Surfer Exploration and Migration:
North American Surfers in Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua
by
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ABSTRACT

The history of North American surf culture’s dispersion into three regions, as in the cases of Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua, offers an invaluable perspective into social, cultural and economic relationships, the transnationalism of tourists and migrants, and considers various surfers’ identities and culture, lifestyle migrations, and coastal development. This thesis explores these cultural encounters and exchanges in order to develop an understanding of surfing’s impact and relationship to coastal regions in developing countries in the past fifty years. The global surf community’s relationship with surf colonies is also examined using popular culture and surfers as actors in local, national and global affairs. A narrative of surfing subculture evolution is discussed, revealing the ecosystem of relationships, and historical relevance and impacts of North American surfers in the coastal regions of Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

Chair: ______________________

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MA Program: History

Sonoma State University Date: 8/14/2013
For my parents, teachers, friends and family, everyone I have ever learned from,
and for surfing communities everywhere.
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Prologue

I booked my ticket to Nicaragua in March of 2007, two months before I would graduate from Sonoma State University with my undergraduate degree. I was writing some final research papers on the guerrilla wars in Nicaragua and Colombia, and it had inspired me to go and visit Nicaragua, especially when I found out about the effects of Lake Nicaragua on the southwest Pacific coastline. A unique feature of this body of water, aside from the fact that it used to be the home to a great many number of freshwater sharks, is that it creates a constant wind, about 340 days a year, out of the East. Smooth offshore winds blow out to sea, creating perfect conditions for the waves that I was searching for. Upon arrival in Managua, I travelled to the west and stayed in a small surfer resort in Playa Santana for a week before going to check out Playa Pie de Gigante (Giant’s Foot Beach), where I was going to be volunteering/working. All of the surfers I met told me not to bother with this area; there was no good surf around it: classic disinformation of the surfer variety.

My goal is to chart and document surfers’ and surfing cultures influence in Nicaragua and El Salvador. This exploration and narrative analysis aims to capture the North American surfer perspectives, experiences, and influences in these specific locations. At Hotel Brio in Gigante, I worked as a general jack-of-

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1 To not upset the general surfing community I will not be naming any new surf spots, only the main zones and breaks that are already exposed and locations disclosed on the international surfing radar, such as Surfer and Surfing magazines, Surfline on the web, and other wave finding and tour sites.
all-trades. I did handyman work with the other Nicaraguan employees, cooking, cleaning, landscaping, gardening, farming and maintenance. I also took visiting surf tourists out on the boat to surf spots in the local region, and fishing sometimes when the waves were poor or too small, which was not often. I found myself hanging out with the Nicaraguan people and workers, staying away from gringos. Eventually, close friendships between many people in the community grew out of my stay in Gigante. With several other surf camps in town, a fascinating feature to the community was the abounding surfer presence, and surfer interaction with the local community. It became clear that the culture in this town was quite different from the surfing culture at Huntington Beach and Santa Cruz in California, the Gold Coast in Australia, or the North Shore of Hawaii; it was an organic development of travelling surfers and the local society and workforce who were changing the economic, social and cultural landscape in unison. I wanted to explore the history of the foreign surfers working within the community, and the evolution of their relationships. It was an interesting case of cultural exchange and evolution.

Cultural exchange between the people in the coastal communities and the foreign surfers that came to visit and settle on their beaches was an aspect of the history of Central America that had not been studied or examined in detail before. While surfing may not have played a vital role in the outcome of revolutions, civil wars, and political elections, it had a wide influence in the local, and in some cases national and international, economies of several Central American nations.
Costa Rica’s successful tourist industry is a model for the growing tourism in Mexico, Nicaragua and El Salvador, nations that have been set back by violence and struggle are now emerging with strong surf culture, tourist, and industrial development.
Introduction

Surf history and social development through travel is the basis of the research and analysis in this work. My aim is to walk through my own experience as a North American travelling surfer, historian, and ethnographer to explore how other surfers like myself have evolved, and how their interactions in Latin America have altered the social and cultural landscapes of several specific coastal regions. Throughout the history of surfer travel, surfers have dispersed their culture into the localities they visit, but the broad North American surfer perspective has changed over time. This introduction seeks to explore and introduce the over-arching surf culture and history. The methodology, historiography and specifics of this research and analysis will also be addressed. This is not just research and analysis of history; it is a comprehensive history that draws upon many methods of interdisciplinary social sciences. My research uses secondary sources such as surf magazines, and also delves into ethnography, both participant and observer, as well as some oral histories. As a travelling North American surfer myself, I have had the ability to interact in the surfing culture that explores Latin America, but my lens and scope of research is thus affected by this perspective. This thesis explores how North American surfers change the locals that become surfers, or are affected by them in Central America, and how these travelling North American surfers are changed by this interaction as well.
Surfers traverse the globe and settle into coastal regions everywhere. Surfers have explored coastlines from Russia and Alaska, all the way to Tasmania and Antarctica. Some of the most heavily worn tracks or wakes of surfers exist in the warmer climates. Paradise, palm trees, warm waves, and no crowds, are a universal desire among many surfers. Some lead the lifestyle of a nomad\(^2\) and some as leisurely tourists. These surfers have a distinct and unique influence wherever they travel, whether they intend to or not. The history of their travel around the globe has generally not been taken into account on the broader scale of national or transnational histories. However, some scholars, such as Nick Ford and David Brown, are beginning to acknowledge the important role that surfers play in a transnational context, creating new cultural identities (e.g. where Latin Americans begin to see themselves not only in a local context, but as a member of a larger global culture through surfing) based on the surfer ethos, consumerism, and politics. Ford and Brown address surfing’s contribution to mass commercialization and globalization in their argument that “major cultural impacts may be expected where surfing has been transplanted (via surf tourism) to communities in developing world cultures in the tropics.”\(^3\)

The encounter and exchange between foreign surfers and local communities needs to be examined by historians and other academics in the social sciences in order to understand the coastal development, in terms of

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2 Some surfers spend their entire lives searching for waves, never setting up a permanent residence. Much like desert wanderers traveling from water sources, these surf nomads move according to the waves seasons geographically.

social, cultural, and economic change, in many developing countries over the past fifty to sixty years. The history of surf culture's dispersion into various regions, as in the cases of El Salvador and Nicaragua, offers an invaluable perspective into the social and economic relationships between the North American travelling surfers and the communities they visit. The transnationalism of tourists and migrants, considering surfers' identities and culture, lifestyle migrations, and development, is essential to understanding these coastal histories in Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Surf culture evolves as surfers encounter new coastal regions. The social, cultural, and environmental impact of their dispersion around the globe can be traced through surf artifacts in those communities and within the broader surf culture. Surfers have been important cultural actors in local, national and global history, playing unique roles and providing perspectives that allow historians to examine this unique development and interaction of coastal communities. With this framework, the history of El Salvador and Nicaragua can be discussed through the evolution of surfing subcultures. The surfers who have frequented Central America provide scholars with an array of diverse histories that can be used to develop a narrative of the surfer, as a cultural actor, and of the community in these regions, that are connected through the broader

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4 Surf culture can be anything pertaining to riding waves, surfer media, clothing, style, language, etc. For a broader understanding of surf culture and history the work of Nat Young, Matt Warshaw, and Drew Kampion should be examined.

5 The surfboards, clothing, and equipment can be used as a metric for the surfers' presence over time in a community, aside from surfers that settle. Also in global surf culture, we can trace surf exploration and influence by the video recordings and magazine articles that focus on surf travel and new waves.
commercialization of its culture. Through commercialization and the popularization of surfing, we can then contextualize the travelling North American surfers in these regions. I will explore this through some of the personal surf stories that later lead to a broader examination Central American history. This coastal demographic can be used to reveal a global process of development in a broader cultural and historical context, in which some of the participants identify beyond the regional community, and are in fact a part of a larger culture not unrestricted by borders. In this project, I will explore the historical relevance and importance of North American surfers and their surf culture as they interact, perceive, and influence the development of coastal regions and cultures in Baja and Puerto Escondido, Mexico, Punta Roca, El Salvador, and several towns in the coastal province of Tola in Nicaragua.

**Catching the Wave**

Surfing has had a profound impact on popular culture and society on the coasts of many countries. This section provides surfing context and understanding of the broader culture. Throughout its journey to the many shores it has influenced, surf culture has evolved and developed differently in the many coastal regions it has encountered. In order to understand how and why surf culture developed and influenced El Salvador and Nicaragua, it is necessary to

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6 There are several key players in the El Salvador and Nicaraguan chapters that infiltrate popular media and discourse, which would not have been possible unless they had been surfing in those areas.

7 Nat Young explained in his book *The Complete History of Surfing*, “surfing’s always been tribal.” This project, congruent to Young’s assessment, refers to surf culture as the global surf community that is connected through the ritual of surfing. It should be noted that each coastal community is an autonomous surfing subculture that exists in a reciprocal relationship to the global tribe.
examine the history of surfing’s cultural travels from its place of origin in Polynesia to the rest of the world. Many surf historians note that not just surfing, but surf culture, has developed and transformed radically over the past several hundred years. Nat Young begins his book, *The Complete History of Surfing*, by acknowledging the idea that the first surfers probably didn’t even know that they were “surfing.” Young explains that “the first surfers were probably ‘unconscious’ surfers: island fishermen who used waves as the fastest means of getting their canoes over the coral reefs and back to the beach with their catch.” The activities and culture surrounding waves were written about by the first to watch surfing with amazement and respect for the pursuit of wave riding. Surfing and surf culture were taken note of by prominent figures in Euro-Polynesian history, like Captain Cook, Sir Joseph Banks, Sydney Parkinson, and his crew, who recorded this mystifying practice in their journals.

Jack London was also inspired and awed by surfers and their culture when he stayed in Hawaii, working on *The Cruise of the Snark*. Clearly surfing has had a powerful influence on explorers, naturalists, writers, and social scientists.

From a surfer’s perspective, Young gives his explanation for the birth of modern surfing:

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Sydney Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas, in His Majesty’s Ship, the Endeavour, Faithfully Transcribed from the papers of the late Sydney Parkinson, draughtsman to Joseph Banks, esq. on his late expedition, with Dr. Solander, round the world. Embellished with views and designs, delineated by the author, and engraved by capital artists*, (Stanfield Parkinson, ed. London, 1773).
surfing, proposing, “at some still unidentified stage in history...catching waves developed from being part of the everyday working skill of the fisherman to being a sport. Instead of work it became play. And this change revolutionized surfing; it turned it into something which, in our own century, has spread from Hawaii across the planet.”

Surfing went from work to play in the Hawaiian Islands and thus was nearly lost when foreign missionaries suppressed it. It eventually resurfaced and was rekindled by enthusiasts and athletes who would further promote its practice in the islands and abroad.

The first two surfers that most historians and surfers credit with planting the seeds of surfing on distant shores are Duke Paoa Kahanamoku and George Freeth. Duke brought surfing to the United States, Australia, and New Zealand from Hawaii in 1912-1917. George Freeth was responsible for introducing and popularizing surfing in Southern California in 1907. While these two men were responsible for the birth of a new global surf culture, it was not the first time that surfing had taken place outside of the Polynesian Islands. In the summer of 1885 three teenage Hawaiian princes rode redwood surfboards at the mouth of the San Lorenzo River in Santa Cruz. Even though these three Hawaiian princes are not represented in surf histories as frequently as Freeth and Kahanamoku, it is important to acknowledge their contribution to the dispersion of

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surf culture in Northern California. The role of these princes is similar to the first surfers to wander through the coastal frontiers Mexico and Central America.

While these Hawaiian princes may have surfed California before Freeth and Kahanamoku, the impact of the Duke was by far the most powerful. "During the first decades of the twentieth century, surfing's image was broadcast worldwide via the brown, smiling face of its traveling, world-champion ambassador, the Duke. The Hawaiian pastime took root on every beach that Duke visited, forever altering beach culture worldwide."  

Even in surfing's origins, travel has been a fundamental aspect of its development. It becomes more apparent that surfing can lead to social and economic development in many coastal regions. Young describes this transition perfectly, explaining that, "at Waikiki you can still see Hawaiians catching waves in their traditional outrigger canoes, laden with tourists instead of fish." While we can give credit to individuals for the initial spread of surf culture, Nat Young explains "surfing's always been tribal." This is a key element or behavior of surfers and their culture. As surfers and the practice of surfing spread across the globe, the culture expanded and evolved. The definition of surf culture will be given some attention in this project. Drew Kampion, the author of Stoked: A

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13 Matt Warshaw and Michael Scott Moore acknowledge that there are different opinions of the origins and spread of surfing historically. They talk briefly about the Hawaiian princes in Santa Cruz, and Warshaw also addresses Felipe Pomar's proposal that the first surfer's were Peruvians. See Matt Warshaw's The History of Surfing, (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2010), 18-22.


16 Nat Young, 19.
"History of Surf Culture," explains that "surf culture has a rich history and a unique system of rituals, distinctive language elements, symbolic elements, a loose tribal hierarchy, and unique lifestyle characteristics that have been broadly imitated and emulated around the world."\(^{17}\) Surfers are members of a global tribe, one that shares the same ritual of the act of surfing. However, each small community of surfers is defined by their regional position and their knowledge, travel and experience.

**“The Search” in Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua**

The vernacular, in surf and popular culture, is commonly condensed into catch phrases and slang that accompany every piece of surf literature, whether movie, magazine or novel. Slogans like "hang ten", "stoked", and "surf's up brah" are easily discernable slang from any surfer’s mouth, and are often included in popular representation of surf culture. However, one of the most powerful ideas and phrases is "the search", which implies the constant exploration for perfect empty waves. This idealized concept is treated by most surf writers and woven into the dominant culture of surfing, promoting this romantic nomadic behavior. Douglas Booth explains that, as surf culture developed, “the search for perfect waves became an endless pursuit.”\(^{18}\) The booming surf tourist industry is proof that surfers yearn to and do travel and surf the globe. Surfers have an impact everywhere they go, and the influences of their travel over time in specific coastal


regions are only now beginning to be examined. When it comes to surf travel and migration, Drew Kampion explains, "while traveling surfers were discovering new places to surf, the citizens of those places discovered surfing."¹⁹ Nick Ford and David Brown propose that "narrative analyses of the histories of surfing in localities other than the core areas of Hawaii, California and Australia could shed light on the global-local processes operating in the geographical expansion of surfing."²⁰ This discovery and interaction of North American surfers within specific coastal communities is exactly what this research aims to study.

**Talking Story**

The history of surf travel in Mexico, Nicaragua and El Salvador has been passed on from surfer to surfer through word of mouth, talking story, magazine articles, and movies.²¹ As word of good waves, cheap living and adventure leaked into the more mainstream surf culture back in the United States, surfers began to pack their cars and buy plane tickets to Central America. Surf stories about Central America began to appear in surfing magazines after more surfers had seen it for themselves, and the stories and rumors had been confirmed. Panama and Costa Rica were the two first countries in Central America to be explored further for surfing in the late 1950s and early 1960s after their initial

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²¹ Talking story in surf culture can be a casual conversation, a trait of the oral culture, to pass on knowledge and stories, telling tales, etc. and can happen anywhere.
discovery. Nicaragua and El Salvador were further explored for surfing potential in the 1970s and 1980s; however these two nations suffered a long period of civil unrest and violence during this early time of surf exploration. Nicaragua went through a revolution with the Sandinistas (FSLN) and later the war with US-trained and financed Contras. In all, the conflicts and violence lasted from 1972-1990. In El Salvador, the people suffered from a brutal civil war, from 1979 until 1992, between the military junta and the FMLN (Faribundo Marti Liberacion Nacional). After the wars in these countries, the region suffered from a lingering international stigma of nasty guerilla warfare, violence and crime.

Although El Salvador experienced a civil war and Nicaragua was in the midst of revolution in the 1970s through the 1990s, there was an important foreign influence and experience, as well as US intervention, in each of these nations. Surfers were there, as journalists, mercenaries, hippies, tourists, drug smugglers, and political and military advisors. These surfers were not only part of surfing culture, but a part of the development of modern culture and economies in specific coastal regions in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Through regional case studies in La Libertad, El Salvador and Gigante, Nicaragua, we can learn about the social and cultural evolution of these surf towns and the development of these transcultural communities. The recent histories of these coastal regions (Gigante, Popoyo, Punta Roca, etc.) are important in understanding the global and transnational context of surfer, tourist, and migrant settlements and how they have affected the local cultures in Latin America.

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22 See Bernie Baker and Matt Warshaw.
Historiography and Surf Culture

Popular Surf Culture

The historiography of surf culture is vast, but in the literature there is no discussion of how surfers and surf culture have influenced, developed, and interacted within specific coastal regions. Always on the hunt, surfers in search of the perfect wave are the beginning of this surfing history. Surfers who were instrumental in the global surfing community write many of the publications about surf history and culture; this provides readers with a larger view of these authors/participants and their influence/experiences in surf history. Novels and history books have been written about surfing, surfers, surf movies, culture, and music. Popular films and documentaries have been produced as well as music. Many of surf cultures elders and instrumental figures have written memoirs or have had books written about them. There are a plethora of surf guides as well. Academic treatments of surfers and surfing exist in sociology, anthropology, history and gender studies. These resources are important to the current dialogue on surfing. This treatment of surf culture in the development of coastal regions in El Salvador and Nicaragua will contribute to a deeper understanding about surfer interaction and exchange between the cultures that they encounter.

Drew Kampion explains that surfers in the 1960s became frustrated with overcrowded beaches and surf spots and "that some gave it up with a groan or hit the road, becoming the seeds for a further dimension of the subculture—bands of nomadic surfers (Americans, Australians, Peruvians, Brits, South
Africans, Japanese) travelling the world, forever on the hunt for perfect uncrowded waves.\textsuperscript{23} The search for the perfect wave has been an insatiable desire for surfers, and it is so prevalent in the popular perception of surfing that guides and databases of surf exploration are immense. As more and more surfers have explored the globe’s coastlines, the knowledge has been shared. Many of these surf explorers documented their adventures and later created films or exposes in surf magazines.\textsuperscript{24} This data eventually led to the compilation of surf manuals and guides. Many specific surf guides to certain regions are available as well as global surf maps. Bruce Sutherland has produced the \textit{The World Stormrider Surf Guide} in several editions along with more specific works like \textit{The Stormrider Surf Guide: Central America and the Caribbean}.\textsuperscript{25} Footprint has published \textit{Surfing the World}, another nomadic tool for surfers written by Chris Nelson and Demi Taylor.\textsuperscript{26} Like Sutherland’s work, there are also more concise regional guides to surf locales, such as Mike Parise’s \textit{The Surfer’s Guide to Costa Rica & SW Nicaragua}.\textsuperscript{27} Small sections of libraries could be dedicated to the large volume of surf guides that are particular to specific coastlines around the world.

