with a carabiner and about eight feet of nylon rope and attempt to push/pull in unison. Everyone took their turn, but it seemed more often than not that the duty fell to me and my good friend Troy Rodriguez, 38, a pharmaceutical sales rep from San Diego. This was not awesome.

The best adventures are hatched in the oddest places.

I first met Pat in October 2007, in a village on the Qiantang River, in southeast China. The Qiantang experiences regular tidal bores—waves pushed upstream by powerful ocean tides—and I was scouting for a surf expedition on behalf of a team of American pros. Pat and a 30-year-old professional Brazilian longboarder named Eduardo Bagé were there to ride the bore, one of about a dozen in the world that's surfable. We got to talking surf trips, and I mentioned that I'd done some walking expeditions in California and Costa Rica, carrying my board for a week or more to reach tough-to-access—and thus empty—breaks. Next on my list, I told them, was France.

Pat lit a cigarette and stared at me with a huge grin. "I also do these trips," he said. "I had never met anyone else who does it, until you."

He told me that he'd been using homemade rickshaws since he was a teenager to carry boards to empty breaks near Bordeaux. But he'd never attempted anything as ambitious as what I had in mind. We decided right there to do a trip together.

After China, we slowly began planning over e-mail. The waves north of Bordeaux spill over



Breaking camp on day five



Pat gets a map consult from a local friend.

shifting sandbars, Pat wrote, and surfing is best in the fall, when offshore winds groom overhead waves into glassy faces. We invited Bagé and Troy, and later welcomed Martin Hartley, a hardy 40-year-old British photographer who's shot over a dozen Arctic expeditions. Pat also insisted we time the trek to coincide with a September *mascaret* (French for "tidal bore") on the Dordogne River, which we could ride before setting off on our trek.

It wasn't until we joined Pat on a foggy early evening in the tiny harbor of St. Pardon, about 100 miles upstream of the Atlantic, that I realized he was something of a big

kahuna in France. Some 30 locals on longboards and kayaks were there to ride the bore, and they treated him like their bro king, calling out his name and reaching for handshakes while making sure not to get in his way. As sunset turned to dusk, we all followed Pat into the water to wait for the wave. It began as a distant hiss, then escalated into a roar as a waist-high wall of water appeared from around a tree-lined bend and lifted us howling up the half-mile-wide river. We rode at first as a massive party, but soon guys started falling off. Two minutes in, it was just Pat, a kayaker friend of his, and me. My legs burned,

but Pat coached me over the rumble of the wave: “Steer to the left! A little to the right! Move to the nose of your board!”

After about five minutes, I relaxed and, in the fading light, took notice of the passing countryside—rolling vineyards, clapboard farmhouses, ramshackle fishing camps, white marble mansions, and the castle of Vayres. Twenty minutes and three miles later, the *mascaret* finally petered out. I was completely exhausted.

“Great ride,” Pat said as we clawed our way up the steep, muddy riverbank. “Only ten surfers have ever ridden the bore this far.”

A little sand in your canard is fine.

Pat’s unofficial mantra for our trip was “Any fool can suffer.” And he was no fool. In the weeks before we started, he purchased what he promised were deluxe rations and drove down access roads to the coast to place food caches along our route. Between our start in the tiny beach town of Carcans-Plage and our ending point, Cap Ferret, there’s only one town, Lacanau-Océan, so Pat figured he’d stash food under the sand near our planned campsites. He called these resupplies “burials.”

The week prior to our trek, the weather had been perfect: 70 degrees and, according to local reports, some of the best waves all year. But as we started out, it was 55 degrees and spitting rain. We trudged south, taking rueful glances at the junky and unsurfable 15-foot waves. The cocktail bars and Euro ravers of Biarritz were about 120 miles south, but here there was just the thrashing ocean, the beach, and wide dunes backed by vast pine forests the French government planted 150 years ago to dry up swampland and prevent erosion.

Around sunset, the skies began to clear, and Pat led us up a steep dune to our first campsite, a funky shack that he said an old fisherman and surfer named Bruno had built entirely from driftwood and flotsam. Pat dropped to his knees at an unmarked spot and started pawing at the sand like a dog digging for a bone. I joined him, and soon we pulled out our rations: two cans of roast duck, canned asparagus, vanilla yogurt, margarine, Nutella, a loaf of bread, Earl Grey tea, ground coffee, three bottles of Médoc wine, and a damp cardboard box of ziti that disintegrated in my hands. Pat had not used a bag—he’d just dumped everything in a hole. This was my first clue that, though the French gave us pasteurization, their ideas of food preservation have what Americans might consider some questionable wiggle room.

You can kind of ignore French law.

At least if you’re with Pat.

“In France it is forbidden to CAMP on the beach with a tent but it’s legal to SLEEP on the beach without a tent,” he’d written me a few months before we started. “Anyway the fines are not expensive, and the French police less frightening than the chinesses.”

