



# Secret to having a swell time

There's more to a surfing safari than waves, as **Ben Johnson** discovered.

"THIS is surfing paradise," I thought as I flicked easily off a wave, which seemed to be descending into the setting sun.

Then I spotted noted big wave rider Tim Taplin and his dad Pete — and didn't feel quite so cocky.

Tim, 20, has threaded more tube rides at the aptly-named Macaronis break, off the Indonesian islands, than the rest of our group combined. As I watched in awe, his dad and his mates towed each other into mountainous outer-reef breaks with all the enthusiasm of five-year-olds on monkey bars.

South Coast legends, Tim and his dad were enjoying a father-son odyssey aboard chartered yacht The Barrenjoey.

Seconds after he had conquered one large peak during a memorable late afternoon surf, Pete was sledding behind the jetski, waving at me descending from my relatively pedestrian backhand turn.

But what the heck ... as we paddled out, colourful tropical fish splashed at our surfboards to counterbalance the equatorial heat and glare amid this shark-free domain — happily adrift 150km west of the Indonesia island of Sumatra.

Six surfers — three young, three not so — are revelling in swells that have charged thousands of kilometres across the Indian Ocean to pitch on the Mentawai Island's triangular reefs in bath-like 27-degree water.

Surging energy and tropical warmth combine to make this location arguably the best in the world for surfers, certainly the finest our crew of loose friends has enjoyed.

Here, the sea is speckled with golden beaches and gilded with lime-green rainforests concealing neither car park nor concrete cancer-ridden surf club.

In fact, schools of exotic fish are the only traffic you'll encounter if you go on a boat trip or stay at one of several resorts dotting this billboard archipelago, where plumes of smoke spiralling from village fires are the only hint of civilisation.

Fishermen are equally spoilt in the Mentawai chain, where spanish mackerel, trevally and barracuda abound and are barely bothered by local anglers in canoes carved from trees.

Three-hour late afternoon surfs are followed by some well-earned relaxation aboard our luxury Tasmanian-built catamaran — Tengirri (Spanish Mackerel) — where the fish caught trolling between surf breaks are served gourmet-style each night — except when steak, crab, hamburgers or spaghetti bolognese are on the menu.

More grub than a hungry surfer could ever eat is dutifully supplied three times a day by chilli-happy Indonesian chef Donald, whose skills in the kitchen



Ocean odyssey: Soaring across the crest of a surging wave along the Macaronis break off Indonesia



Hanging out: The author (far left) with his surfing mates on the beach

complement his skipper's handiwork with a filleting knife.

"Oh, about a hundred tonne," deadpans our fish purveyor when asked, sarcastically, if he'd ever filleted a mackerel before.

Wafer-thin sashimi strips (dipped in soy sauce laced with wasabi) support his claim and make the perfect starter to mackerel steaks grilled to perfection as the sun goes down, together with a few Bintang beers.

Tengirri is a 14-metre purpose-built catamaran that offers you both excellent comfort and excessive amounts of food and beer on regular 12-day Mentawai Island adventures.

Guests and crew sleep in six separate cabins — two with a

double bed in each, two with two single beds and two cabins with one single bed in each for crew.

Two large, fully-shaded decks provide an ideal platform to chill out and take in the scenery. Guests can wash in an indoor shower and toilet or at the stern in an outdoor set-up.

Meals are served in a spacious, air-conditioned indoor dining area boasting a huge flat-screen TV, stereo and satellite phone.

This post-surf indulgence is all a far cry from your initial impressions of Indonesia, when you arrive by plane in the provincial city of Padang — and third-world realities smack you in the face.

You continue questioning your travel plans on the transfer from

airport to pier as wild monkeys bustle with families on motor scooters in pouring rain along sheer cliff roads.

But, ironically, it's during this adrenalin rush you're made aware of the holiday that awaits.

"Yeah, we've got the guests and we're about half an hour away," tour host Phil Kiem says, after answering his mobile phone.

As former rugby players more accustomed to organised 80 minutes of pain, the word "guest" reminded you there'd be nothing backbreaking or onerous, other than a lot of paddling, on this pleasure voyage.

Although, the scolding I suffered from Tengirri's seasoned skipper during a wrestle with a 17kg spanish mackerel bore a remarkably similar tone to post-loss blasts from punch-drunk rugby coaches.

"Oh, it's not that hard," tormented the sunshine coast captain, torn by manners learned in 25 years at sea and the courtesy expected of a hospitality worker.

"Don't let him run, whatever you do — pull and wind when you come down," snarled the hardened trawler brawler.

After nearly handing him the rod, as my bicep cramped during the 10-minute fight in a heaving tinny, I held out and preserved my credibility to land the tastiest of dinners for grateful crewmates.

Surf charter operators such as the Tengirri crew have mastered the art of nautical hospitality, with crew taking note of minor details, even down to presenting guests with their respective towels after six hours in the water.

The experience is a true adventure, thanks to the experience of its skipper and the vigilant swell monitoring of host Phil Kiem.

## DESTINATION >>



### Mentawai Islands, Indonesia

**Getting there:** Fly to Padang via Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur on major airlines for about \$1300 return. Return Air Asia flights to Padang from KL or Jakarta for about \$150.

**Best time:** Peak swell season in the Mentawai Islands is June to August.

**Surf charters:** Tengirri offers 12-day cruises (which amounts to 10 days surfing) for about \$4000 per person (with six minimum). Other boats are cheaper, but not as comfortable. Tengirri can take six friends or the crew can incorporate you into other tours.

**Details:** www.tengirri.com

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