\textsuperscript{24} The research explores surf articles by Naughton and Peterson, and also the documentary on their travels, \textit{The Far Shore}. Also, the works of Raphael Lima, surfer and military advisor.
While the previous surf guides focus primarily on how to locate and get to good waves in certain regions, they also address issues such as lodging, food, transportation, hazards, culture and other travel advice. Surfers and surf spots have become so commonplace in non-surf focused travel writing and tourist locations that even more traditional tour and travel guides address the surf. Moon Handbooks and Lonely Planet are two such travel guides that are aimed at overall tourism of a specific country, but also give surprisingly detailed information about surf spots, shops, schools and lodging in the coastal regions of their each guide’s focus. Before surf guides were produced, general almanacs and handbooks about surfing were published about the general history and codes of surfing, but they also gave a small treatment to the travel and the nomadic behavior and ambitions of surfers. While travel and the search for perfect waves were addressed, these almanacs weren’t nearly as focused as the surf guides, and they primarily gave attention to the practice, form and rituals or codes of surfing. Surfers have written many of the guides that contribute to their culture’s communal knowledge of travel and waves.

**Surfer Interpretations**

There are many works by surfers that also help to explain the history, art, politics and other aspects of surf culture. These publications are beneficial to

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both popular and surf culture, and help to illustrate a broad overview of certain aspects surfers and surfing. One source has made the historiography of surfing easily accessible, Timothy Dela Vega's *200 Years of Surfing Literature: An Annotated Bibliography.* Dela Vega separates his annotated bibliography into four era-based sections and explains the relevance of each historical period in the context of surfing and popular culture. This piece is an integral tool for any academic or surfer researching surf culture and writing. From Dela Vega's broad work many authors focus on broad and general treatments of surf history and culture. The works of Leonard Lueras, Fred Hemmings (b. 1946), and Nat Young (b. 1947) – surfing legends and chroniclers – contribute to this genre of surf publications and cover various historical moments in surf culture; they are distinct from each other due to the authors’ direct participation and influence in surf culture and history. These works represent a general treatment of surf history in the historiography. Each differs slightly in his respective focuses, blending historical analysis with personal narrative, and sharing a gap of a little over a decade in between each publication.

Aside from these general histories of surfing and surfers, there have been some very specific explorations into particular aspects of surfing history. Authors have explored surf culture in general, surf art history, pop-surf culture, surfboard

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art and design, as well as era specific analysis.\textsuperscript{32} Drew Kampion describes the history of surf culture clearly, in that:

The true story of surf culture includes all surfers of all eras, as well as the history of surfing in San Francisco and New York, in Spain and the Philippines, in Brazil and Japan and South Africa and Alaska. The complete history of surfing includes every wave ever ridden by every surfer throughout time; it includes the stories of every session at every spot, of every club and contest, of every adventure and disaster.\textsuperscript{33}

In this regard Kampion has done quite a lot, considering his extensive membership in the surfing community, as an editor of many surfing magazines, and has written numerous works: \textit{Stoked: A History of Surf Culture}, \textit{The Way of the Surfer: Living It, 1935 to Tomorrow} and \textit{Greg Noll, the Art of the Surfboard} to name a few.\textsuperscript{34} All of these works are focused in their approach to particular aspects of surfing culture, lore, development, and history. Matt Warshaw, a former editor of surf magazines as well, has produced a large volume of work that spans general surfing history, an encyclopedia, and books about the specific intricacies of big wave riding, surf posters and literature.\textsuperscript{35} From these works many other surf writers, as Kampion suggests, are able to incorporate more surf

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history and cultural information into memoirs, biographies and popular surfing literature.

Surfing memoirs and biographies are among some of most widely read works by popular surf culture. The sport's culture revels in reliving legends, passing on important memories to the next generation, the next country. Given this practice of passing on stories through the cultural stories and memories of surf legends, it is clear that memoirs and biographies are pivotal pieces of the historical dialogue of surf culture. These works allow for a broader understanding of surfing and surfer history in the context of personal experience and lifestyle changes in the overarching culture. A more recent work, by journalist Michael Scott Moore, is a surf travel memoir that actually discusses and analyzes more of the popular (non-surfing) history in regions where surfing has been slowly developing alongside the citizens who were there before surf culture arrived. This is one of the first surf specific histories that actually researched the regional development of the locales that were explored by nomadic surfers.

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37 These are some of the important and interesting publications of memoirs, biographies and fiction.


(not just littoral areas either!) and how they have grown culturally different from the original surf culture that spawned them. Moore's work is a bridge between the more typical memoirs and the more academic interpretations and studies of surfing and surf culture, similar to what this project aims to contribute.

*Surfing and Social Sciences*

There are a number of scholarly works on surfing; however, each piece is very specific in discipline. Historians, sociologists, ethnographers, sports historians, and geographers have all weighed in on the diversity of surfing and its effects. Kent Pearson's doctoral dissertation, which was later published as *Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand*, is one of the more pivotal works using social theory to dissect the surfing and surf related subcultures within a certain region. Another scholar who has addressed similar aspects about subculture behaviors in surf culture and history is Douglas Booth. Booth has contributed interesting perspectives about nomadic behavior, leisure, gender, popular imagery and ideology within specific points in surfing history. He explains that, "in mainstream discourse, surfers conjured up images of subversive 'itinerants', 'nomads' and 'wanderers'. While many general and

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39 Kent Pearson, *Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand*, (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1979). Pearson takes an ethnographic approach to understanding the two distinct surf cultures in New Zealand and in Australia, the Surf Life Savers and the Surf Board Riders. He also explores how these two different groups identify themselves and how they interact with surf and popular culture. Pearson contributes an important analysis of the dichotomy between surfing subcultures in their relation to each other and larger society.


popular surf historians and novelists use this image in surf writing, it persistently arrives in nearly every analysis of surfing. Some more recent scholarship by Nick Ford and David Brown is an analysis and development of surfing theory, which offers a brief history and break down of what surf culture is, the subcultures, as well as theoretical methods for analysis in the areas of surfing culture that can be further explored. Their work extends into the sociological underpinnings of surfers in many societies and also touches on themes such as gender, class, globalization, experience and history.

The Search in the 20th and 21st Century

While Ford and Brown offer many different avenues for exploring surf studies, there have been some attempts at focused analyses of surf tourism and the commercialization, or globalization, of surfing. While these two works by undergraduates Rhodes and Wesley are departures from the broad treatments of surfing culture, there is more room for development of their ideas about commercialization and tourism development in coastal regions, as in my case studies of Puerto Escondido, La Libertad, and Gigante. Another contributor to this discussion is Jean-Pierre Augustin, a professor of Geography Planning and Development at the University of Bordeaux, who has written a brief but informative case study, similar to Wesley's, about the French coast that was

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explored and influenced by surfers and surf culture. Augustin and Wesley have a strong connection as they both discuss the burgeoning tourism and resort systems that develop out of surfing nomads' exploration and dissemination of lifestyle ideology. Rhodes' question of whether everyone should be a surfer lends itself easily to sociologist Kristin Lawler's work on social and class relationships of the American surfer.

While Rhodes and even Ford and Brown begin to address more complex questions within surf culture, attention to gender is important, not only to this historiography here, but to surf history itself and to this research as well. From the previously presented historiography we see that all of the contributors are male, but the most recent academic treatment of surf culture by Kristin Lawler addresses deep sociological issues in the popular history of surfing, exploring interesting concepts of gender, politics and economics. Lawler's work, *The American Surfer: Radical Culture and Capitalism*, is an important analytical reference for understanding the use of media, class, politics, and economic power to interpret and juxtapose surfing, surfers, and surf culture. She applies a unique Marxist and cultural perspective to the analysis of the commercialization of the surfer throughout modern history. Lawler's perspective and methodology are useful in the further analysis of surf culture in modern Central American history, as I am exploring the surf history in these regions through a North


American surfer's perspective.

Memoirs and biographies, ethnographic and economic analyses, and broad histories all contribute to the current discourse of surfing. It is important to acknowledge that there has not been substantial research and analysis of specific regions that have been influenced and developed by surfers, and the relationship between these communities and the global surf community and culture. I will explore the historical relevance and importance of North American surfers and surf culture, as tourists, explorers, and lifestyle migrants, and how their presence has influenced the development of coastal regions and cultures in El Salvador and Nicaragua. This style of interaction implemented by the purveyors of stoke is best explained by Kampion:

Traveling surfers...spawned cultural outposts around the world...Each outpost was not only a destination but a jumping-off point for further exploration. A silent network of prototypical travelers was always out there working the edges, riding new waves in places no one back home had ever even heard of. Soon they would report back, and the travel fever would be stoked even further.46

He is referring to a domino effect of nomadic surfers, using each new discovery as a springboard to the next adventure, the next wave. Particular communities in El Salvador and Nicaragua can be used in order to understand the history and evolution of local, national and global surf culture.

Modern Central America: El Salvador and Nicaraguan Historiography

Central American history is written about in the context of foreign intervention, revolutions and guerrilla warfare, indigenous exploitation, eco

tourism, and Marxist and feminist movements. While the history of this particular project will focus on surfers and surf culture in relation to specific Central American coastal communities, there will be connections to the existing analyses of Nicaraguan and Salvadoran history. Each of these countries has experienced foreign interference, from surfers, travelers, and other governments, and long periods of civil wars and revolution. These aspects of their history are also integral to the progression and social development through surfer’s interactions in their coastal communities.

El Salvador has been subjected to a brutal civil war and unprecedented nationwide gang violence. Scholars have paid a great deal of attention to both of these issues in El Salvador. Some works that will be beneficial to this project are the works of Max Manwaring, Court Prisk, and Aldo Lauria-Santiago.47 Manwaring and Prisk’s work is a collection of oral histories that recounts and analyzes the civil war in El Salvador. Aldo Lauria-Santiago’s research sheds light on the earlier history of El Salvador and forces historians to look at the modern history of the country with a different perspective, illuminating the agrarian economics and politics of rural spaces. Mark Danner’s *The Massacre at El Mozote* is another important treatment of the civil war as well as Joan Didion’s *Salvador*.48 Nicaragua faced similar violence during its revolution, followed by

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the Contra war. The modern histories of these conflicts are addressed in most history textbooks focusing on Latin American history in the past 30 years.\textsuperscript{49} Jeffrey Gould, Katherine Isbester, and Karen Kampwirth have done some more unique work on the cultural identities of the Nicaraguan people and the intricacies of the revolution.\textsuperscript{50} While these works offer new perspectives on modern Salvadoran and Nicaraguan history, there is also a large amount of general history on Central America and some more specific like Gary Webb’s \textit{Dark Alliances}.\textsuperscript{51} I plan to use this historiography to better contextualize the surf history that will be explored, grounding it in a broader fashion.

\textbf{Methodology}

“Talkin’ story” is how many surfers spend their time when they aren’t surfing. Tales of faraway shores with perfect waves, friendly people, warm climates and adventure were often convincing enough to make a few surfers plan a trip and grab their boards. The surfing culture has been traditionally an oral one, passing along information, stories, etiquette, and directions to surf spots. This cultural practice necessitates an ethnographic and oral component to the


research in order to write a surf history; in this fashion surfing culture also influences the methodology of its study and how its history is recorded. As surfers traversed the globe from Tahiti to Hawaii, California to Australia, to South Africa, Indonesia and Latin America, they spread and increased their community, which allowed them to splinter and further explore adjoining coasts, evolving over time in a diverse and unique fashion.\textsuperscript{52} As I used observational and participatory methods of ethnography in the collection of much of my data, we must also consider one of the issues laden within. Clifford Geertz explains "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes, the less complete it is.\textsuperscript{53} While this work offers clarity by delving into many of the surfing subcultures that I observed, this thesis does not fully develop the Central American/Latin American surf culture perspective regarding North American surfers and their influences.

My research will consist of case studies in several regions of Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. These regional case studies will begin with how these specific surf spots were selected or discovered. My aim in these case studies (in Puerto Escondido, Mexico, La Libertad, El Salvador and Gigante, Popoyo and San Juan Del Sur in the province of Tola, Nicaragua) is to explore surfers' journeys, from abroad to these regions, and how they have settled, developed, and assimilated (or not) into these places. The factors that attracted surf

\textsuperscript{52} Some of the estimated surfer populations and surf shops can be found in Matt Warshaw's \textit{The Encyclopedia of Surfing}. Places like Japan, Jeffreys Bay in South Africa, the Netherlands, from obscure locations to well traveled surf spots, etc. are all catalogued and described in his work, with information about surf clubs, the country and surf spots appearances in movies, and so on.

explorers and their motivations at home will also need to be addressed. Often crowded surf spots and social and political events propelled surfers to leave their homes and to venture into foreign coastlines. "With the beaches of California and Hawaii overcrowded, surfers are constantly seeking new frontiers. Mexico has long since been discovered, and last decade's secret spots in Costa Rica now gather Malibu-size crowds." In an article in the New York Times, the author refers to surf exploration into more dangerous locales such as Nicaragua and insinuates that surfers have indeed made many more foreign regions accessible and open to investment, settlement, travel, and industry. Many surf historians acknowledge that Mexico and Costa Rica are well traveled spots, and this knowledge has become common through popular media and newspapers to the general public. "Surfers are spilling across the Central American isthmus, a place where death squads, narcotraficos and years of various civil wars had, not too long ago, made it inaccessible to all but the most daring of travelers." This history will show how surfers have paved the way for more tourism and socio-economic development in certain areas in Central America.

The Project and Participants

Some of the surf discoveries and explorations were also made by people who surfed but were there in a variation of roles, such as political and military advisors, journalists, and drug dealers. However, most surf explorers were attracted to Central America because of the coastline's potential for good waves,

54 "In Nicaragua, Chasing the Unsurfaced Wave," NY Times (May 15, 2005).
55 Ibid.
the adventure, the tropical climate, and the cheap living expenses. To these
explorers, "the perfect wave is not just a perfect wave; it’s the perfect place, the
perfect time, and the perfect conditions. Some surfers never find it, many just
once or twice in their lives. Others find it (surprise!) at their local surf spots. But
for those who really go after it, the stories are legend." These case studies
should help to unveil the link between the surfer history and the regional and
developmental history of Puerto Escondido in Mexico, La Libertad in El Salvador,
and Gigante in Nicaragua.

Some of the participants in this project were Robert and Jimmy Rotherham,
Alfonso Álvarez, and Robert Dull. Interviews conducted with the informants and
the conversations focused on how surfing has played a role in their lives, how
they came to Central America, or how surfing has affected their community and
lives since its arrival. From these interviews, I construct a narrative history that
will support the idea that surfing has fundamentally altered the coastal
communities in El Salvador and Nicaragua. The oral histories that are conducted
with surfers in Nicaragua and El Salvador are an exploration into the personal
narratives of each one’s experience in these specific regions. These interviews
will help to supplement previous interviews published in magazines with these
surfers and the articles about them and where they live and surf. The section on
Mexico will draw heavily from periodicals, my own travels, and my ethnographic
research there. Aside from surfer memoirs and history texts, these case studies

will be based on oral history interviews and surfer periodicals.

Magazines like *Surfer* and *Surfing*, circulating since the 1960s, played a critical role in the development of surf culture, tourism and industry in these coastal regions. They are one of my sources because many surfers have been attracted to El Salvador, Nicaragua and elsewhere due to the photos, articles and travelogues by surfers in foreign places. Some of the surfers that will be interviewed were also the authors of many of these primary resources. Matt Warshaw explains the beginning of their journalistic careers, and hints at the territoriality and secrecy of surfers as well:

The travel writing void was suddenly, cheerfully filled by Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson, two unknown teenage surfers from Orange County. On their first trip, in early 1973, they drove south in Peterson’s VW bug for a long, low-budget tour through Central America. A few weeks after arriving, they mailed off a parcel of slides and handwritten notebook pages to *Surfer*, where it was crafted into a feature article called “Centroamerica.” No breaks were named. No countries were named.57

The articles and film published by Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson over the past forty years will also be instrumental to this research. As Naughton and Peterson paved the way for surf travel journalism, many more surfer/journalists explored the globe, contributing to the communal discourse of surf spot exploration in surf magazines. Kampion explains “the surfing magazines devoted increasing space to travel adventures, with annual travel issues crammed with global forays.”58 These resources are fundamental to understanding how surfing subcultures interpreted and reported events in modern history in Central

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America.

My research methodology analyzes the process and cycle of cultural, social, and economic development in these specific coastal regions in Nicaragua and El Salvador. As surfers explored these towns, some remained, some went home and others used it as a base for more exploration into the surrounding areas. Surfer exploration/settlement is the beginning and end of the cycle of surfers, a time when it is simultaneously being used to settle, develop, and further explore for surf, a launch pad zone for further surfers. Surfers settle into these regions in a variety of ways. Some surfers marry a local man or woman and start a family, integrating into the existing community, like the Rotherhams in Punta Roca. Others will open up restaurants, hotels, surf guide services and other entrepreneurial ventures, like Dale Dagger, Robert Dull, and JJ Yemma in Gigante and Popoyo. Foreign surfers not only disseminate surf culture also construct churches and schools, having a religious and educational impact as well. Some surfers will stay a while and then move on with their travels, and others will return home with news about this new place, further perpetuating the cycle of nomadic travel for surfers.

This cycle also evolves and allows for the growth of other industries and improvements in infrastructure for these coastal regions. Brad Melekian, a modern surf journalist/traveler, explains that:

Maybe it’s worth noting that surfers have been a very influential force on the ground as well. Before there was eco-tourism, before there were hordes of rainforest seekers crunching granola on the ground, there were surfers, swashbuckling their ways through the jungles in search of waves.
And as time went on and word spread, the local communities came to
cater to the surfers, recognizing that one of their most precious resources
was indeed the tropical climate and warm waves.  

