

CROSSING OVER

A SOLO JOURNEY TO NOWHERE

“There’s only one rule in this sport,” Deiter said solemnly as he looked firmly into my eyes. “Don’t fall. If you fall, you die.” Gulp.

As a mountain guide with clients who pay the big bucks to get scared but not die, there was only one rule: the guide must not fall. I was a mountain climbing guide for ten years before I really let it sink in that when you fall off a mountain you die; when you fall off a windsurfer or a diving board you just get wet. Falling while climbing was simply not an option. It never entered my mind; if it did, I’d turn back. Clients fall, guides do not.

Once I had this dictum firmly instilled in my mind, life in the mountains became simpler. There was never a “what do I do if I fall.....” question. I became more relaxed, more focused, more observant. If you’re walking through the jungle always worried about a lion attack, you’ll never get to enjoy those cute pythons which wander by.

So it is too with open ocean windsurfing. I’m not talking about a casual wave session in mushy, head high surf. No, I’m talking about 30’ wave faces pounding down onto a shallow reef; I’m talking about sailing into a fog bank on the Oregon coast where the wind goes from 30 knots to zero in an instant; where you can’t see ten feet in front of you and you know you’re outnumbered 20:1 by Great White sharks. I’m talking about heading out into the Pacific in an off shore wind, a 10 knot rip current and nothing between you and Antarctica. I’m talking about times where falling in the water is not an option. No bail outs. No safety nets. I’m talking *alone*.

Heading out into the ocean alone is one of the most intense feelings on earth. It is such a simple environment—water, wind, swell—yet so complex, so constantly changing. A windsurfer is perhaps the most basic of sailboats; you steer with your body, navigate with your nose.

Risk. Adventure. Fear. These are the things which drive one’s soul. To conquer one’s fear is to control one’s mind. I can slow down my heart by simply concentrating on my breathing. But can I vanquish my fear? Can I convince my mind that I am not afraid? Is my soul and my brain one entity or are they two?

There is nothing I love more than to head out into the ocean off the north shore of Maui for several miles until the shore is a hazy green and rust mirage, then slowly work my way down the coast, alone in the deep blue ocean, cavorting with huge sea turtles, scattering schools of red and silver flying fish, whales and dolphins and yes, sharks.

Even on relatively calm, flat days large ocean swells will loom up out of nowhere, carrying me down their steepening faces until they crest and disappear just as suddenly as they appear. Sometimes I head out in a gentle breeze and flat sea only to return an hour later to raging winds and huge waves. Shore becomes a challenge, not a safety zone.

It was a bright, clear, windless day as I sat sipping a cup of tea overlooking Hookipa. There wasn't a breath of wind in sight and none in the forecast. The waves were small and lifeless. It was a good day to work in the yard or go hiking. It was a good day to go diving or biking or fishing; it did not look like a good day for windsurfing.

And that is exactly why, of course, I wanted to do only one thing: go windsurfing.

I loaded a small 8'6" wave board on my roof rack, threw a mast, boom and a couple sails in the back and set out to explore. There was obviously no wind on the north shore so I headed across the isthmus towards Kehei, home of flat water, off-shore winds, honey-mooner condos and endless golf courses. The sea was calm and flat.

I drive west along the coast towards Lahaina, home of exotic art galleries and t-shirt shops, ocean-side cafes and big-game fishing charter boats. Calm and flat.

Further west along the coast is a continuous string of fancy hotels and resorts, tourist shops and gated homes guarding the beaches from casual tourists or scruffy surfers. I pull out at one of the few public access points and look out to sea towards Molokai, the beautiful relatively undeveloped island twenty miles off the Maui shore. A couple carloads of Sunday afternoon locals stares at me; I have windsurfing gear on my car instead of surfboards, therefore I am branded as a tourist and not a local. It is a strange distinction yet I am acutely aware of its presence and repercussions. I sit in my car and look out at the ocean, ignoring the hostile stares, then start the motor and travel on.

A mile further I pull into the employee entrance at the bright pink Embassy Suites hotel which looks as incongruous on Maui as a walrus in Vermont. I walk along the side of the building to the beach and look out onto the ocean. Something is.... different. There's..... wind. In fact, there's enough wind to... windsurf. Cool!

I quickly rig up a 4.5 meter sail, probably too small for the wind but... it could build. The beach is strewn with white, overweight sunbathers swathed in baby oil. There is no one else out on the water; I have stumbled upon paradise amongst the ugly. I walk to the water with my gear; no one notices. Moments later I am sailing. The wind is light but steady and warm. Perfect!

I head straight out from shore, fully intending to sail a mile or so, then turn around and zip back and forth towards shore for an hour in that endless procession which seems so unfathomably repetitious to non-windsurfers. It is not. It's like skiing or tennis; every turn or shot is actually quite different or interesting, every one challenging.

But I don't turn around. The wind is so steady and my disposition so casual that I keep sailing in a straight line, out to sea. In the distance, rising vaguely from the ocean like a giant gray mound, is Molokai. I have wanted to windsurf from Maui to Molokai ever since I first heard that it was possible. In the mid 80s organized groups of windsurfers, complete with walkie-talkies, compasses and emergency flares, would head across accompanied by fishing boats for support and potential rescue. The stories of broken masts and torn sails abounded, along with freaked-out sailors floundering in fifteen-foot-deep swells so that they could not be seen even though help might only be a few yards away.

