

Part 1: The Build-Up – by Myke Bartholomew

The sliding doors of the terminal whisk open and I step into the Costa Rican air. The humidity snatches my breath like it was attached to a fishing line. We've been traveling most of the day and I'm instantly questioning my decision to wear a flannel with jeans. I chose shorts at 3:30 this morning, but was repeatedly cautioned by my girlfriend that I may get cold on the flight. As any man who knows what a repeated suggestion from his woman actually means, I changed to pants. Not 30 seconds into to the tropical climate and I'm sweating. I should have worn shorts. My eyes scan a sea of drivers with last-named boards in hand. "Bartholomew and Hidalgo." There's our man. He introduces himself as Wil and shakes my hand with a firm ease. Without hesitation he grabs our board bags and loads them atop his van. I look towards the west as the sun begins to set over the expanse of deep green trees outstretched in front of us. When the sun climbed this morning, I was in California and staring out the side window of Anthony's silver F-150, anxious for the experience ahead. And now, as it goes to sleep this evening, I'm standing in the land of rich coast, humbled by the luxuries of air travel. Wil helps Anthony and me into the vehicle and slides the door shut behind us. I look back to Anthony. "We're in Costa Rica, man. It's finally here." Wil enters the van on the driver's side. He says something and laughs as he pulls away from the curb. Too caught up in my own head, I didn't catch his joke.

We scurry along a two-lane road passing slower traffic on the left. At times, getting a little closer to the oncoming vehicle than either Anthony or me would like. Anthony mutters, "Oh here we go," as we stare straight into the headlights of a large truck that's about to lock lips with our approaching carriage. All I can do is laugh nervously as we make our way back into the right lane, only physically undamaged. Other than these words, our conversation is scarce. Though it's now pitch black outside, we sit in silence absorbing the surroundings of a country each of us had yet to visit.

After a short pit stop for water and Jagermeister, we arrive at our hotel. We unload our belongings and check in. The young lady at the desk is tall and slender with curly hair and gentle eyes. She welcomes us warmly and gives our instructions for tomorrow's trip. We'll be picked up at 630am and traveling by van to Ostional. We are excited but tired. Aside from a quick assembly of our boards, we each decide that a beer is much overdue. Sliding down to the bar, we order the microbrew IPAs and have only a couple before heading off to bed.

The alarm shouting at 5:30am came way sooner than expected. But adrenaline and motivation help propel our awakening faster than normal obligations. We sip coffee and pack day bags for the excursion. In conversation at the bar last night, we learned that Ostional is roughly two hours away by van. In my overly obsessive and analytical behavior, I calculated that to mean, with a three hour surf session, approximately a seven hour day. In agreement with myself, before venturing on this trip, I elected to forfeit my desires of control and did absolutely no research of any surf spots available to us. In my experience, planning means expectation. And expectation can lead to disappointment. Thus, wanting to escape disappointment, I decided to go with the flow, relying only on the expertise of our guides to help direct our motions for the day. However, trying to offset the unexpected, I prepare with ample food and water. Or so I think.

At 6:25am, we arrive at the agreed upon spot and pace semi-patiently until our guides arrive. Each introduces themselves as they load our boards on the vehicle. I look around and shake hands with the other prospective travelers. Two guides, one driver, eight passengers, 13 bags, 12 seats. This is going to be tight. We all load up and depart. I am sitting next to Beto, one of our young Costa Rican surf guides. He and I strike up conversation while lush green pastures pass in a rapid blur outside the windows. I learn that Beto is 18 years old and wants nothing more than to surf Trestles. I find it ironic that he pines to surf a spot I frequent, while I have traveled this far to ride the waves he accesses every day. In our chat, Beto talks of his desire to explore further in his country once he buys a car. He repeats the phrase “I want to buy a car” more than once. This stands out to me because I understand the longing to be footloose and the possibilities moving wheels can create. In my thoughts, I silently hope Beto’s ownership of a vehicle comes sooner than later.

Roughly 45 minutes into the drive, a couple of other passengers sitting closer to the front begin to heckle our driver. “Are you sure you know where you’re going,” spits Sean, a forty-something year old man with a sharp southern accent. Sitting to his right, his buddy Nick responds, “Somebody get him a map.” We all chuckle because the drive has been long so far. Seemingly a lot longer than the 45 minutes we have endured. I say endure because the roads are different from the typical paved highways to which I am accustomed. Most of this trip has been on a dirt road with more dips and sways than a boxing match. It’s about this time I steadily begin to remember how easily I can be made car sick and instantly start to question my choice to pick a seat towards the back. Since I was young, my intuition has always been to choose seats located either towards the front or side window of a packed car. Yet in moments of eager anticipation, when selecting my seat for this ride, I thought it wise to pick a spot over the rear axle, in between Anthony and Beto. Struggling with a mild headache from short sleep and motion sickness, I reach into my bag to grab one of the snacks I packed. Nothing in the side pocket. I reach to the other side pocket and pull out only air. Trying to keep calm, I subtly stir through my entire pack, only to learn that I left both my day’s ration of snacks and water quietly resting on the bar of our hotel room. I curse myself. My efforts to offset the unexpected were prepared in vain.