These new communities are where the local culture and surfers intersect and
create a new transnational community. Eventually a new surf culture is
developed from the influence of the original surf explorers and settlers with a
combination of the local community and culture. This surf travel and migration
can also create new types of identities for the locals and the surfers; Drew
Kampion explains, “while traveling surfers were discovering new places to surf,
the citizens of those places discovered surfing.” Surfers that settled often
embraced the local culture and blended it with their own, while the locals now
had surfing to deal with, often creating a new domestic counter culture of its own.
In essence the surfing counter culture spreads to new communities and
reproduces itself, usually assimilating some of the local cultural traits as well.

The first chapter will trace the history of surfing in the borderlands of Mexico
and the United States, with the initial surfer forays into Baja and deeper into
southern mainland Mexico. Transitioning further into Central America, the
second and third chapter in this work will begin with the early surf exploration of
El Salvador and Nicaragua. The perspectives of travel and surfing will be
researched and analyzed from popular sources and surfing periodicals and the
oral histories/memoirs of the early surf adventurers and receivers. This will help

60 Benedict R. Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of
61 Drew Kampion, Stoked: A History of Surf Culture, (Santa Monica, CA: General Pub. Group,
1997), 98.
to understand the popular perceptions of these countries by the surfer explorers and their countries as well. A chronological narrative can be constructed through these chapters with the periodicals and oral histories that can be told in vignettes by case study.

These first three chapters will explore the process and cycle of each regional case study (i.e. Puerto Escondido, Gigante, Popoyo, Punta Roca, etc.) throughout their experience with surf culture. I will delve into the most recent history of these regions and how they are currently developing. Examining how the oral histories, primary resources, and other popular histories of Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua relate in order to discern the changing focuses of surfers, academics, and popular media. Ford and Brown also assert that these types of “narrative frameworks could usefully be applied to analyses of individual articles in surfing magazines, to examine the recurring themes and structuring which occur, with ongoing comparative studies being capable of providing a rich commentary on changing emphases over time and underlying orientations.”

This chapter will help illustrate how the identities of the surfer explorer/settlers and the locals have shifted over the past fifty years. These three chapters will aim to show, not only how the coastal regions of Mexico, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were affected and developed by surfers, but how the global surf culture evolved as well.

The next chapter will explore the perspectives of surf exploration in these

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regions and how they have changed since initial surfer contact, as well as how that culture evolves to the present. With this analysis we should be able to see how surf culture at home (surf explorers’ places of origin) and abroad (coastal regions explored/settled) develops in the global and communal dialogue and evolves. This chapter will rely heavily on surfing cultural artifacts (videos, periodicals, and magazines) that reflect the changing perceptions of and by surf culture. Much like Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins in their work *Reading National Geographic*, the images and captions within surf articles and travel guides will be used to illustrate the relationship between the coastal regions and the surfer explorer/settlers. The surfers’ act of “producing pictures, captions, and layout is a social and creative act in which negotiation and unacknowledged struggle result in the ultimate artifact, rather than a singular plan deliberately followed through.”

Relationships between the surfers and the communities in these regions are documented through other media that will be analyzed, such as popular media news, films, plays, pictures, surf movies and documentaries. Ford and Brown write that “it would be hoped that in future years a whole series of narrative histories of surfing may emerge, which may involve further reflexivity in terms of gender, ethnicity and nationality, for instance. Again, there is a particular scope for textual analysis of the narratives presented within the surfing

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media. The narrative that develops in this chapter will connect the modern history of El Salvador and Nicaragua with popular and surf culture.

This final section of this project will be the conclusion that will tie together all three chapters and explain the relevance of the information and analysis of the research. After a general summary, evaluation, and restatement of the thesis, topics and avenues for more exploration into the history of coastal development by surfers in other regions will be suggested and how they may be connected to the existing historical narrative. Other social, cultural and touristic groups will be addressed as components of other contributors to the regional development in Mexico and Central America, in concepts of sex and romance and other activities such as jungle tours, ropes and golf courses, and other recreational activities have had similar impacts as those of surfers and surf culture. Exploring the history of surf culture's global influences on coastal and regional development around the world will assist in a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social links to community and economic growth and development.

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Chapter I
Mexico: Surfing in the Borderlands

This chapter explores the preliminary surf travels throughout Baja Mexico and mainland Mexico. From this narrative we see how surfers moved through the country, and began to foray further in Central America. The search for waves, being the main focus of North American surfers into Mexico, will be shown to drive some of the economies and to also stir social and economic change for some of the communities. The areas where surfing has flourished in Mexico can be divided into several sections: Northern and Southern Baja, Mainland, and the Gulf. Heeding the call of Ford and Brown, this narrative aims to expound this concept that “given its high mobility, surfing is an example of a highly cosmopolitan ‘third culture’ as a practice that transcends national boundaries. Such notions as localist/cosmopolitan may be usefully linked to the plurality of individuals' identities and affiliations within a globalizing world."\(^{65}\) Also exploring counter culture influences like “los jipis”, the North American surfer journey through Mexico will ground the research and analysis that moves on into El Salvador and Nicaragua in the following chapters.\(^{66}\)

Surfers have been a community without borders since their inception. The very practice of the art (or sport, lifestyle, etc.) is an act of crossing borders of land and the sea. The search for perfect empty waves has sent surfers around

\(^{65}\) Nick Ford and David Brown, *Surfing and Social Theory: Experience, embodiment and narrative of the dream glide*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32.

the globe, but for many American surfers, they needed only head south. The border between California and Mexico has been a commonly traveled region for American surfers. Understanding how and why surfers travelled and explored through Mexico can unveil the progression of surf travel from California to Mexico, as a passageway to Central and South America. The footsteps of the surfers that found waves just over the border will aid in the understanding of the history and evolution of the modern surfer communities and locations in California and Mexico. Surfers from the United States had a fundamental impact on the social and economic development of Mexican surf culture and industry through their travels and tourism, incorporating another nation into the global surfing community.

Travelling to exotic and foreign locales was a practice conceived and pursued in the 1960s. Surfers were not the first foreigners to begin exploring Mexico for recreational purposes. In Eric Zolov’s analysis of the Mexican counterculture, he explains that, “Mexico had in fact long been a country of attraction for bohemian travelers, dating back to the postrevolutionary fervor of the 1920s and providing new appeal for beatniks in the 1950s.” Surf movies were being released in California in the 1960s and began incorporating footage of surf from foreign places, or those outside of Hawaii, California and Australia. This was quite a departure from the typical surfing films that only focused on Hawaii, California and Australia. Films like The Performers, The Nomadic Surfer,

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Once Upon a Wave, and Have Board Will Travel all contained glimpses of the waves peeling unridden in Mexico. These films enticed the surfing community to roam into Mexico and find more waves. This cultural practice and process is explained by surf culture historian Drew Kampion:

Surfers are nomads. To surf is to seek, and to seek is to roam. To find a good wave might require traveling a good distance. To find a great, uncrowded wave might take you to the ends of the earth. Bruce Brown’s The Endless Summer actually recapitulated and promulgated the core ritual of surf culture: the search for the perfect wave.

As surfers began to explore more and more of Mexico, these forays were also documented in surfing magazines. Matt Warshaw states that “surfing was dispersed internationally by expats, vacationers, nomads, students, drug-runners, and military personnel. With few exceptions, they were all American and Australian.” This assessment alludes to a large demographic of surfers exploring the world in search of waves. The surfers that began exploring Mexico in the 1960s were rambling through small coastal towns like Puerto Vallarta, Sayulita, Sinaloa, Mazatlan and Acapulco, and abandoned or sparsely populated fishing villages, desert points and jungle river mouths.

The North American surfers needed resources while on these explorations and travels for surf. The Mexican people and communities that interacted with these travelling surfers began to realize that there was money to be made renting campgrounds, rooms, and feeding these wave riders from across the border. Bo

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Boeck explains the common scene of surfers jumping across the border, “We found lots of boards and fellow surfers escaping the coldies up north between semesters...we stayed at the Hotel Tropicana on “Gringo Beach”...we enjoyed barbequed fish on a stick (20 cents all you could eat) and cold beer.” Currency was not the only thing being exchanged between the Mexicans and the surfers, slowly but surely the surfing seed was planted in pueblos, fishing villages, desert towns and jungle outposts.

The areas where surfing has flourished in Mexico can be divided into several sections: Northern and Southern Baja, Mainland, and the Gulf. I focus solely on the Baja peninsula and the Oaxaca region of Mainland Mexico. While there is much surf in the other regions, these specific areas have been the most widely traveled and developed by surfers and surf culture. According to Warshaw, “Baja has for decades been a favorite destination for travelling Southern California surfers.” Not only has Baja California been an escape for California surfers, some of its acclaimed surf spots have been used for contests; campgrounds and hotels catering to surfers have been developed. In 1967 an article in Surfer Magazine reported on the second annual Baja Surf Club Invitational, describing this transnational event wherein surfers from different countries competed. The event even drew the attention of Mexican government officials from the department of Sports and Tourism. “Ignacio (Nacho) Felix, president of the Baja Surf Club, said surfing has really stoked Mexican officials...”

72 My ethnographic research is based on the Baja Peninsula of Mexico.
and he further explained that, "Mexico is really coming into its own as a surfing Mecca as more and more American surfers discover our fine beaches."74

Contests weren't the only attention received by these spots and eventually even Hollywood used Mexico's beaches for films, expanding surf culture's reach in both Mexican and American culture.

Surf spots have been filmed for many surfing films, and some of these spots and towns across the border from the United States have also been used in mainstream popular movies. The presence of surfing media and Hollywood in these countries is implicit in the cultural exchange of North American surfers perceiving Latin America. Some Hollywood motion pictures have depicted surfers in Mexico and their experiences during these cross cultural escapades. *Big Wednesday* has been "considered by many surfers to be one of the more "authentic" of Hollywood's portrayals of sixties surfing. This is partly due to the fact that Milius cast actors who could actually surf, and partly because Milius himself is a surfer."75 There are several scenes set in Mexico, in Tijuana and Ensenada, where the surfers come in like conquistadors, taking waves, beer and women. The surfers buy marijuana from a drug dealer and go to a strip show, where there are dozens of other California surfers and a fight breaks out.76 This

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type of occurrence is still common for surfers travelling over the border for waves, beers and women. Baja has seen a unique form of development in its northern region, differing from the areas of Pescadero and Cabo San Lucas in southern Baja.

Pescadero and Cabo San Lucas have seen a large influx of surfers and general vacation tourism over the years. Some surf camps, schools and resorts exist in Pescadero, but the infrastructure has not progressed as fast as Cabo. The surf breaks in the Cabo San Lucas region are mostly beginner and intermediate and have seen the proliferation of a localized and territorial Mexican surf scene. Warshaw’s *Encyclopedia of Surfing* illustrates this point, “Zippers, located just off the highway in San Jose del Cabo, is also far and away the most crowded, with territorial locals sometimes harassing visiting Americans.” Cabo has seen an explosion of surf spots, community, and tourism due also in part to its reputation as a party town. Surfers searching for uncrowded waves often don’t go to Cabo, but travel in Northern Baja.

San Miguel in Northern Baja has attracted surfers from California and the world for the past fifty years. Bill Cleary describes this wave as, “Somewhere to escape to when you’re tired of stoplights and freeways and crowded waves. San Miguel, Baja California, is just the spot. The waves resemble Malibu in form...one happy difference, though: it’s seldom crowded.” While San Miguel eventually becomes an iconic destination, its campground atmosphere is quite

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78 Bill Cleary, “Mexico,” *Peterson’s Surfing Yearbook #2*, 1965.
different than the club scene in Cabo. There are positive and negative ramifications, but this should be explored further by interviews with locals, not just surfers, in the communities. "Representatives from the California-based Surf Industry Manufacturers Association have traveled to Cabo since 1998 for an annual weekend-long seminar and booze-up. Regional and American-sponsored surf contests have been held here as well."79 As surf business executives and representatives partied and vacationed in spots like Cabo, some of the more "hard core" or "soul surfers" travelled in a different manner.

AC Weisbecker is a surfer, author, explorer, screenwriter, and retired drug smuggler. His memoirs and exploits are of legend status, and he even maintains an online blog about his ongoing travels in Central America titled Allan Weisbecker's Expat Journal.80 While Weisbecker tends to travel to remote locations in most of his surf explorations, he does occasionally stay at more crowded and well-travelled surf spots. The cultural exchanges that occur at these types of surf zones are variable; however, the ones that are in close proximity to the border of California and Mexico evolve differently. "The greatest cultural impacts of surfing, however, could be expected to occur where it is taken up in developing world cultures in the light of surf touristic travel."81 While surf tourism, as Ford and Brown suggest, has altered Cabo San Lucas greatly,

surfing has not had the same touristic effects on Northern Baja. Even though it is well traveled by surfers, there is not a great deal of infrastructure because many visiting surfers drive over the border for a day or two and do not require more than a campground or restaurant.  

Many borderland residing surfers hop the line between California and Mexico because "Baja has righteous surf... [And] during the last fifteen years, it has evolved as a heavily surfed area, as a result of the hyper-accelerated California scene immediately to the north." Most spots like K58, Salsipuedes and San Miguel are merely dirt camping sites and not burgeoning surf hotels like Cabo. "As of 2003, Baja was home to an estimated 1,000 native surfers and 10 surf shops, most catering to visiting surfers near the California border, and around the Cabo San Lucas area." Weisbecker describes a stay at the San Miguel campground in his memoir *In Search Of Captain Zero*.

Five days at the San Miguel campground were more than I'd planned, a result of my long-standing traveling rule that dictates that one should never drive away from god surf. Now, with the deterioration of lineup conditions and a worsening crowd factor, I was itching to get on with it. Ensenada, being a little more than an hour's drive south of San Diego, is in many ways an extension of the United States, a place and state of mind I have decided to put behind me.

Surfers often travel through Baja, north to south, and then move on to Mainland Mexico, where the surf scene is completely different from its peninsular counterpart.

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82 This is from my own ethnographic observations in 2003, 2006 and 2007.
The travel between Baja and Mainland Mexico is usually by ferry for most surfers. Often they drive down through Baja, take the ferry across and keep exploring the coast, usually ending up at the Mexican Pipeline, Puerto Escondido. Adrian Kojin took a solo motorcycle/surf trip from California through Mexico, and Central and South America in the late 1980s. While on the ferry, he reminisced about his trek through Baja. “There was the old fisherman who had told me about gold in the Baja mountains; the Shaper from California who gave a new surfboard to a local kid; the guy who had just become a grandfather and was celebrating with a session at Costa Azul in Cabo.” While Kojin’s journey was a personal adventure that involved more than just surfing, the fact that surf zones are becoming more and more crowded is often a motivator for many to travel. “The crowding problem further stimulates surfers’ international travel, linking with the culture’s traditions of wanderlust, further expanding surfing geographically.”

An issue that often comes with this nomadic tendency to search for waves is how to find them, what directions are reliable, and whom can you trust?

One particular surf article from 1965 chronicles the adventure of surf exploration in mainland Mexico, from its beginnings in pouring through cultural myths and directions from surfers to the desolate jungle waves at the end. Bill Cleary begins his journey with his process of tracking down reliable directions to and information about this mythical surf spot.

There have always been many myths of huge green waves, undiscovered.

87 Nick Ford and David Brown, Surfing and Social Theory: Experience, embodiment and narrative of the dream glide, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32.
spots, perfect breaks abounding in Mexico. But like the El Dorado sought by the ancient Spanish Conquistadores, the treasure is always over the next hill, beyond the distant jungle...I had to find out and so I was on the trail—tracking the myth to its source.\textsuperscript{88}

Cleary tracks down Peter Viertel, an earlier surf pioneer, and in his article and addresses the problems of disinformation, treacherous maps, faulty directions, and not so helpful hints. He also contemplates the appropriate manner to engage someone, who obviously knows how to get to a secret surf spot, and successfully gets correct directions and information about the location.

As noted earlier, the cultural symptom of territoriality and localism in surfers invades even the simplest common happenings, like conversation and social interaction. As the conversation progresses the spot’s location is finally revealed. Peter Viertel’s role goes beyond merely giving other surfers directions; he has also spread the culture to various ends of the globe.

Viertel is a novelist, a screen writer and—what most impressed me—a surfing pioneer. Several years ago while working on the screen play of ‘The Sun Also Rises,’ Viertel introduced surfing to France’s Cote Basque. He also had surfed Mexico while his wife Deborah Kerr was filming “The Night of the Iguana” at the picturesque village of Puerto Vallarta. There, I had been told, Viertel had discovered the Mexican Malibu.\textsuperscript{89}

Much like California when surfing arrived in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, France and Mexico exploded with California surf fever. “Wherever surfing took hold, it was fashioned, as much as local conditions would allow, on the Southern California


\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
California counter culture wasn’t always greeted in these foreign surf zones, and many of these travelling surfers had to deal with harassment and abuse, but it was often worth it for the waves.

There are often many articles that appear in surfing magazines and travel guides that explain how to get through check points and border patrols in Baja Mexico and Mainland, who to bribe, what not say or do, and other codes of behavior. Surfers usually had bad reputations, many that weren’t totally undeserved. “In the late sixties and throughout the seventies, probably half of the hardcore surf travelers were moonlighting as dope smugglers, or vice-versa. Many of those who weren’t trafficking were at least encouraged by the thought of visiting places where the highs were cheap and often legal.” Smoking grass, drinking beer, and sitting in a hammock watching newly discovered waves were the preferred past times for not all but many foreign surfers in Mexico. In another code/behavior piece in Surfer, John M. Wilson explains that, “Anyone who has ventured across the Mexican border with hair longer than John Wayne’s and a surfboard atop his car or camper knows about the inevitable hassles with the federal police.” This reputation, of both surfers and Federales, is one that still exists today, and encourages many surfers to travel covertly.