No, the Molokai Channel, the deep, current-ridden maelstrom of wind and waves, is not a place to take casually. Break down in the middle, even when accompanied by friends, and chances are you'll go a long, long way before getting rescued. If at all. Because it is so far across it is impossible to forecast what the wind and ocean conditions will be like in the middle. The wind can be blowing 20 knots on the shore on Maui and fade to nothing ten miles into the crossing. Add to that the fact there can be 30 knots of wind blowing the spray off the tops of the waves in the middle and virtually dead calm at the bottom of their monstrous troughs, and you've got a challenging venture indeed.

I keep going. I am five miles from shore, then eight, and suddenly the swells begin growing and I realize I am indeed in the middle of the Molokai Channel. The wind is ideal, the sun is blazing, and I am feeling full of life. There is a choice to be made. A reasonable and rationally cautious person would assess the situation and probably figure that since not a soul on earth knows where I am, there is absolutely nothing around me, I am in the middle of a dangerous channel known for its strong current, big waves and unpredictable winds, and I am standing on little more than a few pounds of fragile fiberglass and dacron, flying along at break-neck speed in waters known to be teeming with Tiger sharks, I should immediately turn around and head back to shore.

But I am not a reasonable person, so there is no choice to be made. Something inside me draws me to the unknown, whether it is just to scramble up to see what is over the next rise on a long ridge or to stick the nose of my kayak into a big, nasty, turbulent hole on a remote river. I wonder what's *there*? What will that *feel* like? Can I just *touch* the edge and get that...*feeling*?

What makes people want to jump from high buildings? What makes people want to jump out of airplanes? What is the difference between fear and excitement; what makes some people more afraid than others? What makes me want to do seemingly 'stupid' things.... alone? Who draws the line between 'brave' and 'stupid'?

These, of course, are questions posed by adventure seekers and philosophers alike for hundreds of years. I don't have the answers; I can only say that something drives me and it is an instinct I have no control over. Perhaps that is what makes it both dangerous and addicting.

I continue towards Molokai. My decision made, immediately I am more alive than ever. As with my focus on a big wall rock climb, I narrow my focus on the task directly in front of my nose. Every swell becomes an obstacle to be negotiated, every gust a raging bull to be subdued and tamed. I look behind me and Maui is now the hazy mound on the horizon; Molokai becomes more vivid and detailed. Soon I can see the outline of palm trees and the faint line of a yellow beach.

I have been sailing hard for an hour. The beach is now clearly in view, so much so that I can see and hear the large breakers crashing on shore. I'm on the backside of 8-10 foot swells, meaning twenty foot wave faces pounding the reef. This is not where I want to be. Although I might make it through the surf to shore, I would be hard pressed to make it back out and if I don't, well.... there you go: stuck on Molokai.

So with only a few hundred yards to go I make my first jibe in an hour and head back across. The wind remains strong and steady and the sailing is superb. I get feisty and take a few long, lofting jumps off the wave-tops, landing carefully so as not to break something. I laugh out loud and shriek with delight, no one around to tell me I look like a fool or what the HELL am I doing out here alone.

Thirty minutes later I am once again in the middle of the channel but things have changed. The swell is now substantially larger and there is a complete lack of wind between the giant waves. I have to carefully plan my journey down and across each one, conserving my speed in the trough so as not to completely lose my speed. Should I happen to crash or drop my sail in the water I would be very hard pressed to get started again. But I am careful and things are going smoothly. Ten miles to go.

Then the wind dies. As I climb out over a monster swell I sense that something has changed; there is no welcoming gust to lift me along. Instead I barely make it to the top of the wave, then glide down the next face as I slowly lose speed. I pump my sail and bear off downwind to try to recapture the

breeze. But it is not there. Slowly I come off a plane and plodding along in barely five knots of wind. Damn!

My small, thin wave board will barely support my weight when not fully powered with wind. As I struggle to balance myself and my rig I take stock of my situation. It hasn't changed: middle of the ocean, no one knows I'm here, late afternoon, wind dying. This is not good.

I drift along for five minutes, not daring to even think about the consequences of dropping my sail into the water. Ten minutes. Fifteen. I manage to climb up onto one swell and I can see Maui in the distance. Let's see... ten miles... if I start swimming now at a mile an hour with six knots of side current trying to carry me to Fiji.... I'll most likely get eaten by a shark in.....FIFTEEN MINUTES! Damn!

Then a small puff of wind hits my sail. Then another. Frantically I pump and pull at it, trying to harness every molecule of wind. A minute later and I am pulled onto a plane; a smile the size of New Jersey covers my face. I'm free....I'M FREE! I'M NOT GOING TO DIE! WOOHOO!!!!

Fifteen minutes later I am out of the central channel and heading for shore. The wind is once again steady and strong and I have completely forgotten the fear which had gripped me so tightly a few minutes before. Life is like that.

I find I often assess whatever it is I'm about to do—be it a major mountaineering expedition, a high-angle ski descent, or simply an iffy log crossing on my mountain bike—on a risk/reward basis. If the risk is high, the reward must be equally weighted. I cannot rationalize or even understand my decisions; they are made simply based on my feelings at the time.

My board slips over the last bit of small surf and onto the beach. I hop off, hoist my board and sail over my head and walk out of the water. None of the sunbathers notices. One lifts his head, turns towards me, realizes I am not selling Diet Pepsi or potato chips, and flops back down. I de-rig my sail, tie my gear on top of my car and drive back to my house on the north shore.

The funny thing about experiences like this is that they are so intense while they are happening yet when you are once again safe and sound it is hard to recall the feelings you have experienced just a few hours or days before. But they are still there and without them life would seem dull indeed.

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