As we continue further into our journey, we learn that our guides chose Ostional because it is to have the biggest and cleanest surf for today. Other people on the trip, who have surfed the spot before, testify to how large it can get. My nerves and car sickness amplify, consequently producing impatience. I close my eyes and rest my forehead against the seat back in front of me. I start to think of my place in the world. How this time yesterday I was in a completely different spot on the map, in a state I have grown my whole life. I recall the months of waiting for this trip to come to fruition; and the nagging excitement for a long overdue surfcapade. I think of my lack of ease with the unfamiliar and how it both enlivens and intimidates me. I imagine all the days I yearned for adventure and craved the unknown. I meditate over the fact that the very opportunity to enrich my experience through other cultures is right now surrounding me. That here, in this space, I am one step closer to becoming the person I want to be. I breathe in the calmness of my rationalization and instantly feel better.

The van hangs a sharp right and pulls between two buildings. On the left an open and empty edifice that reminds me of a small banquet space. To the right, a pink structure with green doors and the words “Linda Vista” painted in large red letters. My grandmother’s name was Linda. I

can't help but think I am exactly where I need to be. The doors open and I crowd surf to be the first one out. The fresh air hits my face at the same time the hot sun caresses my shoulders. In front of us is Ostional. I see a long peeling left in the distance that is well overhead. The passing red tide has turned the water into a weird olive greenish brown. While we unload, we learn that this place is a wildlife reserve and in recent weeks played host to myriad sea turtles coming ashore to lay eggs. We hear stories about how thousands of freshly hatched reptiles tried to manage the perilous journey across 30 yards of sand, dodging sea gulls and dogs, to hopefully make it to their aquatic growing space. Hearing the sea turtles' struggles in their very nascent stages of life sticks to me.

Boards in hand, we move to the sand and choose a peak. As we make our way down the beach, squashing remnants of turtle shells with each step, I try to ignore the nervousness in my stomach. This will be my first surf outside California or Baja Mexico. Ready to know what 85 degree water feels like, I attach my leash and enter the Pacific. I paddle to the break, repeatedly mentioning to Anthony how warm the water is. He nods in agreement. We arrive to the lineup and bask in the heat while waiting for a set. Understanding the wave size and my lack of experience with this spot, I remind myself to be patient. I make a couple of feeble attempts at humor to ease the tension. No one laughs. Off on the horizon, there's finally a bump. I pass over the first wave because the second looks cleaner. In better position for the left, I paddle anxiously for the peak. As I spin towards shore, I paddle twice more and feel the wave's inertia take over. Gliding in that split second before I rise to my feet, I think, "Okay. I guess my first wave in Costa Rica's gonna be a left." With my back towards her face, I grab my rail and drop into a wave much taller than I. The murky sea continues to rise in a glassy mound with efforts to lure me in. I dip my leading shoulder and enter my bottom turn, scanning feverishly down the line. Switching from heel to toe, I drop back down to generate more speed. It is here I realize my mistake. Veering off into the distance of my folding ramp, I can see I'm not moving fast enough to outrun the closeout. I attempt to generate more speed, but it's useless. As I move too late to straighten out, I feel the lip shove me from behind as though I'd turn my back on a bully. No stranger to beach break beatings, I calm myself as I am propelled below the surface. I am instantly shoved deep into the belly of the sea where light ceases to exist. Tossed helplessly within this warm, black space, I rotate without weight like I am in utero. I have never felt power like this. It feels like I am in the grasp of a sunken river with no control over the direction I am headed. My board tugs maniacally at my ankle, only pulling me further from orientation. I let myself go completely limp as to conserve my energy. In a very small and unexplainable moment, I think of what it would be like to die here. I am not in fear of my dying at present and I cannot justify the thought. But for some inexplicable reason, my awareness of mortality has decided to exist here and now.

The tumult of the passing third wave rolls over me and I aim for what I hope to be the surface. Thankful I was right, I take my first breath in what feels like eternity. After a moment of internal revelry, I reach for my board and make my way back to the peak where Anthony is sitting.

"Did you make it," he asks.

"Naw," I reply. "And I feel like I wasn't supposed to."