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92 Warshaw, 301.
94 See also Eric Zolov’s piece Refried Elvis and the comparisons of Los Jipis (Hippies), this exact language is seen later in an interview with Salvadoran surfer Alfonso Alvarez in the following chapter.
Surfers travelled through northern and southern Baja and across the Sea of Cortez to mainland Mexico. But surfers had also flown to Puerta Vallarta, San Blass, and eventually arrived in Oaxaca as well. Through bandito riddled highways, Federale checkpoints, and desolate desert roads and steamy jungle, eventually surfers discovered and settled at the legendary Mexican Pipeline, Puerto Escondido. This spot was surfed as early as 1959, but was further surfed and explored in the 1970 and 80s. In 1974 the Mexican Pipeline hit the magazines, “by which time increasing numbers of surfers from California, Texas, and the eastern seaboard were beginning to file into the small hotels in the fishing/resort town to the immediate north.”\(^95\) As became famous for its hollow and amazing barreling waves, surfers flocked. With this new influx of tourists and settlers, Mexicans and surfers alike were forced to deal with the spots newfound popularity. Adrian Kojin explains his experience there and how it differed from his travels in Baja. “Puerto Escondido was a turning point on the trip. The tranquility and peace I’d been experiencing so far were soon to disappear. The lineup got pretty crowded for an entire week, and I soon found out that local food and accommodations were more expensive than in other Mexican towns.”\(^96\)

While the rising prices in accommodations and food in Puerto Escondido may have been hard for thrifty nomadic surfers, it was beneficial for the local economy and growing domestic surf scene.

With magazine and video exposure of Puerto Escondido circulating within


the global surf culture and its reputation for Hawaii style barrels and power, surfers rushed to the region. Local Mexican surfers also began to emerge and, “A small surf industry was built in Puerto Escondido over the next 20 years, complete with retail shops, surf contests, surf resorts, even a locally made line of surfwear.”97 This unique culture that grew out of the Mexican hosts and foreign surfers is a direct result of the surfing cultures characteristic trait of exploration, settlement, and commercialization. As the local Mexican surfing schools, hostels, clubs, companies and groups emerged in Puerto Escondido it is apparent that the local surf culture identities not only as a Mexican culture, but also as a larger community culture, linked through surfing. Matt Warshaw describes an aspect of this evolution, “By the early ’90s, Puerto Escondido’s local economy had been so pumped up by incoming surf tourism dollars that the city council erected a statue of a surfer embedded into a looping concrete tube.”98

With this booming surf tourism and local surf economy, Angel Salinas opened the Central Surf Shop with his brothers.99 Central Surf Shop was established in Puerto Escondido/Playa Zicatela in 1988 and has its own clothing line of shirts and boardshorts, teaches surf lessons and offers housing services and tours. The experience of Angel Salinas is unique, especially because he did not become internationally recognized until he used an aspect of his own national culture. Shots and images of surfers in the barrel or tube have been in nearly every surf publication, and many existed of Angel, but the magazines never ran

98 Ibid., 481.
99 www.centralsurfshop.com
them. That is until Angel began wearing the famous Mexican wrestling masks of the Luchadores. He became famous almost over night on the international surf scene, and images him surfing the tube in his masks are now everywhere.

Similar to the los jipis/hippies presence in Mexico, explained by Eric Zolov, the surfers that explored and settled in Puerto Escondido, "allowed youth to invent new ways of being Mexican, ways that ran counter to the dominant ideology of state-sponsored nationalism." The experience of Angel Salinas is interesting story of how surfing in Mexico has developed independently and simultaneously harmonizing with the dominant global commercial surf culture.

Surf spots that are discovered by surfers run the gamut of development. Some become like Puerto Escondido while others remain isolated and underdeveloped. Either way, many foreign surf locations function as areas to gather information and exchange notes with other travelling surfers. Drew Kampion explains this process the best in that, "Traveling surfers...spawned cultural outposts around the world...Each outpost was not only a destination but a jumping-off point for further exploration. A silent network of prototypical travelers was always out there working the edges, riding new waves in places no one back home had ever even heard of. Soon they would report back, and the travel fever would be stoked even further." Sometimes these surfers didn’t need to report all the way back home, only to a communal surf spot or bar in the

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region, which might serve as a launch pad to further surf exploration.

Surf wasn’t always the hot topic either, sometimes news of home and travel conditions were just as important. At a now non-existent surf spot, Petacalco, Craig Peterson explains a chance encounter with some other travelling surfers. After driving back from Central America, “Late that night we reach our destination, and park next to two surfers from the East Coast. Bob Rotherham and Eric Penny, who are on their way to South America. They filled us in on the latest bums from the States; i.e., Nixon, Watergate, gas shortage, meat shortage, and wave shortage. We in turn told them of the areas we had left, and suddenly felt like returning to.” From this experience it can be determined that the cultural exchanges between traveling North American surfers weren’t the only things happening on surf trips and explorations. Already developing was an organic network of surfers and locals as informants who exchanged not only surf info between travelling surfers in these areas, but news and current events as well.

Surf exploration and settlement throughout Mexico is vast and varies from region to region, depending on the wave quality, locals, and infrastructure. Surfers often cross fences, and borders, against the rules to ride waves. This cultural tendency to ignore the law and rebel is another issue that needs to be

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102 Petacalco was a hidden wave of mythical proportions that was very short-lived, due to coastal development at the spot the wave was forever lost, and is now only known in legend. It also plays a pivotal role in the meeting and near meeting of key players and developers of surf culture in Nicaragua and El Salvador, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

addressed in the historical analysis of surf travel. "The surfers’ refusal to respect private property—insisting on beach access no matter what—was another massive problem for straight world authorities."¹⁰⁴ This rebellious nature is an inherent quality that must be addressed in further research.¹⁰⁵ More research and analysis similar to Wesley Davis’ project that looks at the effects of surfers and tourism in Nias and the Mentawais in Indonesia would also be useful to the isolated surf locations like Cabo San Lucas, Puerto Escondido, San Miguel, and Baja Malibu.¹⁰⁶ Surfers’ trips throughout Mexico have left the country with diversely developed regions, containing foreign and domestic surf culture, particular to each surf spot. Ron Stoner sums up the Mexican surf trip simply, and more and more surfers will heed the call. “It was a great experience for me, and I’m sure the rest of the guys agree. Mexico has a good wave. Over and out.”¹⁰⁷ The exchanges between surfers will continue as long as the stories are told, about empty waves and adventure. The journey will always begin with a crossing of the border.

¹⁰⁴ Kristin Lawler, The American Surfer: Radical Culture and Capitalism, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 117. Tangentially, there is also a lot of legal and social commotion in Santa Barbara at present, about the development of a stretch of coastline in Gaviota, a popular film from Surfrider Foundation and USC is in the works. However, some of the land is private, and surfers continue to break the law by trespassing to surf the waves, and also feel the need to protect the pristine land from development. A sociological treatment of this double standard should be explored, as this type of movement has occurred in several coastal areas in California.


While surf tourism is still progressing and growing in both Baja and the area around Puerto Escondido, the locals are trying to protect themselves socially, environmentally, and economically. By enhancing their political scope in Mexico, they are gaining attention and traction with the government, and now have the capacity to protect their waves, jobs, and future. Recently Mexico has issued a ban on photographing and video recording of certain beaches, specifically Salina Cruz in Oaxaca (Surfline) due to exploitation of resources.\textsuperscript{108} Local Mexican surfers are calling for regulations and have got them, embassies now issue licenses, roughly 800 dollars to record pro surfers in certain locations and require that all visiting surfers hire domestic labor and surf/tour guides on this surf endeavors.\textsuperscript{109}

Near the beaches of Puerto Escondido and Barra de la Cruz, this ruling by the Mexican government stands to set quite a national and international precedent about surf development and support in poorer and developing countries where surfers frequently visit for leisure, exploration, and surf media production. This current situation is still evolving, and will be hard to track consistently as there is still a level of local surfer secrecy around the locations and waves. While these measures have not been enacted on the same policy level in El Salvador and Nicaragua, Mexico is paving the way forward as an


example of how to stimulate their domestic employment within their own local surf culture and commanding respect from the broader international surf community.
Chapter II
El Salvador

"The nautical charts were right, our hopes not hopes anymore. A set rolls through. The rest we vowed will never pass our lips..."\(^{110}\)

The rocky coastline of El Salvador parallels its tumultuous past. It is this geographic characteristic that has drawn in many visitors from the United States, Europe, Australia, and South America. The perfect waves that break on the cobblestone reefs and rocky points of Central America’s smallest country have been and remain the main attraction for these water-dwelling explorers. Surfers from the United States, propelled by the desire for exploration and adventure, began traversing through their neighboring countries to the south in the 1950s and 60s. Wave-driven pilgrimages throughout Mexico and on into Central America were just a few of the many destinations for globetrotting surfers; however, some stayed long enough to have a distinct impact on the region visited, and others remain there to this day, as integral parts of the local community. Traveling surfers who stayed for just a visit and migrant surfers who settled not only brought surf culture to El Salvador, they also influenced and were assimilated into the Salvadoran culture. This chapter will explore accounts of how North American surfers came to surf and settle in La Libertad, El Salvador and the impact from these explorations in regards to settling and buying houses

\(^{110}\) Kevin Naughton, Craig Peterson, Greg Carpenter, "Deeper into Centroamerica," *Surfer*, November 1973, 53.
or starting businesses, or just passing through and loaning a board to a local or visitor.

While surfers are a unique culture that has traversed many places around the world, they are but one of the groups of people that were exploring and influencing these regions. The United States government and military have been influential, and in some cases imperialistic, in funding and aid during the 1980s, exercising influential political interference. There is an intense history of violence, scandal and corruption in US interactions with much of Central America during the Cold War era. El Salvador experienced this US intervention and influence throughout the 20th century. Similar to the early modern history of Nicaragua, El Salvador had a contingent of leftist rebels that fought both against the elites that controlled its nation and its US backers. Farabundo Martí in El Salvador, and Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua, were leaders in their struggles against their own governments’ oppression and US imperialism. Both leaders were martyrs in their struggles, later becoming the romanticized symbols of the two distinctive guerrilla groups, the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) in El Salvador and the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) in Nicaragua. Oppression of the poor and consolidation of land and resources into the hands of the few and rich in El Salvador stimulated an eventual revolt due to that social and economic polarization. Often third world nations, especially those

111 These guerrilla forces and their leftist ideology were a strong reason why the US government backed the military dictatorships. See more on the Domino Theory of Cold War politics in Central America. *Dark Alliance* by Gary Webb and *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* by William M LeoGrande.
with abundant and lengthy coastlines, are attractive to traveling and migrant surfers, regardless of the dangers of war and civil unrest.

El Salvador has twice the population of Nicaragua packed into a country one-sixth its size, and almost all of the land was controlled by a small group of Salvadorans in the middle of twentieth century. From the latter half of the 19th century up until the Military Dictatorships of the mid twentieth, two percent of the population owned over sixty percent of the arable land. These landowners were known as the “14 Families.”112 The guerrilla formations were a result of social, economic, and political disparity and polarization in both nations. From 1980-1992 the FMLN in El Salvador engaged in a brutal civil war against the military dictatorship supported by the US. Despite of all the political and social upheaval, foreign intervention, and violence, surfers explored El Salvador. Some surfers who came to El Salvador settled, like Robert Rotherham and Jon Stokesbury; some left and moved on, like Craig Nautghon, Craig Peterson, Dale Dagger and Robert Dull. Opportunities such as the waves, love, work, and friends presented themselves and the then visiting surfers helped to create the domestic Salvadoran surf culture that flourishes there now. Others documented the surf, people and culture, becoming key writers and figures in surfing history. All of these surfers became inextricably linked to the local history of La Libertad and surfing in El Salvador, and it is exactly this history that these interviews, articles and ethnographic research aim to illustrate and analyze.

As Nick Ford and David Brown have stated, “Narrative frameworks could usefully be applied to analyses of individual articles in surfing magazines, to examine the recurring themes and structuring which occur, with ongoing comparative studies being capable of providing a rich commentary on changing emphases over time and underlying orientations.”

Along with interviews and articles, this narrative is capable of illustrating the growth and dispersal of North American surfers and their culture to La Libertad and the surrounding towns in El Salvador, and even further into Central America.

**The Early Explorations**

Articles, hearsay and rumors about empty beaches in foreign lands with flawless waves is how the surfing spirit of adventure is kept alive, and stirred up, inciting surfers to take off and explore on their own. Peter L. Dixon wrote one of the first surf articles ever published about El Salvador in 1969, while the Salvadoran government was still a repressive military dictatorship. He documents his own family’s surf adventure on El Salvador’s coast with his old surfing cohort, Doug Walker, the then Deputy Director of El Salvador’s Peace Corps. After being greeted at the airport by Doug Walker and Sr. Luis Drake of the El Salvador Office of Turisimo, the Dixon family’s surfboards and bags were loaded quickly into Volkswagen bus and driven away, while they were taken in another car to their destination. Dixon explains his experience, and obvious culture shock in his article, explaining, “I thought about revolutions, and bandits.

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We were in the hands of a stranger and speeding through San Salvador's dark back streets.\textsuperscript{115} In 1969 El Salvador was still ten years away from the beginning of its civil war, but tensions were high with their neighbor Honduras. Dixon was travelling in El Salvador while the political system was becoming more destabilized and repressive.

Loaded into their cars, the group headed towards La Libertad on the coast of El Salvador. Led by James Ruiz and Doug Walker, Dixon and his family were astounded by the initial view of the surf. They breezed through the area now known as Punta Roca and headed on towards Zunsal, another one the country's famous surf spots. Dixon's writing describes many spots, usually comparing them to similar breaks in California or Hawaii, for example Zunsal to Sunset beach in Hawaii and Tamarindo to Waikiki in Hawaii. As some of the first surfers in El Salvador, their practice of surfing was an odd and entertaining spectacle for the Salvadoran people. Dixon elaborates on the reception of surfing in El Salvador:

We returned to San Salvador and found a request waiting that we appear on local TV. Yes, interest in surfing was growing. We lugged the boards to the TV studio and, with Jimmy Ruiz translating, we told El Salvador what wonderful surf we'd found. I had brought along a 16mm copy of Grant Rohloff's Wet and Wild surfing short, and this was the clincher. The local people who saw the exciting footage from Hawaii and California were converted instantly. Next day it was back to the beach for a surfing class and El Salvador's first Tablistas rode standing their first day on a board.\textsuperscript{116}

Dixon further perceives the culture shock of the Salvadorans watching people ride on waves was obvious, and the people, media, and government were

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 64.
obviously intrigued. The local people witnessed these visitors surfing, and some of the images of this were broadcast on television, and lessons were even given. The act of teaching the locals to surf added to the coastal practices of the community in La Libertad and the surrounding beach communities.

**Bernie Baker and the Soccer War**

Bernie Baker traveled throughout the Caribbean and Central America in 1969, surfing and writing articles documenting his experiences in these Latin American cultures. The Soccer War lasted about 100 hours on July 14th, 1969. As Bernie moves from the islands to the isthmus, he encounters an actual war zone at the border crossing of Honduras and El Salvador. He describes the Honduran/El Salvadoran border as completely destroyed with bullet holes and blown up buildings. At this point, both the Salvadoran and Honduran armies were strategically positioned against each other on opposite sides of Bernie as he crossed the border. “After clearing customs, we were transferred to a smaller bus and started on a detour when the Honduran forces scored a hit on the bridge, tensions were high, and I kept my camera in my bag as we rolled slowly away from the shooting.”117 His travel along the border with Honduras was much different from the heart of the El Salvador. “At the capital, San Salvador, the Instituto de Turismo people were so friendly and efficient in catering to our problems, it blew my mind. They took care of everything: maps, directions to the beaches, and even delivered a message left me by another surfer from Santa

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117 Ibid., 74.
Barbara.118 The fact that messages were relayed from surfer to surfer, even by the government officials, portrays just how easily they stood out against the typical people and other tourists in El Salvador.

Matt Warshaw, author of The Encyclopedia of Surfing and The History of Surfing, states that there were most likely only three surfers in the whole country when Baker was there in 1970.119 Surfers were in fact so few at this time that Bernie had proclaimed, “the coastline was entirely ours!”120 Like most other traveling surfers, Baker would wander into a bar and shoot pool with the locals in La Libertad, common pasttimes in the coastal bars. “This proved to be a bit of a cultural shock and carnival for the locals, who had rarely seen blond hair, much less of any unnatural length. But after they figured out we were as easy going as they, it was smiles and greetings whenever we stopped in.”121 The locals on the coast had not yet been accustomed to the surfers’ and their cultures’ presence. While the surf zones had not yet been overrun with surfers, these places were still rural and functioned as ports or fishing towns. Small towns on the coast like La Libertad were still subject to the occasional skirmish or violent outburst.

Robert Rotherham, a Floridian transplant, recalls that his, “wife said when they had the [Soccer] war, they had a blackout here and some guy flew over in an airplane and threw a couple of bombs out of the cockpit. They hit somewhere

118 Ibid., 74-75.
120 Baker, 75.
121 Baker, 75.
up on the mountains, not even close to the target. 

Towards the end of his article Baker describes the nocturnal activities in La Libertad. “Late in the evening, we occasionally went down to the wharf where, under the secrecy of night, arms and ammunition were unloaded off foreign vessels anchored in deep water, and whisked away under armed convoy.”

In the 1960s and 70s, La Libertad was one of El Salvador’s main port for boats transporting livestock, sugarcane, cotton, oil and other merchandise, there was even an oil refinery near the point. However, with the development of the new port in Acahutla, La Libertad’s role as a port diminished. La Libertad closed to international commercial shipping in 1976 and slowly became more of a fishing town and tourist destination. Surfers would help with the latter.

The Wanderers - Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson

Articles about surf exploration in El Salvador were only beginning with Dixon and Baker; soon to be on the scene were Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson, fine examples of wandering surfers. With films and articles being devoured by American surf culture, the need to escape and explore was commercialized. Drew Kampion illustrates the beginning, “To surf is to seek, and to seek is to roam. To find a good wave might require traveling a good distance. To find a great, uncrowded wave might take you to the ends of the earth. Bruce Brown’s

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123 Baker, 75.
The Endless Summer actually recapitulated and promulgated the core ritual of surf culture: the search for the perfect wave." California was also becoming crowded in the water. Surfers had explored much of the coastline, and now it was time for many to move on.