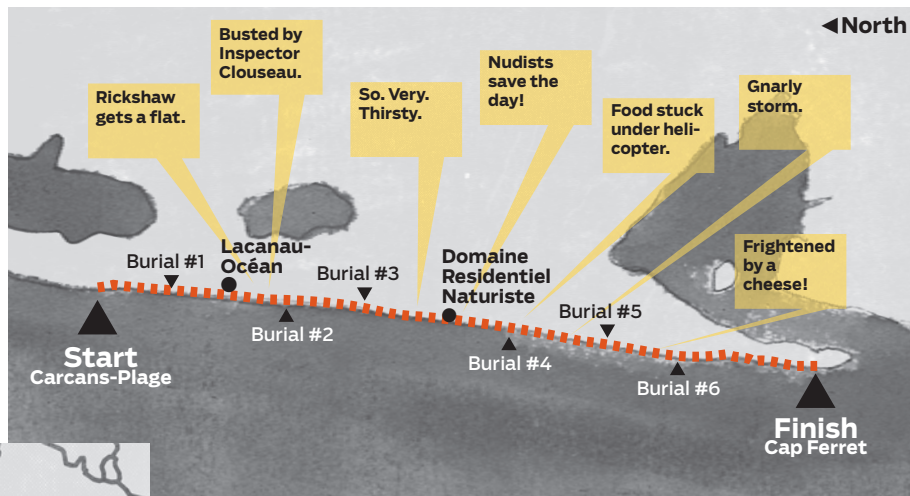
Our second day had been as frustrating as the first. We’d woken to more big, sloppy waves, then been skunked at the legendary sandbars off the tourist town of Lacanau-Océan, site of an annual pro

whatever you want,” Pat said, chuckling. “And that I should personally teach you these rules.”

Hydration is more important than clean hair.

This should be obvious, but apparently not for Brazilian longboarders.

Every morning on the beach, we watched Bagé open one of the five dromedary bags we used to store our drinking water, hang it on the rickshaw, then kneel down and meticulously rinse his shoulder-length brown hair, with its sun-kissed highlights. **continued on page 91**



contest. Three miles farther south, it was dark when we pulled the rickshaw to the top of a dune in the Maison Forestière du Lion, a government-operated park. We donned headlamps to search for the night’s burial,

frantically digging for a few minutes before pulling up fish soup, canned green beans, some cookies, and bottles of wine. It was like *Survivor: Chez Panisse*.

The next morning as our coffee was brewing, we heard a vehicle approaching from the north. Suddenly, a white park-ranger SUV charged up the dune, its tires spitting sand in the bright sunshine. Pat stood up and casually lit a cigarette.

A lanky man sporting a khaki uniform and a fussy mustache popped out of the truck. He actually looked like Inspector Clouseau, and Pat treated him accordingly, smirking as we got a finger-wagging lecture.

“What did he say?” I asked after Clouseau drove away in a huff.

“He said, ‘You are not allowed to camp. Look around: You have destroyed everything,’” Pat translated. “I said, ‘We are kind people. We didn’t injure any plants or herbs.’”

“Then what’d he say?”

“‘Tell the foreigners it’s not possible to do

HAVE BOARD, WILL TRAVEL

One other thing I learned: You don’t have to tow boards down the beach for a week to find empty waves in France. Just get to Bordeaux (one-hour flight from Paris; beware of the \$200 fee for your board), rent a car, and drive the 36 miles northwest along Route de Lacanau to Lacanau-Océan. There’s a popular break right in front of town, and you can rent boards, buy wax, and get local advice from Mata Hari Surf Shop (011-33-5-56-03-13-01). If the lineup is crowded, pack a lunch (don’t forget extra water), grab your board, and walk a couple miles north or south and you’ll soon find empty waves. There are plenty of lodging options in town (lacanau.com). You can also find good surf in Carcans-Plage, about eight miles north. Camping Municipal de Carcans-Océan campground is a short walk from the beach and the main local break (\$40; 011-33-5-56-03-41-44). And if you’re cool with skinny-surfing, the Domaine Résidentiel Naturiste does look comfortable (doubles from \$33; lajenny.fr). —M.A.

At first it was funny—even endearing. Here was a professional surfer who, as he explained it, hated being sandy. The habit would have been harmless had the rickshaw not popped a tire during a short excursion into Lacanau-Océan. After we got it fixed, Pat declared our load too heavy and instructed us to empty three of the dromedary bags.

We knew we had a water shortage by the third day, but we ignored it because we finally had decent surf—clean, waist-high rollers that were perfect for Bagé’s stylish longboarding. It was hard to begrudge his grooming habits after watching him hang ten over the nose of his nine-foot-one tri-fin.

