

42.9896° N
BASQUE CO.
2.6189° W

ME AND MARIE

M A R A W O L F O R D , O N D I S C O V E R I N G U N E X P E C T E D I S L A N D S

I still distinctly recall the first time I saw Marie-Pascale. It was the 1986 ASP banquet held at The Royal Hawaiian Hotel – that imposing pink monolith built between the two great wars.

I was 17 and had been dating a pro surfer on the tour for a few months at that point. He’d brought me to the North Shore when my uni finals had finished in early December. I’d been all over Central America and the western US by car, but had only boarded a plane once, from San Jose to LA, to go to Disneyland when I was six. The flight over the ocean and the exotic nature of Hawaii enchanted me.

Marie-Pascale was there with her husband, Tom Curren. He looked like he’d have preferred to be anywhere else on the planet, a trait I’d discover he exhibited whenever crowds of any kind were involved. She, however, looked like a princess: comfortable and in command with an elegant French bob, wearing a sophisticated light pink dress. She extended a cordial yet perfunctory introduction in a French accent that inferred all the class and worldliness a 17-year-old surfer chick might one day aspire to attain.

She was only a few years older than me but had already been married for years and carried herself with the dignity of someone twice her age.

It took time before Marie-Pascale wanted to be friends with me. In retrospect, this was perfectly understandable. Floozies and come-easies followed the ASP Tour like vultures, and there

was no reason for her to make friends with those simply passing through. We both surfed quite well for plus-ones to the party, and we started talking for the first time out in the water on the North Shore the following year. I’d been present for a while by then and perhaps she surmised I might stick around long enough to warrant friendship of some sorts.

Later that year, I found myself in France. The Europe ASP events finished up and the men pushed on to Brazil, but I decided to stay on through September with Neridah Falconer. Neridah had a month off the women’s tour and

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my uni courses only began in October. It didn’t hurt that it was traditionally the best time of the year for waves in France.

I can’t recall how it happened that Ned and I arranged to meet up with Marie-Pascale in the parking lot above Geuthary that afternoon in September, but by then we were fairly well acquainted. We pulled up next to her old black Saab in the glowing afternoon light at the top of the cliff, and I laid eyes upon a scene that would change the course of my life.

Marie-Pascale is not from Biarritz proper: she’s from a small, traditional village up the mountain

from Saint Jean-de-Luz. The village of Sare is deep Basque Country and Marie-Pascale is deep Basque – a fiercely proud people who cherish their own culture and independence. For them, the Basque Country exists as an island wedged between France and Spain.

Marie-Pascale comes from a family of eight siblings, only a few of whom I’ve met: Francois, Xavier and her late sister, Marie-Jeanne. Inviting Neridah and I with her that day, she had pulled us from the dregs of shitty Biarritz beach breaks and revealed her fiefdom to us.

To the south we could see Spain and nearby

Saint Jean-de-Luz, framed by La Rhune, an extinct volcano that straddles the border between France and Spain. The cliffs to the left were formed of jutting stone and named Les Alcyons, after the omen-bearing bird from Greek mythology they resembled. Below us lay one of the oldest fishing ports in Europe, where human habitation dates back to 1193. And to the right lay one of the best right-hand reef breaks I’d ever laid my eyes upon.

The reef was located 500 metres out to sea where shifty, deep-water peaks challenged you to listen to the ocean speak as they reared up from

the depths of the Atlantic. The way down to the beach was marked by footpaths worn smooth over a thousand years, and was lined by elegant red, green and white buildings from centuries past. The surf was double overhead and perfect, glistening orange in the autumn light. Marie-Pascale stood there in all her beauty and grace, then turned and said, “This is my home.” I wanted to cry for the exquisiteness of it all.

“You see that rip there?” she continued. “Be careful. It’ll sweep you into the pit if you don’t watch it.” And with that, we suited up and paddled out.

There were a handful of other surfers in the line-up, including Jeff Hakman, Phil Grace and Francois Lartigau. *So that’s where these men have been hiding out when the surf has been good*, I realised. We rode beautiful waves until dark and my mind was made up.

I wanted the quality, refinement, sublime surf and *le douceur de vivre*, the sweetness of life Marie-Pascale’s island offered. I wanted to obtain what she had always considered normal. With her single invitation, Marie-Pascale altered the course of my life.

I flew back to the States and changed my course load at university to include French. I pounded my way through it, and in 1991 I boarded a flight to Paris on a one-way ticket, determined never to return. Twenty-eight years later, I still haven’t.