Kevin Naughton was eighteen and well traveled, having surfed in Europe and Central America, before he took off on his trip with Craig Peterson in 1972. Peterson was sixteen, a senior in high school, and a staff photographer for Surfer magazine. The search for perfect waves and adventure is what brought them together and allowed them to travel together for ten years. Kevin was well traveled and surfed in California and wanted to see the rest of the world. Craig said that it was hard to leave during the 1960s because it was so happening in California, but distant shores beckoned. So with some planning and gathering of supplies they packed up a Volkswagen bus and prepared to head south. Doc Ewing gives their desire to explore and travel some context by explaining that, "Kevin and Craig were facing the same kind of issues that many young men were facing. People had to consider large questions about the US involvement in Vietnam, about public and social policies, and as many did in the seventies people responded to their own hearts, and their own conscience." Kevin and Craig followed their own path and not society's status quo of progression and

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course in life. Naughton believed that, “If they can land on the moon, we can land on a far shore,” and go surfing.¹²⁸

Similar to the pivotal effects of the 1996 film The Endless Summer, Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson were pioneers in the travel writing surrounding surf exploration. Mexico was well explored and surfed as we have seen from the previous chapter, however Central America was not. In a Volkswagen Van, Naughton and Peterson looked the part of the stereotypical hippie surfers, and got stuck a lot, always on an adventure. The mystique to these surfing gypsies was the unknown, the romanticized tendencies to explore and catalog their journeys and the thrill of discovery. “Peterson was the lanky blonde kneeboorder and photographer. Naughton was the friendly two-hundred-pound regularfooter with the Burt Reynolds mustache. In six years, they produced another eight surf travel installments, mailed in from Latin America, Africa, and Europe.”¹²⁹ Naughton proclaimed they were like the Odd Couple, traversing through Latin America.¹³⁰

The romantic writings and nostalgia of surfing’s past infiltrate the surf articles from then, and the current ones. Upon their departure from the United States, they announced that:

Winter was announcing itself in California with a barrage of bad vibes from

irate locals guarding "their secret spots. Surfing was turning into a battle of wits with Darwin's and Dora's survival-of-the-fittest theory dominating the atmosphere. The water was so cold the seals were wearing wetsuits, and the smog was as stifling as the crowds. With this in mind, we three adventurous young surfers packed our belongings, bid farewells, and started a long journey to a land of Eden and intrigue.  

Trying to keep surfing spots and directions under wraps so as not to expose anything, these surfers didn't name any of the surf spots in their articles, let alone countries. The articles in *Surfer* were ambiguously titled "Centroamerica." Considering surfing and exploration in El Salvador during the 1970s Jaun Sverko explained, "You felt like Peter Pan or one of the lost boys returning to Never Never Land."  

This was indeed a time for surf and adventure, another North American surfer who has frequented La Libertad since 1971 explains the modern situation. "I am saddened by the disguised flakiness, the smoothly paved roads, the condos, the cell phones (my caretaker has a cell phone), bungalows and five-star dining: Expectations are high; Adventure is not." Their concept of surfing paradise is much different than the present day travelling surfer.  

The concept of a finding a surfing paradise was universal and fleeting in the 1970s. For the authors of the "Centroamerica" articles, this was something rarely experienced by most surfers. "Paradise to us meant...a combination of warm, transparent ocean, mixed with repetitioning infinite tubes, unpopulated in a

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133 Jon Stokesbury and Chris Martin, "Thanksgiving Epistles" The Surfer's Journal (Vol.2 No. 3 June-July 2011). 42
tropical setting." Naughton and Peterson found a unique living situation in El Salvador. They met up with two of the original surfers there, Bob Levy and Juan Sverko. Kevin and Craig lived in a "house with two really fine surfers, Bob Levy and Juan Sverko, two good friends to have anywhere. They are the original locals in this area, and have been returning here for the past several years, ripping apart all the spots. But this is their last visit, compliments of crowded waters." Bob was actually from a little town between La Libertad and San Salvador called Santa Tecla, one of the original surfers on the coast of El Salvador.

Even in their first article, Naughton and Peterson alluded to this surfer's soon-to-be paradise lost:

Native people of the land here are overly friendly and trust gringos the same as their own family. How long this will last with a continuing high tide of wayfaring surfers pulling in is questionable, as some natives have already been abused by a few asinine surfers. The women down here are beautiful-long, straight silky hair, dark tanned and always smiling. But, for their nightly entertainment, most gringos just settle for second best, The Panama House, a local establishment.

While they question how long their paradise will last, they also describe the women and the practices of the common tourists visitations to bars and prostitution houses. Generally surfers were adventure tourists in El Salvador, but at times sex and romance occurred, as in any place, and in some instances

134 Kevin Naughton, Craig Peterson, Greg Carpenter, "Centroamerica," Surfer, September 1973, 42.
135 Ibid., 42.
136 Ibid., 42.
becomes a form of tourism in it of itself.\textsuperscript{137} Surfer interactions with the coastal people of El Salvador was usually friendly, but surfers are selfish and protective, and their interactions with each other were often minimal. However, at a secret spot in Mexico, an encounter between two sets of traveling surfers would serve as a springboard for one of the key surfing settlers in La Libertad.

\textbf{Petacalco – Two Paths Intersect}

In 1973, on their way back from El Salvador and the rest of Central America, there were rumors of a mythical wave. After surfing some spots somewhere in Mexico, Craig and Greg left the break and reminisced about the trip through Central America thus far. Peterson declared that, “some spots had been crowded with more and more surfers on the road. But there were others that could only be found through months of exploration and patience. Some of the traveling foreigners were ripping the spots off. Bringing with them the bad vibes, the ugly American attitude. A few are mellow, though, and act humble and appreciative of someone else’s land. Hopefully we were of the latter.”\textsuperscript{138} They drove for a week straight after leaving the previous surf spot and arrived at their destination where they met two other traveling surfers also in a VW camper:

Bob Rotherham and Eric Penny, who are on their way to South America. They filled us in on the latest bummers from the States; i.e., Nixon, Watergate, gas shortage, meat shortage, and wave shortage. We in turn

\textsuperscript{137} For more information on sex and romance tourism look to Florence E. Babb, \textit{The Tourism Encounter:Fashioning Latin American Nations and Histories} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press) 123-153. This issue will also be explored further in the concluding chapter.

told them of the areas we had left, and suddenly felt like returning to. They didn’t say much about the surf where we were camped except that it had been stormy, and they were waiting it out. They had been out of the States for seven weeks and still showed signs of civilization; whereas, we had run out of toilet paper months ago. They turned us onto some.¹³⁹

Surf information is passed back and forth, and secondly, the group of nomadic surfers talks about the news back home. The issues that concerned most Americans at the time seem to push these surfers further away from home, into the unknown of Central America, to search for and live the hedonistic lifestyle of surf and sun.

Peterson got ready to move on back to the US, “We packed, leaving things with Bob and Eric that they could use better in their future travels.”¹⁴⁰ There were some surfers that were actually very protective and territorial at Petacalco, and after Peterson’s article was published (his photo also the cover), which did not name or give the location of the spot, the editor received several death threats.¹⁴¹ These traveling surfers, especially writers, have to consider how their articles will impact the rest of the traveling surfing community. Power and responsibility to reveal or not the names and locations of discovered or secret surf spots is a hard line to walk for many surf journalists. They have to face the fact that they may be jeopardizing the surf paradise that they idealize, as well as the local people and culture. Photos and writing can alter their relationships with surfers at home and

¹³⁹ Ibid., 51.
¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 52.
¹⁴¹ Craig Peterson in The Far Shore, DVD, directed by Gregory Schell (2002; San Francisco, CA: Soul Carvers Productions, 2003). Paul Holmes also explains that while he was editor at Surfer during this time they were always very careful about over publicizing surf spots, or giving out too much information. He received death threats in letters and phone calls.
abroad, and the people that they meet along the way in these travels. Robert Rotherham illustrates the friendliness and the reclusiveness of surfers on the go in Central America:

The whole time we were there, there was only one other curious surfer that turned off the highway and drove down, which was not Craig, cause Craig was long gone after this. My buddy and I were so, well, we were kind of a couple of assholes man. We were so paranoid that someone else would find the wave we jumped in the bushes and hid from the guy. Then later on we pulled into La Libertad and he was down here. We became really good friends, a guy named Dale Dagger.

Robert Rotherham and Eric Penny would move on to El Salvador, pass through, and Eric would continue to South America while Robert returned to La Libertad, becoming a figurehead in the Salvadoran surf culture.

More Wandering in Libertad

Many surfers and articles talk about traveling in Mexico and Central America and address issues such as banditos, war, and being targeted because they are "hippies." The counter cultural movement of the 1960s and 70s, mostly by teenagers and college students, was widespread during this period, and more conservative societies and governments were not always as tolerant of vagabond surf tourists.

Eric Penny, Bob Rotherham’s traveling partner, also published an article in Surfriding about surf and life in El Salvador in 1974. “El Salvador, like any remote

surf place, has its hassles but the good waves and slow living bring a contentment and peace of mind. That's what we sought and that's what we found." The similarities in these reports about surf life in El Salvador is most likely due to the cultural similarities of the surfers that are writing them, and the tropical lifestyle of the coastal communities. Penny further disassociates Salvadoran surf life from the US culture back home, informing the surfing readership abroad that, "A moon landing is as alien to a Latin American peasant as an afternoon siesta beneath mosquito netting is to a North American suburbanite. In rural areas the people's lives flow with Nature's cycles. Clocks are of little use here, time is a nearly abandoned abstraction." Lounging, hammocks and the pace of Central American life was attractive to surfers from the United States; some even made it into a philosophy.

Resurfacing again in El Salvador, Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson could not resist returning to the place that they had written of a year or so before. Their travel writing would change the way the journalism of surfing tourism was written, and they gave it their own flair, not merely focusing on the waves:

The heart of the Naughton-Peterson experience was found in the cantinas and beachfront tents, around the campfire, in a hammock, and under the hood of yet another broken down car. They became the patron saints of American surf adventurers simply by changing the emphasis—by recognizing that there really isn't that much to say about great waves (the photos pretty much took care of that), while there's no end of good fun to

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145 Ibid., 58.
be had documenting the trials and tribulations of vagabond travel.146

In 1975, once they had arrived back in San Salvador, they began to look for a way back to the coast. Boarding a bus, with families, fishermen, students and livestock, the culture shock was still there, despite their having traveled around the world. For the readers back at home, these descriptions may have been comparable to a ride on a Grateful Dead tour bus, or hanging in Haight Ashbury or “the Haight” in San Francisco.

As the bus took off, careening through the city and screeching up and down the hills, Naughton and Peterson felt their insides quiver, and attempted to cool their nerves with beer. “The only “aid” on this bus consisted of religious pictures, a cross, a flesh colored Christ that glowed in the dark, and a few prayers that were pasted on the dashboard. No first aid kits on these buses, but adequate material for a decent last rites ceremony.”147 The roads and transportation wasn’t so great at this time, and it wasn’t just foreign opinion. Alfonso Alvarez, one of the first native, or local, surfers in El Salvador explained that, “In the 1970s and 80s it was kind of difficult, the road conditions to some of the areas were not so good. But we’ve been very lucky that we’ve got lots of waves close to home. Around Punta Roca [La Libertad] there are forty kilometers of easily accessible terrain, we must have at least twenty different breaks that we can surf.”148

147 Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson, “Part IV: Headin’ home...THROUGH LATIN ATTITUDES...and a Time of Transition,” Surfer, October 1975, 92.
Roca and Zunsal, the waves in the area get closer as they descend in their
"chicken bus."\(^{149}\)

Still tipsy from their drinks in the capital, Kevin and Craig finally arrive at the
coast, back in La Libertad. Right when they get off the bus, instead of finding a
place to stay, or surfing, they hit the local cantina. Drinking heavily, they
eventually discuss where to stay for the night. Naughton and Peterson get so
drunk that they eventually wake up at Juan Sverko’s and Bob Levy’s place.
Sverko and Levy were in a poker game and when they finished they saw
Naughton and Peterson, drunk and disoriented, and took them in their van back
to their place. They hadn’t seen each other in two years, since they’d met on
previous surf trips in and around Central America. Naughton and Peterson wrote
that Sverko and Levy, “were sustaining themselves by mining turquoise and
panning for gold.”\(^{150}\) Aside from the drunken stories and descriptions of perfect
waves, Naughton’s and Peterson’s article recounts Sverko and Levy’s tall tales
about prospectors in the Salvadoran jungle, running into anacondas and being
eaten by crocodiles.\(^{151}\) After reminiscing about surfing and other adventures, the
four get back to the old routine. “We soon slid (literally) into the lifestyle enjoyed
by Bob and Juan. The tropics require a certain pace if one intends to stay for any

\(^{149}\) Chicken bus is a popular term for the local buses in much of Latin America, used by travelers
to describe how there are families and livestock, e.g. chickens, etc all aboard the buses with
travelling surfers, tourists and locals.

\(^{150}\) Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson, “Part IV: Headin’ home...THROUGH LATIN
ATTITUDES...and a Time of Transition,” \textit{Surfer}, October 1975, 93.

\(^{151}\) Ibid., 94.
length of time."\textsuperscript{152}

Here Naughton explains his philosophy of "hammock consciousness."\textsuperscript{153} This type of living was what many surfers wished for. After surfing, Kevin would climb into his hammock, near a walkway so that when people passed it would swing it for him, no effort required. Above him, a mango tree would occasionally drop fruit directly into his lap, as he lay with a beer in one hand and a book in the other. This is how he spent many of his days in El Salvador, unless he was surfing. However, there were moments when he and Craig interacted steadily with the locals in the community. All sorts of animals were a common sight to them: rays, sharks, iguanas, pigs, dogs, chickens, and turtles. On one occasion a big fat sow waddled into the road and was hit by a semi truck and within five minutes two guys butchered the thing and it was cooked for everyone. Hard for California surfers back home to imagine running out in the street in Hollywood if an animal got hit, carving it up and eating it.

Another night two drunken Salvadorans staggered into the street and fought with machetes. Eventually two women came and stopped the fight. Naughton and Peterson examine the differences of American and Latin societies, explaining that, "the men fared better under the machete blows than under the degrading gruff of the women."\textsuperscript{154} Consistently, these articles serve not only as surf guides, but almost as a National Geographic journal for surfers. Their

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 94.  
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 94.  
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 95.
journals and articles are doubly informative as ethnographic notes and observations. “Published a decade or so after The Endless Summer, the Naughton-Peterson articles convey the same mood and message: that surfing is the perfect excuse to get out there and experience the world.” It is these articles that are some of the first chronicles and footsteps of documented surf culture’s presence and it’s social and cultural interaction with the coastal regions of Mexico, El Salvador, and Central America.

**Surfing and Civil War**

It’s real cold out there right now. Economic and political upheaval, class riots, nationality discrimination, and, in general, just a whole lot of dissension and unrest. Not really a welcome world for a surfer to be traveling through, even if you’re wanting nothing more out of life than an uncrowded wave away from the backyard crowds, and an exotic meal or two thrown in. But what chance have you got in surviving an unkind border guard or indiscriminate terrorist attack if even ambassadors find no privilege or respect?  

Bernie Baker returns to Central America, ten years after his first article about the region. When he first entered El Salvador it was right around the time of the Soccer War, and his experience at the border of Honduras and El Salvador was intimidating. Now, however, there is a new climate. The United State’s backyard is feeling the effects of the Cold War and dominant US foreign policy. Most surfers that traveled through El Salvador were affiliated with the counter culture of surfers in California or the hippies. Bernie reports that in Central America, “We were all considered hippies, no matter what our beliefs were, and

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you kept on your toes when you weren't in the water." In many articles, second hand stories were told. Rumors and tales of arrests and killings, deportations, secret surf spots, drug deals, and banditos circulated by word of mouth. In Panama on his way north through the isthmus, "There was more than one story running around about someone that had been involved in a simple driving error and found himself being escorted to the nearest precinct by the arresting officer for a haircut, since it looked to him like that was proper justice to fit the crime. Remember, constitutional rights are waived once you step beyond your own borders." These cautionary tales functioned as warnings and guides for surfers that might be traveling to these areas, to know what to expect in these foreign cultures, and how to avoid the mistakes of the previous surfer.

"I finally moved on to El Salvador, which at that time was stable, but getting across the border from Honduras was even worse yet. There had been a bitter riot between the two countries over a soccer match, and Honduras retaliated by attacking Salvadorean farmers living near the border." Yet another instance of the instability of the borders, and that the surfers deemed it necessary to cross to catch a swell and some waves. The anti-American sentiment in the region, most certainly due to the Cold War tensions, made it clear that, "Americans seemed to be on the top of the hit lists, not tourists mind you, but stray bullets don't check I.D.'s first. Military and government vehicles were being blasted on the roads,  

157 Ibid., 102.  
158 Ibid., 102.  
159 Ibid., 102.
and there I was, looking for a ride north on anything with four wheels. Eventually, we were offered a ride in the back of an empty banana truck that was going as far as the border."160 At this time, the war had begun between the military junta in El Salvador and the guerillas of the Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). A stern warning, Baker asserts that, "Of all the surfing countries that presently have unhealthy traveling conditions due to political unrest, Spain, the Philippines, El Salvador, and Southeast Asia with parts of Indonesia are the worst. Government forces and Basque separatists along the northern coastal towns of Spain are fighting it out in the streets."161 The article continues to warn surfers that:

El Salvador is the worst situation of all, with student/leftists attacks carried on throughout the country almost daily. This past autumn, two Americans returning from the beach to their hotel in San Salvador were following behind a military truck when guerillas opened fire on the truck from the bushes. This was on the main highway used by travelers and residents alike. In that sort of situation, it was innocence that put them there, and the attackers sprayed everything in sight. The Americans were blown away, reportedly still in their beach wear, and wet from a day in the surf."162

While there are these instances of some surfers being caught in the middle of war, journalists were also targeted. "Last week it appeared that the violence may have claimed yet another American: John J. Sullivan Jr., 26, a freelance journalist from Bogota, N.J., on assignment for Hustler magazine."163 It seems

160 Ibid., 102.
161 Ibid., 102-103.
162 Ibid., 103.
that many of the people motivated to be in El Salvador during this period were different than the mainstream American culture back home. There were missionaries, surfers, journalists, and military advisors, all looking for something in this tropical and violent nation. The journalistic account of the early 1980s is captured eloquently by Joan Didion, and describes the terror and downfalls of this period.\textsuperscript{164}

Darrell Jones, a \textit{Surfer} magazine photographer, and surfing accomplices Jacky Grayson and Fred Grosskreutz flew to El Salvador for some of the rumored point break perfection of the flawless waves in La Libertad in 1981, right before Didion’s piece was published in 1982. Upon arrival the crew of surfers was pretty nervous about the current instability of the country, and the war that was currently underway. Pursuing the surf, they tried to get to the coast from the airport in San Salvador, but “the taxis wouldn’t take them to their destination, they were even more uneasy. Then they found out the road to the surf spot was the one the 3 nuns had disappeared on weeks before. This little worn, torn wave land is as volatile as the smoking volcanoes that sit ominously above the cloud line.”\textsuperscript{165}

Despite a bloody war with guerrillas and death squads, some, albeit few, surfers continued to venture towards the legendary surf breaks in La Libertad.