By day four we were down to just one bag of water. Still, that morning Bagé poured what must have been a quart over his head, running his fingers through his locks to work out every last grain of sand.

Martin, sitting next to me, muttered under his breath what we were all thinking: “What the fuck, dude?”

Nudists can save your life.

“Here—it’s the nude-people camp,” Pat said, leaning over to point at the map we’d spread on the sand. “If you want to get water, though, you must be naked. It’s not a problem for me.”

It was several hours after Bagé’s coiffing, and we’d been slogging through sand so hot that it calved in chunks under our feet. My mouth was dry, and I had the beginnings of a nasty headache. Pat, looking like a ragtag Lawrence of Arabia with a blue-and-white-striped picnic napkin wrapped around his head, estimated that the Domaine Résidentiel Naturiste de La Jenny was a few miles farther.

About an hour and a half later, we came upon the first of them, sprawled out like pink seals. They were all men, lying on their stomachs on towels, their buns roasting in the sun. As we passed, each one seemed automatically to flip over, as if our arrival had triggered a silent timer on a tanning oven. They stared at us without speaking. I stared at my feet.

Soon we reached the heart of the resort. Nude grandparents played bocce ball, nude kids boogie-boarded, and nude people of all ages, sizes, and colors lounged. We spotted a lifeguard perched on a chair in the bed of a pickup and shuffled over to ask about water. Luckily, given his position relative to ours, he was clothed, and he pointed us toward the bathhouses, atop a dune at the end of a long set of wooden stairs. As Bagé, Martin, and I gathered the bags and began wading through the sea of skin, Pat dropped trou and lit a cigarette.

On a large wooden deck outside the bathhouses, we found two open-air showers and a knee-high blue spigot with drinking water.



Bagé between hair rinsings

We took turns gulping straight from it and filled the bags, then, in the spirit of the place, I stepped out of my trunks and took a shower. The same wasn’t good enough for Bagé. He found a plastic bucket, filled it with the potable water, and started washing his hair.

This time, Martin didn’t mutter: “What the fuck, dude?!”

Don’t bury your food next to a helipad.

We’d left the Domaine Résidentiel Naturiste in good spirits. The swell was steadily building, and we were looking forward to a pre-dinner session. But as we approached our fourth camping spot, near a concrete helicopter pad at the end of an access road, we made out three police trucks, an ambulance, and a blue-and-white rescue helicopter. When we got closer, we could see a few dozen onlookers and, near them, a man kneeling and pumping the chest of a lifeless woman in a wetsuit. She’d drowned while surfing.

We had no interest in sticking around, but we had no choice: Our food was buried beside the idling chopper.

Around sunset, the medics and gawkers cleared out and we unearthed our food, but we all felt uncomfortable camping right where a woman had just taken her last breath. Plus, the incident had attracted police and rangers who might not appreciate our surf-gypsy caravan. We pushed on.

Two hours later we found a spot to camp in the dark. It had been a nine-mile day, by far the longest of our expedition.

There are cultural differences regarding the proper refrigeration of dairy products.

I will concede that deep sand provides some cooling. But in the last days of the trip, we dug up increasingly suspect portions of cheese, yogurt, and milk. Worse, we carried the left-

overs in one of those soft-sided cooler bags, which functioned more like a steamer in the heat. Still, Pat, Bagé, and, at times, Martin took long pulls of 75-degree whole milk. Troy and I marveled at their intestinal fortitude.

During a dinner near the end of the week, I set out some ripening Roquefort, Brie, and Camembert, and Troy, feeling the courage of half a bottle of Médoc, decided to go native.

“Fromage-y boy, hit me,” he said. “Give me that double-hard Roquello... Roquefort... whatever it’s called.”

I scraped some on a baguette and handed it over. He took a bite and instantly recoiled. “Oh!” he blurted. “That’s strong.”

“Come on, afraid by a cheese?” asked Pat incredulously. “If I tell this story to my friends, nobody would believe me. Incredible. Frightened by a cheese!”

If you walk it, the waves will come.

“No wind,” Bagé said as we scanned the crashing chest-high peelers and bluebird sky that greeted us on our sixth morning.

“And nobody out,” Troy added, grabbing his board.

After almost a week of trekking, and despite mostly unsatisfying surf, we had come to enjoy the workings of the well-oiled machine that we’d become. Everyone pitched in to prepare food, wash dishes, and set up and break down camp. When the tide was low, we walked. When night came, we slept on the beach. Now, it seemed, the surf gods were rewarding our patience.

For five hours we shared the waves, swapping boards and taking short breaks to lie in the sun. At around two in the afternoon, the wind came ashore, ending the party. But by that point nobody cared. ○

CORRESPONDENT MARK ANDERS WROTE ABOUT RALLY RACING IN OCTOBER 2008.