Alfonso Alvarez, a local Salvadoran surfer, recalls that surf tourism was very steady, and increasing throughout the 1970s. There were a lot of surfers from California, Florida and Brazil, El Salvador was very popular surf destination until the war started in 1979. Tourism declined to nearly nothing for roughly 15 years. Surfers that were still coming to Central America began going to Costa Rica during this period. In El Salvador the fighting was mostly in the mountains and away from the coast. However, the publicity and popular media representations were not good, often displaying violence and the revolution. Thus surf tourism and travel in general suffered, along with the now stagnant surf economy on the coast.

Like Darrell Jones and his group of surfers, Craig Fineman finally got the opportunity to travel to El Salvador in 1983. Fineman considered the war, but, “A three-year dream had finally come true, and I wasn’t going to let a mere revolution stand in my way.”166 During the war, surfers were stimulating the coastal economies to the same extent. The 1970s were a time of growth and expansion for surf culture in El Salvador. Robert Rotherham had married his Salvadoran wife Marta in 1974 and opened his famous restaurant, Punta Roca, right along the legendary point. Surfers were coming from South America, Hawaii, Europe, everywhere. The film Big Wednesday was even filmed in La Libertad, bringing with it a plethora of big name professional surfers and publicity. However, as Fineman saw, the country had transformed since its golden era:

166 Craig Fineman, “Centro,” Surfer, July 1983, 44.
The vast and beautiful landscape surrounding this relatively small airport was literally strewn with the remnants of nightmares past and present. The charred remains of military vehicles in camouflage, and the burned-out skeletal frames of various types of aircraft lay in silent testimony to the bloodletting. Security personnel, dressed in familiar combat fatigues and armed with nasty M-16s, constantly patrolled the perimeters and vital areas adjacent to the terminal. A cursory gaze at these unsmiling and heavily-armed individuals sent chills along the spine, and served as a vivid reminder of this country’s rampant instability.167

Traveling in El Salvador in the 1980s was a difficult task. Surfers were targets at times, and Americans were not greeted like they were when the first North American surfers came to the country. Going through customs and borders was always an ordeal, as Bernie Baker has testified. Especially when you are traveling with large surfboards, it can be awkward. Fineman recounts, "When they were finally convinced that we were just some surfers, and not smugglers, they cleared us through."168 While many surfers were attracted to El Salvador for the waves, that being their main motivation for travel, some surfers ended up in the country for other reasons, and happened to get empty perfect waves alone.

Rafael Lima, a surf correspondent and military advisor and now Lecturer at the University of Miami School of Communication, was well traveled in Central America, and he had been exploring the coasts for waves and working with the US and Salvadoran government. Lima came into El Salvador and was contracted by an American company to help the Salvadoran government and military. Also, "He was training, sort of private people, who were trying to protect

167 Ibid., 47.
168 Ibid., 47.
their haciendas. Kinda like the paramilitary,” explained Robert Rotherham. He elaborates on their relationship:

In fact he was a friend of mine from Miami. He’s one of those guys, whenever he got involved in anything, he went all the way. When he was at the beach, he was without a doubt one of the best surfers at the beach. Then he got of surfing and got into boxing, so he became a golden gloves boxer. Then from there he went to martial arts, then to parachuting, and then he got involved in weapons. So, he did some work down in Nicaragua, by whoever contracted him, and then he got involved here, and now he’s a professor at the University of Miami.

Rafael Lima was one of the first men to bring a unique perspective to the surfing community, both in El Salvador and in the United States. A military trainer/operative and a surfer, he expressed the perspective of a soldier and a surfer, a duality not so commonly seen because of the subcultural behaviors of surfers and the conformity of the military. "In the north of El Salvador, around Chalatenango, on the green slopes of volcanoes, bands of ‘guerrilleros’ clash with army patrols. Plumes of brown smoke spiral up from the dense green carpets mixed with the far-off cracks of small-arms fire. In the south, at ‘Punta Roca’ in La Libertad the stories of the fighting filter down, over the crackling voice of the rebel radio ‘Venceremos.” Many surfers came into La Libertad and surfed for a week or so, only to return to their peaceful home in the north. Local Salvadoran surfers experienced terror and violence as a result of the war, as did the rest of the country.

170 Robert Rotherham, September 6, 2010.
Training people in San Salvador and the surrounding areas, when he had time, Lima would venture down to La Libertad to surf. “On the porch at Punta Roca Restaurante not much has changed, the war has left La Libertad relatively quiet.”\(^{172}\) Lima reminisces about the last time he was in San Salvador, several years earlier, he had witnessed a university demonstration gone awry and the military had opened fire on the masses, wreaking havoc and carnage. The fighting had spread from the urban centers and into the more rural areas. Noam Chomsky also asserts that, “the careful observer will find that the worst atrocities have regularly been conducted by elite battalions fresh from their U.S. training. Salvadoran officers who admit their participation in death squad killings describe their service under CIA control and the training sessions on effective torture conducted by U.S. instructors.”\(^{173}\) Are there parallels to what Lima experienced in his training of Salvadoran soldiers, and what he wrote about in his play *Salvador*?

Darrell Jones was back in El Salvador as well, despite his last dangerous visit in 1981, and the two men, “had made their way from the capital city of Guatemala to a tiny town on the Atlantic coast near the Honduran border called Chicimula. [Rafael] had been hired by an American company to train militia men in anti-insurgency and light weapons. Darrell had come along as a photographer and because “it sounded like fun” and we might even catch some waves.”\(^{174}\) It wasn’t just the waves that brought these surfers, and their influence went beyond

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\(^{172}\) Ibid., 72.


\(^{174}\) Lima, 72.
wowing the locals with their hedonistic pursuit in the ocean.

While still in Guatemala, Rafael trained the “Indians” while Darrell was sick and the death squads killed an average of 200 victims monthly; on August 8th, 1983 there was coup that installed a “traditional military government.” Lima and Jones, “drank the bar dry, trained our Indians every day and at the end of two weeks the government fell apart in a bloodless coup. An airplane sent from the capital to evacuate us crashed and Darrell and I left our weapons and Indians in Chicimula and made our way to the capital in trucks.” Much of Lima’s article is sensationally written, evoking romantic notions of war and idealism. Since he was with the military more frequently, he undoubtedly saw more action; however many of the local surfers recall that La Libertad was not a major target for the FMLN or the military. Lima claimed that while, “On the coast, going surfing, I would set up my men with shotguns in a security ring on the beach while I went surfing.”

At the restaurant Punta Roca, after seven beers, drunkenly reflecting, Rafael elaborates on his recollections:

I remembered driving down a narrow alley at night in a small town in Santa Tecla, my headlights suddenly illuminating legs sticking out onto the roadside and driving past, looking down on the road through bullet-proof lexan windows and seeing the body of a man lying in a huge puddle of blood. I remembered the faces of the men I was training. Faces lined with years of torment and hunger. Faces that would rather farm and raise

176 Lima, 76.
177 Ibid., 76.
children than fight.\textsuperscript{178}

Alfonso Alvarez stated that, "Around Punta Roca [La Libertad] there are forty kilometers of easily accessible terrain, we must have at least twenty different breaks that we can surf. This area was always very quiet; there was never a problem the guerrillas and the war."\textsuperscript{179} However, he and his surf buddies didn't go to Punta Mango or Las Flores, in the Orient (El Salvador's Wild East), because there were more guerrilla/war problems and conflict there. Lima counters that, "There had been rumors that the guerrillas were planning an offensive toward the south that would include La Libertad and Punta Roca."\textsuperscript{180}

While there may not have been any battles in La Libertad during his stay there, it wouldn't stay peaceful forever. Rotherham gave Lima and Jones a ride to the airport in San Salvador. "As we were leaving, on their way into town like the cavalry in a western, more trucks with Salvadorean military rolled in. Maybe the war was catching up to La Libertad after all."\textsuperscript{181}

Shortly after this period in 1984 and 1985 Jimmy was going to school up near Santa Tecla, in a place called Loma Linda, for 1-6 grade, which is also where Farabundo Marti went to school. This area is known for its rocky winding terrain. Jimmy explained that while riding the "Chicken Bus" with fisherman, old ladies, and students at times the guerrillas would be on one side of the street and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{178} Ibid., 76-80.
\bibitem{179} Alfonso Alvarez, interview by author, Playa El Zonte, El Salvador, September 4, 2010.
\bibitem{180} Lima, 80.
\end{thebibliography}
Military on the other. There was a lot of fighting that used to take place there and on the San Salvador volcano, near coffee plantations and farms.\textsuperscript{182}

While some accounts of violence and terror are in historical texts and books like Didion's \textit{Salvador} and Webb's \textit{Dark Alliance}, Jimmy's accounts of events are interesting and valuable as he has the unique perspective of being a surfer, the son of a North American man and Salvadoran woman. His identity and history offer us insight into the war in El Salvador and the local history of La Libertad. Jimmy recalls one instance, about three miles before La Libertad, he and his family were stopped by the military in 1990. He was about 8 or 9 years old, in 4\textsuperscript{th} grade and the military took their wallets, watches, jewelry, and wedding rings. It was a situation like, "give us all your stuff or we'll kill you."\textsuperscript{183} They tried to take his mother, but they resisted and the military put them all in the car. When they tried to take Marta, Jimmy's mother, again she got angry and clawed the military man's face so they left her with family. The military would return every few minutes and hit his parents with their guns and yell at them all with threats of death from 9 until midnight.

A lot of other cars went by, and the same thing was happening to other families. They didn't come back for a while so they got out of the car, as they walked away there were a bunch of cars moving people up the hill, and a little

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\textsuperscript{182} Jimmy Rotherham, interview by author, Hotel el Cocal, La Libertad, El Salvador, September 5, 2010.

\textsuperscript{183} Jimmy Rotherham, interview by author, Hotel el Cocal, La Libertad, El Salvador, September 7, 2010.
house down the road where women were coming out who had been raped. His family started to walk back to town and half a mile down the road they found their truck and went to the police station and told them what happened. A few months later a General came through, and the military did the same thing, didn’t know who he was. “Ten days later on the news, military found, pretty much, heads cut off, hands cut off, and there was a photo of the guy who my mom had scratched on the face and he was dead.” 184 At this point Robert Rotherham, Jimmy’s dad, had been mistaken for a priest, and the military guys argued that they couldn’t kill him. The shroud of terror is evident in Jimmy’s tone when he speaks about this, and from other accounts like Joan Didion’s and Raphael Lima’s.

Even during the day, when tourists or surfers might be around, Jimmy explains that sometimes at the Punta Roca restaurant there would be FMLN guerrillas and military personnel eating at the same time, luckily none ending in violence. Later in 1985/86, a fully armed Huey or a Cobra helicopter was circling the restaurant and landed nearby. The captain came out of the chopper, and it was one of their customers, and he asked to use the bathroom. The Rotherhams sent out sodas and stuff out to the helicopter crew. The captain comes out and just takes off again. The military were always around, and it seemed they would show up randomly. 185 On another occasion a member of the parliament was driving drunk in San Salvador. He had a fight with his wife and was stopped by the military. He stated that he wanted to go to Punta Roca so the military stops

him and escorts him there. They pulled up to the restaurant, knocked on the door, and the politician wants to come in and ends up staying at the restaurant for four or five days at their place. He was in bad shape because his wife had his kids in Guatemala and he wouldn’t go back until his kids returned. Eventually they came back and he left the Rotherham’s. It seemed that there was quite a little bit of activity around Punta Roca during the war, and the Rotherhams had established a little surf haven amidst it.

**The Motorcycle Riding Surfer – Adrian Kojin**

Adrian Kojin began his motorcycle ride from the US to South America in the late 1980s, and his perspective on Central America and the global state of affairs in general reflected both the surfer mentality and one affected by the threat of the Cold War. Kojin was a Brazilian surfer that wanted to ride from California to South America, while exploring for surf. In his chronicles Kojin explains with a Cold War flair that, "We are living in paranoid times. The nuclear bomb is waiting to blow away our surfbreaks, competition among surfers is on the rise, and crowds are growing each year. I knew what I wanted. My scheme was both simple and vital: I was going soul surfing before it was too late."\(^{186}\) Kojin’s experience travelling in Central America seem parallel to some of Baker’s during the Soccer War; however Kojin was coming south through Mexico and Guatemala.

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While travelling venturing south Kojin explained that, “guerrilla activities in Guatemala have greatly diminished. With the exception of a few places, the country is pretty safe-unless you get in a bar brawl and your opponents are friends with the local police. Unfortunately, that’s exactly what happened to me, and I had to cut short my stay in that country. El Salvador certainly didn’t seem like a safe place to seek refuge, but that was where I was headed. Contrary to my expectations, once there I found only peace.” Kojin’s arrival in El Salvador is only a few years before the end of the civil war, and he finds La Libertad during a moment of tranquility. He describes his interactions with some foreign surfers in town who he deems “locals”; one may infer not Salvadoran local, but surf locals. “The locals were quite friendly. While I was there, a Laguna Beach couple-both surfers-was in town. They own property right on the point at La Libertad, and spend a month every year surfing the tranquil waters of a disturbed country.” From the period of time that Kojin was there, and the small amount of foreign surfers in the area, he may be referencing Jon Stokesbury, a surfer and artist from Laguna Beach, who has been living part of every year on the point in La Libertad since 1971. Not much is published about La Libertad or Punta Roca for a few years until some military action occurs right on the Rotherham’s doorstep.

187 Ibid., 92.
188 Ibid., 92.
A Battle in Libertad

There were two attacks in La Libertad from the beginning of the war in 1979 until its close in 1992. "For twelve years of war we only got attacked twice here in town."\(^{190}\) The very first incident started with a, "Bang bang, we're around."\(^{191}\) Jimmy likes to speculate that, "They must have been drunk, you could hear the missiles, but they didn't hit anything."\(^{192}\) This parallels Robert's earlier mention of Marta recalling the bomb incident during the Soccer War. The second attack was much more serious, destructive, and catastrophic than the first. It occurred in 1991, right before the signing of the Peace Accord in the end of January of 1992. This attack lasted for roughly four hours according to both Jimmy and Robert.\(^{193}\) This event included a lot of fanfare and explosions, but not a lot of casualties, just destruction. "Everyone got to use their toys. There was small arms fire, automatic weapons, mortars, airplanes, ships, bazookas, and anti-tank guns...everything got to be used."\(^{194}\) Robert is not quite as talkative about this incident, but Jimmy further describes the battle:

It was full on battle. It started about 9:30 or 10 o'clock on a Friday night.

\(^{190}\) Jimmy Rotherham, , September 7\(^{th}\), 2010.
\(^{191}\) Robert Rotherham, interview by author, Punta Roca Restaurant, La Libertad, El Salvador, September 6, 2010.
\(^{192}\) Jimmy Rotherham, , September 7\(^{th}\), 2010.
\(^{194}\) Robert Rotherham, , September 6, 2010.
There was actually like a Vietnam war movie going on, Channel 6 on Friday nights would show a really good movie. First they [guerrillas] tried to take out the main electric thing here in town to blow out the system. Fuck, the first bomb wasn't really that loud, so everybody thought, 'oh, it's just the movie.' The lights only flickered but they stayed on. Twenty minutes later a bigger bomb went off, and the whole house shook, dude, the lights went off and all hell started. Missiles, bombs, AK-47s, I mean everything.195

The military was stationed in an empty building, constructed by Captain Jack Dale, the Englishman. It sustained mortar fire for about an hour according to Robert Rotherham. "My house was used as a supply line, you could hear them walking by dragging boxes, talking to each other, loading up a bazooka, run down the road and shoot it off and then run back and get more ammo in front of our house."196 Jimmy remembers hearing the guerrillas in the yard, giving orders, talking and moving supplies. They just hid under the bed and waited it out. The guerrillas came in from all angles and had the military backed up to the ocean. A bomb was shot from the pier and it came through the Punta Roca restaurant, bounced off an exterior wall and tree, and hit the next building, the Hotel Rick, which was accommodating a bunch of North American "gringo" surfers.197 According to Robert Rotherham the surfers were regulars that had traveled to El Salvador consistently throughout the 1970s and 80s, supposedly because La Libertad was still safe.198 Luckily the bomb did not detonate and after hitting the exterior wall of Don Lito's it rolled into the pool at Hotel Rick's and

sank to the bottom.\textsuperscript{199}

Other surfers recorded this event as well. A voicemail was later published in \textit{Surfer} about this incident:

Jeff Divine this is Danny Minton. El Salvador was radical! Three hundred guerrillas attacked La Libertad one night, just blew the hell out of the town. At least forty mortar rounds, machinegun fire outside our hotel room. One mortar hit our hotel, bounced into the pool and didn't detonate. Crazy time. Helicopters came up from San Salvador to back up the army. Flares, helicopters blowing away the guerrillas. A lot of soldiers and guerrillas died, but no civilians. Pretty wild, but we got good waves. We went surfing the next day." — "A voice-mail message to Jeff Divine from photographer Danny Minton, who spent 10 days at La Libertad, El Salvador, with Jason Senn in April. The attack lasted three hours, and was in retaliation for the death of a high-ranking Nicaraguan rebel."\textsuperscript{200}

According to Jimmy, the casualties were only a couple of military while the guerrillas suffered heavier losses.\textsuperscript{201} There were some other incidents in the surrounding areas, but no more in La Libertad. While this may have been an extreme example of violence during the war, the social conditions in El Salvador would continue to diminish as gang violence grew despite the end of the civil war.

Surfing tourism slowed slightly in the 1990s, but has begun to grow again. Robert Dull, who plays an integral role in Nicaraguan surf history, was around in the late 1990s. He actually got to meet with the Rotherhams, who let him store his boards at their restaurant. Dull was working on his PhD research up in Chalchuapa in 1997-98, and came to La Libertad on the weekends. He came back one weekend to find Jimmy taking one of his board bags to go to his first

\textsuperscript{199} Jimmy Rotherham, \textit{Surfer}, September 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2010.
\textsuperscript{201} Jimmy Rotherham, \textit{Surfer}, September 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2010.
surf contest in Panama. The situation in La Libertad and the rest of El Salvador was not well at that time, despite the end of the civil war, gang violence had escalated. Dull explained that it was probably one of the most fearful times of his life, and that the gangs were just “killers without conscience.”\textsuperscript{202} He mentions that some Salvadorans helped him on several occasions, saving him from gang violence and harm. At this point for Robert Dull, Nicaragua was on his mind, which is were his dominant role in surf history and exploration arise.

The surfing community in El Salvador has been growing, and tourism has rebounded since the end of the civil war and despite current gang problems. With the strong leadership from Jimmy Rotherham, many surf contests are happening in El Salvador, both for the locals and the global circuit. This is a model that we are beginning to see in many developing surfing destinations around the world. Reef has even sponsored a major ASP event in 2013, they announce this on their website:

Reef, the premium surf travel brand, is pleased to announce its sponsorship of the Reef Pro El Salvador, the Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP) 6-star qualifying event at the famed point break of Punta Roca in El Salvador. Surfers from around the world will descend on La Libertad for a piece of the $155,000 purse July 9-14, 2013.\textsuperscript{203}

With contests like this beginning to occur more regularly in Central America, the opportunity for future development in these countries is growing as well.

Nicaragua is another Central American nation that is beginning to host surf

\textsuperscript{202} Robert Dull. March 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2013. Austin, TX and Santa Rosa, CA.
\textsuperscript{203} REEF. “REEF PRO EL SALVADOR” South Cone, Inc.
http://www.reef.com/culture/events/reef-pro-el-salvador#overlay-context (7/8/2013)
contests as well, but to get there it is important to understand the how surfers first traveled through Nicaragua and spread the culture of surfing.
Chapter III
Nicaragua

Rattling along in the ebon tropical dark of the Nicaraguan forest, scattering charcoal-dusty pigs and aerobic chickens, bound for our secret rendezvous with Captain Daly and the Trader, I thought back on the pattern of exposure/colonization that established itself in the decades following Naughton/Peterson's journeys. And there has been a pattern: Intrepid surfer (or in many cases surf photographer) discovers exotic new break. Tells friends. Friends tell friends. Generally two seasons pass. Word of mouth builds, eventually reaching Dana Point. Mag team is dispatched, consisting most often of a tuned-in surf photographer who'd been told of the spot and several prof surfer/models. They return with story, magazine feature appears full of titillating photos but no specific locations. Another season passes. Second season following release of magazine article sees the arrival of suitably inspired, their presence resented, naturally, by those surfers who'd come due to word-of-mouth. Third season, more surfers, maybe a second magazine feature. Fourth season, Balinese/Sumatra/Latin America/European/Polynesian locals start renting out hammock space at the break, which is now considered crowded, and subsequently ruined.  

Its war torn past, similar to El Salvador in so many ways, has also landed Nicaragua in a similar situation. However, geography and population demographics, along with surfing tourism history, in this country has produced a unique situation in comparison to its neighbors to the North and South. El Salvador, smaller in size with a larger population and long surfing history and infrastructure, has outpaced Nicaragua in surf cultivation and development, nearly catching up to Costa Rica's surf and leisure tourism. This is due in large part to Nicaragua's revolutionary history, specifically the outcome wherein the leftist guerrillas, the Sandinistas (FSLN), took power in 1979-1990. This radical change from the right wing Somoza oligarchical dictatorship to a socialist run

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government resulted in the United States' direct attention during the Cold War. Noam Chomsky explains that, “this ‘little region’ has been under the effective control of the United States for a long time. Its history and current state therefore tell us a good deal about the United States. The picture is revealing, and not very pleasant to contemplate.\textsuperscript{205} The way surfing culture and tourism has developed in Nicaragua tells us a great deal about the local history and development of North American surfer relations with Nicaragua. This chapter uses analysis of surfing articles, ethnographic research, and oral history to draw an understanding of the North American surfer’s story of exploration and interaction with Nicaraguan culture and the coastal communities over the past 30 years.

While Nicaragua does boast of some perfect waves, it is primarily all sandy and river mouth beach break, making it quite bit different than the near constant perfection found in El Salvador and Costa Rica. Nicaragua’s northern and southern neighbors offer many reef and point breaks, that don’t rely on sand formation for perfectly shaped peeling waves. These spots only require tide, swell, and wind, unlike many of Nicaragua’s surf breaks that can change with a heavy storm and flash flood due to the rapid shifting of sand bars and river flows. The waves that were sought out by earlier pioneer surf explorers like Rotherham, Naughton, and Peterson were pointbreaks and reefs that offered longer rides in the 1960s and 70s. As board technology progressed so did the desire for different waves. Surfers in the 1980s and onward were searching for heavier conditions.

barreling waves with the coming of the shortboard revolution. While Nicaragua does offer up some point and reef surf, the more common site is a firing beach break or river mouth wave, slightly more fickle. In this sense, Nicaragua holds a different appeal for surfers, with some bone crushing beach break tubes and outer reef monster slabs that vary more in their irregularity, and also including tougher access. The allure of Nicaragua has grown more in the past few decades.

Bernie Baker, the surfer who traveled in throughout most of Central America in 1970, very well may have been one of the first surfers cruising though Nicaragua, but he doesn’t talk much, if it all about the surf, more about the logistics of dealing with hairy and tense borders and checkpoints. He recalls during his travels in 1969 that when, “crossing the border into Nicaragua, we got some raised eyebrows when it came time to figure out what our bag-covered surfboards were. They checked for barrels and trigers, and collectively decided they couldn’t be used in a revolution, passing us and our surfboards into their country.” Unbeknownst to the guards at this border crossing, or to Baker, the surfboard and the surfers that would travel to Nicaragua would have a deep

206 For more on the shortboard revolution see Warshaw’s works, either The Encyclopedia of Surfing or The History of Surfing.
207 ‘Firing’ is surfer slang for when the waves are breaking really well and consistently, like a gun firing bullets over and over, the waves are firing, breaking over and over.
208 The reference to outer reef monster slabs and bone crushing beach break tubes is a parallel to the types of waves found in Hawaii and mainland Mexico, like Puerto Escondido. This relatively rare for Central America, thus it gives a certain notoriety to Nicaraguan surf possibilities when exploring for more surf.
209 See Chapter 2 on El Salvador for more on Bernie Baker.
impact on the coastal towns and cultures of Nicaragua. Florence Babb explains, “tourism offers a window on shifting relations of culture and power as heritage, national identity, race, class, and gender are reconfigured.” She further asserts that tourism has an important impact on the rebuilding and development of transitional nations, and I argue that surfing tourism creates opportunity for socio-economic improvement while also influencing culture and development. As Dale Dagger, JJ Yemma, and Robert Dull slowly travelled through Central America separately, they would each settle in Nicaragua. Their independent activities would have a distinct influence on the southwest coastal region of Nicaragua, specifically San Juan del Sur, Playa pie de Gigante, and Popoyo.

As Baker continued through Nicaragua and the rest of Central America twenty years before any of these other surfers would, he observed and often heard of many instances of cross-cultural events that surrounded the interaction of surfers and tourists with locals. Baker wrote that he was learning that the feeling among the people was that any wandering youth with long hair was one of those “student radicals” pictured in last week’s International edition of Time or Life. In general a rock-throwing, cop-hating revolutionary. And these people have enough on their hands trying to keep their own youth in order without “student radicals” planting seeds of revolution in their children’s minds. But don’t worry, most of the kids I met were in the midst of leading their own quiet revolt against the binding Spanish traditions and beliefs of their parents.

While American surfers and tourists may not have been planting the seeds of

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212 Robert Dull. March 16th, 2013. Austin, TX and Santa Rosa, CA.
revolution in the common Nicaraguans’ minds, the US government had a strong relationship with the ruling family, the Somozas. Foreign relations between Nicaragua and the US became intensified when the FSLN overthrew Anastasio Somoza and won the war in 1979. It didn’t take long for the CIA to finance, train, and supply the CONTRAS, a FSLN opposition force based out of Honduras and Costa Rica, that went on for a decade as the Cold War progressed. While surfers may not have communicated as much about Nicaragua at this time, there were other mainstream cultural interactions for the US, many explained in Gary Webb’s *Dark Alliance*, a journalistic exposé of the crack cocaine explosion and CIA operations within El Salvador and Nicaragua.214

**Kojin Rides On**

Nicaragua doesn’t appear in surf articles, let alone on the surf culture radar, for quite some time. This may be because not much exploring had been done up until the violent wars began, unlike Costa Rica and El Salvador, which were already well documented and frequented by surfers. Nearly twenty years later in 1987 a lone motorcyclist and surfer named Adrian Kojin would travel from California throughout Mexico, Central and South America. His solo journey of surf and exploration might make one think of a young hip Che Guevara in the *Motorcycle Diaries*, only with a surfboard and no medical training. Kojin observed that, “away from the borders and mountains there is no fighting between the contras and the Sandinistas. Still, the atmosphere was tense. Food

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and gas shortages are common, and the people are weary after nine years of
countryman fighting countryman.\textsuperscript{215} These perspectives are important to the
dialogue of history in Nicaragua as well, because some surfers were not just
passing through like Kojin. Some surfers came to explore and find surf and
enjoyed what they found so much they never left. But Kojin’s documented
exploration revealed the possibilities of surfing in Nicaragua. Matt Warshaw also
illustrates this point explaining that, “when Brazilian surfer Adrian Kojin rode a
motorcycle from California to deep South America in 1987, virtually nothing was
known about the Nicarguan surf. Kojin discovered beautiful fully groomed five-
foot beach-and pointbreak surf.\textsuperscript{216}

It was mentioned earlier that Nicaragua may not have the perfect points and
reefs that El Salvador does, but on his journey Kojin catalogs in his tale that, “it
was fantastic to discover a couple of spots with perfect waves and offshore
conditions. One was called Puerto Sandino, the other I named Communist Point.
I surfed both places alone.\textsuperscript{217} This type of statement is all too common in surf
exploration pieces during this period, and is what can set the fire under some
surfers to get out and explore these areas further, provoking and sometimes
encouraging more surfing exploration, immigration and tourism. Kojin reveals the
name of one surf location, but names another differently, and does not state the
proximity of this “Communist Point” to Puerto Sandino, or give any other

\textsuperscript{216} Matt Warshaw, \textit{The Encyclopedia of Surfing}, (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc., 2003). \textit{The
\textsuperscript{217} Adrian Kojin, 93. We can also clearly see the Cold War mentality and culture that infers
Kojin’s naming of the surf spot, ‘Communist Point.’
geographic hints or markers. He even makes the line juicier by stating that the waves were perfect and offshore, and that he surfed all alone. This had to have enticed a few adventurous surfers to pack a bag and a board and venture out into the coastline of Nicaragua.

“Latin Lines” and Surf Camps

Shortly after Kojin’s initial foray into Nicaragua, Brock Little and a few other surfers ventured in in 1992, shortly after the election of Violeta Chamorro as president in 1990 ended the Contra war. Robert Dull, another surfer who would develop in Nicaragua, was also in Costa Rica in 1991, thinking about Nicaragua, but not making it until 1997. Brock’s account of his arrival into Nicaragua is pretty romantic. “We were greeted at the airport by an entourage of Nicaragua’s finset: Edward Belize, the country’s head of tourism; Mauricio Targo, the owner of the rental car company; the owner of our hotel; and a radio news crew. After a round of handshakes and “holas,” they took us into a room for a press conference.”

Brock explains that the TV crew didn’t show up since it was Sunday, and they wouldn’t be paid. “So we went on with the radio broadcast. None of us knew what was going on; the conversation was in Spanish. I think it had something to do with Nicaragua copying Costa Rica’s success with surfing tourism.” In the early 1990s it was already on the broader economic and political radar that the Nicaraguan government was seeking a deeper understanding of how surfing was changing parts of their country. These surfer’s received what they described as

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219 Ibid., 62.
very posh accommodations, much like the ones Robert Dull describes on his honeymoon in 1997 in Montelimar, Nicaragua. Brock’s team of surfers had rooms in a fancy beachfront hotel with cable, air conditioning, hot water, a pool, horses and quads. “We ate dinner in a part of the hotel that has played a role in recent Nicaraguan history. The building that enclosed the restaurant was at one time a beachfront retreat for deposed Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.” The article actually summarizes the revolution and tourism, which may have been some surfers back in the US first time reading about Nicaragua. Brock explains that, “the Sandinistas decided to turn Somoza’s former beach house into a world-class tourist resort. Around the same time, the Sandinistas finally gave in to demands for a popular election, and were quickly voted out of office. Now the hotel fills up on weekends with rich Nicaraguans who have returned to Nicaragua since the Sandinistas fell from power. So much for the history lesson.” Driving on the beach, the surfers spin donuts and jump their four-wheel drive vehicles. They see some local fishermen and decide to put on a show of bravado, ending up with the vehicle flipping onto its side. The author of the article, who was driving, smashed his head through the windshield and his wrist through the side window.

Matt Archbold and Todd Lynch were fine; they all climbed out of the Suzuki Samurai and the fishermen came over to help push the car back onto its wheels. Later back at the resort, Little needed some minor medical attention. Little

\[^{220}\text{Robert Dull. March 16}^{\text{th}}, 2013. \text{Austin, TX and Santa Rosa, CA.}\]
\[^{221}\text{Brock Little, 62.}\]
\[^{222}\text{Ibid., 63.}\]
explains that he "had a cut over my right eye and my wrist was wide open, but
luckily there was a doctor at the hotel. I had blood all over me but he laughed at
my wounds, saying he'd had a lot of practice sewing up bullet holes." After this
stunt, it was back to surfing for the group. They describe the euphoric feeling of
what many surfers feel when travelling to far off foreign lands where they can surf
without crowds in great waves. They "surfed all day, until we couldn't paddle
anymore. It was an unreal feeling, surfing perfect waves with just a couple of
friends. We'd heard there were maybe 4 or 5 surfers in all of Nicaragua, and
they were nowhere to be seen. We were probably the only surfers in the picture
for hundreds of miles, north or south. It sounds sappy, but it was a good vibe." It
was around this time that surfers like JJ Yemma and Robert Dull were surfing
in Costa Rica, not yet venturing to Nicaragua. Little recounts the last evening in
Nicaragua: "On our last night in the country, the people at the hotel threw a party
in our honor. That was a classic night. Nicaraguans like to party, so we surfers
fit right in. We raged until 3 a.m. I'm not sure that we represented our sport in a
professional manner, but we had a great time."  

While Little's portrayal is much of the romanticized surfer trip, some surfers
would venture in and invest in more ways than one. Around 1991 Robert Dull
would take some time off of school at UC Santa Barbara and go to Costa Rica;
he knew that someday he would invest in land in Central America, and was

\[223\] Ibid., 64.  
\[224\] Ibid., 64.  
\[225\] Ibid., 64.
thinking a lot about Nicaragua. In 1996 JJ Yemma a Floridian like Bob Rotherham, would travel up to Nicaragua from Costa Rica and on this surf exploration he fell in love with the land. While Dull was in Graduate school at UC Berkeley in 1996 he was exploring options for his dissertation site. He was interested in El Salvador and when he went for 2 months in 1996 he saw good surfing and research topics. This reminded him of Costa Rica and that was wonderful. It also had all of his interests in prehistory with the Maya and his environmental change research of the land pre-discovery.

After getting married in 1997, Dull was encouraged by his professor to go to Nicaragua, and schedules his honeymoon trip there. While in Montelimar, Dull witnesses perfect waves peeling out front, but he has no board. Luckily a busboy had an old board and let him borrow it for a few days, and he was able to surf “his brains out by himself.” At that moment he knew that “Nica had waves, and he wanted in.” From word of mouth of other travelling surfers and tourists, Dull knew that property was cheap. He had already missed the land grab of the 1990s in Costa Rica. Nicaragua was similar if not better in many ways and Dull swore that when he had the money, he was coming back to invest in the land.

In the fall of 1997 through 1998 he took off to do his dissertation research in El Salvador, where he focused on getting to know the land and the people in Chalchuapa. Dull frequented La Libertad on the weekends to surf, where he

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226 Robert Dull. March 16th, 2013. Austin, TX and Santa Rosa, CA. Rob’s initial foray’s into surf travel were in Baja Mexico in the 1980s.

227 Robert Dull. March 16th, 2013. Perhaps a board left behind by Brock Little, Matt Archbold or Adrian Kojin?

would meet Don Roberto Rotherham. Don Roberto was already a legend, and his son Jimmy was the best surfer around, an enigma. Rob was allowed to store his boards there at the hotel/restaurant. After his time in El Salvador, Dull would return to Nicaragua in 1999, writing his dissertation and looking to buy property. Around the same time JJ Yemma and his wife move to Popoyo and start construction on the now famous Popoyo Surf Lodge, technically at Playa Sardinas.229

The Search for Land and Waves

Dull had heard that there were steals to be had on getting land and returned to Nicaragua in 1999. He began talking to Dale Dagger in San Juan del Sur, the same travelling surfer that had crossed paths with Robert Rotherham at Petacalco in Mexico and Punta Roca in El Salvador. Neither Dull nor Dagger had land at this point and according to Dull, Dale Dagger lived in a shack in San Juan Del Sur.230 Dale introduced Dull to his business partner Dennis who took him to Playa Maderas near San Juan Del Sur. Maderas is now one of the most popular surf breaks for travelling surfers, and there is even a daily surf report done by a local Nicaraguan surf company.231

Dull explored some land parcels with Dale and Dennis in Maderas, one parcel of about 40 manzanas for $40,000.232 This deal fell through at the last moment and Dennis then took Dull to Gigante. At this time no “gringos” were

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229 http://www.surfnicaragua.com/about.php
232 1 manzana = 1.73 acres
coming into that area, so Dennis had Robert wear a baseball hat and hide in the truck so that no one would see him when they went to look at property.\footnote{Robert Dull. March 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.} When Robert saw the first piece of land that Dennis showed him in Gigante he fell in love with it; this would later become Hotel Brio where I would work in 2007.\footnote{www.hoterlbrio.com} However in 1999 there was no electricity in town and it was very hard to get in and out of town, Dull explained that there were many challenges as he slid off the roads on three separate occasions, a commonplace occurrence there even now.

Once Dull decided to buy the property Dennis and Dale introduced him to the family and the cooperative. Dull spent about $9,000 US dollars altogether on this first parcel. According to Dull, Dennis and Dale took their profits, which was about $3,500 US dollars and bought two properties down the road, one of which would become Dale Dagger’s Hidden Bay Surf Lodge and the rest of his surf tour and rental empire.\footnote{Robert Dull. March 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.} After this series of purchases, Robert Dull travelled up to Popoyo in 1999 where he would run into JJ Yemma who was then living in a tent according to Dull and building his now famous Popoyo Surf Lodge. Once word got out that “gringos” like Dale and Rob were buying land in Gigante, Rob explains that, “People were coming out of the woods wanting to sell their land.”\footnote{Robert Dull. March 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.}

Robert bought three more parcels in 2000, another farm, directly through the family and land cooperative. However Robert had seen what happened to the family he originally bought from; they blew the money on getting married,
partying, the father started drinking heavily and they moved off the land, living in
squalor. Dull explains that he felt some remorse and guilt for this and tried to be
more proactive and thoughtful when purchasing land and interacting with the
community. He explained that he didn’t know the family personally and when he
got to it weighed on him heavily.\textsuperscript{237} In 2001, Robert advised another family to
hold onto some of their land and he bought some from them, and they are still his
neighbors today, still fishing and farming. He also used 36 acres of land that he
purchased to establish the Zacatan Ecological Reserve in 2000, land protected
from development. In 2003 Robert Dull took a friend of his, Jack Ucciferri, to
Gigante. Jack invested in some land in Gigante where he started the Giant’s
Foot Surf Camp in 2004.\textsuperscript{238} Prior to this Robert had done some surfing to the
north and south of Gigante, at now well known locations like Panga Drops,
Colorados and Punta Manzanillo in 2001 and 2002. Many of the surf camps
have boats that take travelling surfers to these spots, and more resorts are
popping up yearly.

\textbf{Developments in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century}

As more "gringos" invested in property and businesses in Nicaragua, more
surfers and tourists began frequenting this frontier. Early on in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century,
many surfers were still travelling through Nicaragua, but it hadn’t seemed to
match the tourism boom that had happened in Costa Rica. Matt Walker explains
that, "Nicaragua remains in a state of blessed limbo for being the one place

\textsuperscript{237} Robert Dull. March 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.
\textsuperscript{238} www.giantsfoot.com
American surf tourism just cannot get a grip on, much less steer." On this trip Walker and a band of pro surfers, much like Brock Little and Matt Archbold a decade earlier, find countless perfect empty waves, this time with the help of JJ Yemma at the Popoyo surf camp. With Offshore winds for 340 days a year in the Rivas Province due to Lago Nicaragua, the surf is incredible. However the tumultuous and nameless roads, rivers, desert terrain create quite an obstacle in the hunt and search for waves and beaches in Nicaragua. Walker asks, "So how does such a paradise stay pure after a decade of visiting surfers? Easy; by not being paradise." Walker seems to think that this is a different type of paradise, one that will stoke the feral surfer with, "this lack of luxury—and a wealth of surf—that will keep the feral traveler smug and happy for years to come, at least until the local authorities become more aware of the wave-driven dollars." Some tourists and other surfers want surf and adventure at their doorstep and umbrella drinks and beer in the fridge of their air conditioned beachfront room, all of which is becoming available with new hotels and surf businesses now popping up.

Matt Walker describes the coastal region as mostly local farmers and fisherman. There are a few areas where there are hostels or surf accommodations, but nothing amazing; there is no Motel 6 nearby or Holiday Inn. This is in 2003, near Popoyo, which is still less developed than San Juan del Sur.

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240 www.surfnicaragua.com
241 Walker, 98.
242 Ibid., 99.
“Visitors can plan on either eating a local diet of pork, chicken and rice where they stay - or even boa constrictor if you’re brave - or catching their own food and having someone prepare it for a price.” This article perpetuates the idea that Nicaragua travel is still very adventure oriented, however this idea is challenged as Sam George records another journey into Nicaragua that same year, in a similar vein, but asking some very different questions.

Influenced by the travel styling and writing of Kevin Naughton and Craig Peterson, Sam George delves into his recent excursion into Nicaragua, just a few months after Matt Walker’s:

To label this recent surf trip as “Centroamerica” again would rob the story of any real significance. By not saying where it is you cannot write about the culture, the weather, the history, the food, the music, the flora or fauna. By lumping this trip under the single banner “Centroamerica” you also run the risk of fostering an insular, neocolonial attitude that disregards the rich cultural differences that distinguish all the countries that make up the region.”

In this article George is offering up a philosophical or rhetorical question to travelling surfers. He is addressing some of the cultural conundrums that plague surfers everywhere, like how to protect secret surf spots and zones and the morality of tourism development around this question. On this trip, George meets up with Martin Daly, the captain of Quiksilver’s boat the Trader on its infamous trip “the Crossing.” Jimmy Rotherham actually was “discovered” as the surfing prodigy he is by this boat when it was in El Salvador on its way to Nicaragua. These surfing and tourist happenings begin to shape the cultural and social

243 Ibid., 99.
development of these surfing regions, through the intersection of international surfers, in this case Americans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans.

As more surfers travel through Nicaragua, the tone of the articles in surfing magazines begins to change from one of exploration and discovery, to purchasing land and social issues.²⁴⁵ Matt Walker writes about Nicaragua again a mere three years after his previous article, with a much more somber tone and message.²⁴⁶ Walker signs off on the piece as a “self-loathing surf imperialist” pointing towards the internal battles and dialogues surfers face when travelling through and surfing in developing countries. Even the title of the article suggests it, “Atoning for Surfer’s Sins in Nicaragua.”²⁴⁷ In this article Walker explores the psychology of the North American surfers that have either purchased land in Nicaragua or settled there, the problems they encounter and the ones they have brought with them. Walker explains that he has purchased some land here and needs to get it registered, along with his worries and other foreigners that have bought land.

Subconsciously, I hope to displace some of the blame for taking part in the movement that will surely turn unspoiled cliffsides into parceled, well-packaged real estate, the very Western civilization wreckage we were running from to begin with. At least I’m not alone. Every single surfer who sets foot in Nicaragua—from Christian missionaries hoping to save a million souls to drunken surfarists too fucked up to think past their next wave—

²⁴⁵ There seems to be an overarching cultural shift within the broader surf culture in the past 15 years, with a stronger focus on the social, environmental and economic impact of surfers travelling and settling in foreign countries. This topic should be explored further, perhaps with a greater ethnographic approach, in regards to the many organizations that have been started by surfers and surf companies to create positive change and aid developing communities internationally.
²⁴⁷ Ibid., 43.
contributes to the country’s metamorphosis, encouraging tourism officials to keep dangling promises of happiness today and future wealth tomorrow beneath the mantra: “It’s the next Costa Rica.”

As Walker delves into these complicated issues of surfers destroying what they love just by exploring and settling, it becomes a bit of a paradox. These are issues that Robert Dull and JJ Yemma also face in their developments in Nicaragua. Robert Dull explained that he carries some guilt and remorse about purchasing the land, and the development and problems that have arisen out of it and Western influence, such as drugs, crime and prostitution. It seems as if the North American/US influence may have just shifted, from one of Cold War politics to a new one of tourism and land development. The relevance of Chomsky’s previous statement where he refers to Central America and the Caribbean is clear even in this period of surf driven development. Walker speaks with a Nicaraguan surfer who yearns for a better education of his people enabling a better development for his community. Baldo, the young Nicaraguan professional, states that “It’s all a matter of education… I want them [Nicaraguans] to start opening their own adventure camps, to see tourism as a way to sell the land more than once. To turn down fast cash now for the bigger money down the road.”

This concept is further explained and promoted by other young surfer

248 Ibid., 32.
professionals and entrepreneurs in the surf movie *CENTRO: Nicaragua.*\(^{252}\) In the film some Nicaraguans have mixed feelings about the Western development in their country and coastlines, and another article in *The Surfer’s Journal* pushes this question further, simply titled “Land Grab,” pushes the question further.\(^{253}\) This article delves into issues of foreigners purchasing property, the ethics of surf tourism, and even the opportunities and similarities of the Nicaraguan case as compared to Indonesia, Sumatra and Costa Rica. There is a short piece on Dale Dagger and his experience as the “gringo” or “expat” in the region. He was one of the earlier surfers to explore here as far back as 1978, but didn’t surf or begin to settle until the mid 1990s. Dean used one of the local boat captains that works for Dagger, a Nicaraguan surfer I hung out with there in Gigante, named Zacarias Lopez, or Captain Zack. Dagger’s surf camp and Giant’s Foot surf camp are on the same street, beachfront in Gigante, and both use Nicaraguans for work as well as foreign surfers/interns. This concept is explored by Dean in his article as well, and is exactly what I was doing back in 2007.

Robert Dull continued to develop the land that he bought in 1999/2000 from Dale Dagger in Gigante and in January of 2007 he opened the doors to Hotel Brio.\(^{254}\) This is where Robert and I met; he gave me a volunteer work position in July of that same year. I lived on the Hotel Brio property in a unit down hill from the main complex with the Nicaraguan manager of Hotel Brio and Spanish school administrator of Escuela Bigfoot, Juan Delgado. During my time there I was

\(^{252}\) *CENTRO: Nicaragua,* DVD, directed by Tyler Bliss (2009; Third Born Entertainment).


\(^{254}\) Robert Dull. March 16\(^{th}\), 2013.
privileged to work in many facets of the business and to spend a lot of the time with the local community. I have to admit that the thought of buying some land and settling down there also crossed my mind, and has been the topic of many surf conversations and articles. Dean La Tourrette further explains what Walker and many surf property investors and tourists experience:

Everyone's rushing to get in on the act, and you can hardly blame them. The fantasy of owning surf property is deeply imbedded into the Western surfer's psyche. Combine the American cultural legacy of colonization with surfing wanderlust and you create an almost insatiable desire to find that perfect piece of surfing paradise—a swarth of earth where you can plant your flag in the sand and surf uncrowded waves to your heart's content. Surfer landowners I talked to in Nicaragua spoke repeatedly of "the dream" and about "keeping the dream alive."

Here is where the modern surf culture ethos really begins to define itself apart from that of the original Polynesian surf culture through the mixture of North American land ownership and the Western drive for exploration. While many surfers that have developed in Nicaragua like Dagger, Dull and Yemma employ many Nicaraguans, issues of how this development should be happening still arise, and it is a difficult one to discuss.

**Nicaraguan Surfers**

The Nicaraguan revolution from 1971-1979, followed by the Sandinista rule and the Contra War, were violent and dangerous times. This was part of the reason that not many travellers were entering Nicaragua. Adrian Kojin does ride through in the late 1980s; however, the young Nicaraguan surfers that lived there throughout it express their feelings about this period in the documentary surf film

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255 La Tourrette, 34.
by Tyler Bliss, CENTRO: Nicaragua. Oliver Solis, a young Nicaraguan surfer, explains early on in the film what it was like growing up during that period, "Look man, in the 80s, it was really bad. It was really bad. We didn’t have free expression to speak or to do something, or to make a business. We couldn’t do anything." He and other Nicaraguan surfers further expound that it was surfing that kept them going during this period, often walking 8 kilometers with only water to surf, it was their only escape from what was going on.

Another Nicaraguan surfer, Luis Chamorro, states that, "when the war was here, it was just about the killing." They all seem to be proponents of surfing as part of their culture and livelihood. "The war of Nicaragua, uh, they fucked up the country. We’re [set] back like 20, 30 years in everything man, in life and in business. The country is behind, the people are behind." They explain it was harder to surf and get transportation because there weren’t tourists like there are today and they attribute this to surfers that started exploring and investing there. Solis also thinks that there are more opportunities now with the foreigners and their businesses, but other Nicaraguan surfers express different sentiments about being happy for surf tourism. There are more opportunities and more money, but at the same time the foreigners that buy lots of land and sell it for more money, exploiting them and not helping the communities, sadden them. Robert Dull also stated that as Gigante has grown and developed, crime and drugs have become

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256 Oliver Solis in CENTRO: Nicaragua, DVD, directed by Tyler Bliss (2009; Third Born Entertainment).
257 Luis Chamorro in CENTRO: Nicaragua, DVD, directed by Tyler Bliss (2009; Third Born Entertainment).
258 Oliver Solis in CENTRO: Nicaragua.
more prevalent.\textsuperscript{259}

Roque Calderon, another young Nicaraguan surfer agrees, “when a country such as Nicaragua, if it grows very rapidly there are going to be more drugs and prostitution.”\textsuperscript{260} Despite these problems, these young Nicaraguan Surfer’s attribute more positive results from having surfing in their lives. They have surf competitions for the local Nicaraguan kids, which is great for the communities and the younger generation of Nicaraguan surfers. Oliver Solis, Luis Chamorro, and Roque Calderon see themselves as representatives for the surf companies and their own surf culture, and they are trying to lead by example. Oliver Solis wants to share this experience with the rest of his surfing community because, “before I started surfing, my life was empty. Surfing changed my life.”\textsuperscript{261} With community leaders like these, and more philanthropic efforts by Western surfer travelers and settlers, the face of Nicaraguan surf culture is changing for the better.

Much like current state of surfing and surf culture in El Salvador, Nicaragua is now also experiencing more surf contests, and recently held an international event. Nicaragua hosted an International Surfing Association contest in June of 2013. Truly receiving the backing of global surf culture, Jiguiliste Beach in the province of Tola, Nicaragua hosted the ISA (International Surfing Association) World Junior Surfing Championship, recognized by the International Olympic

\textsuperscript{259} Robert Dull. March 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2013.
\textsuperscript{260} Roque Calderon in CENTRO: Nicaragua, DVD, directed by Tyler Bliss (2009; Third Born Entertainment).
\textsuperscript{261} Oliver Solis in CENTRO: Nicaragua.
Committee. 262 With two major surfing events being held in El Salvador and Nicaragua, only months apart, demonstrates that they have become internationally recognized as not only great surfing destinations for vacation and recreation, but as world class competitive grounds for the world’s best surfers. With this much attention and focus now on the surfing and tourist industry in Nicaragua their attention to how they handle the influx of foreign surfers and travel on their coastlines is crucial. It will be interesting to see if there is a model, such as what happened in Southern Oaxaca in the first chapter, for Nicaragua and El Salvador follow as surf tourism grows within their borders.

Chapter IV
Conclusion

Still thinking more of the future than of the past or present, I saw that this was a Rhine stream of a different kind; that the foundations of castles were yet to be laid, and the famous bridges were yet to be thrown over the river; and I felt that this was the heroic age itself, though we know it not, for the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men.263

Through these case studies we have explored North American surf culture’s influences on specific coastal and regional developments in Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua, developing a more comprehensive understanding of the surf related cultural and social links to community and economic growth and development. The power of surf culture to affect the coastal systems in developing and emerging countries has been demonstrated through the building of hotels and surf tours and guides. In Mexico, specifically in Puerto Escondido and in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, the actions taken by Mexican surfers to protect themselves by enacting legislation that allows them to regulate foreign surfers and how they travel and spend money will allow them to build a stronger infrastructure that keeps money in their community. This example has not been used in the other two case studies, although they have their own interesting avenues of development and agency.

Surfing in El Salvador has changed greatly from the first time it was written about in the magazine by Naughton and Peterson. Kevin Naughton wrote a piece “Passing Time in El Salvador” where he traveled back with Craig and Greg,

the student who made the documentary about them, *The Far Shore*.\footnote{Kevin Naughton, "Passing Time in El Salvador," *The Surfer's Journal* Fall 2001.}

Naughton reflects on how developed it has become since he was there nearly 30 years ago, and the paradise he once inhabited has changed so much. He interviews Don Roberto Rotherham and you can hear the slight sadness of tone in the writing at how Punta Roca has changed, gotten more crowded, and developed. They talk about the good old days and reminisce about the filming of *Big Wednesday* and *Salvador*. He is not shocked but saddened by the massive numbers of surfers in the water at the point in La Libertad.

El Salvador and Nicaragua have been the homes of very repressive, violent and methodically horrible regimes, with civil wars and revolutions, wherein the people have suffered the most. Surfers have been in these regions in Central America, primarily on the coastlines because that is where the surf is, and therefore have not seen as much of the violence and war that the rest of these countries' people have experienced throughout their histories. Most fighting occurred in larger towns, cities, the mountains and jungles, although some ports and coastal towns are where minor skirmishes have occurred and weapons, munitions and supplies have been received, shipped and smuggled. All of this has had more of an effect on the locals, and surfers are now really taking an interest in social and economic change in these regions by mobilizing the community and other travelling surfers.

In Nicaragua we have seen the development of several surf lodges and guide services by foreigners. Both Dale Dagger and JJ Yemma hire local
Nicaraguans to work for them. And in the case of Hotel Brio, Robert Dull had actually partnered with the nephew of Eden Pastora aka Subcomandante Cero, Edward Irias and Pantilo. Edward was excited about working with Robert Dull and even paid for a Satellite to be installed at Hotel Brio right before I arrived in 2007, making it the only place in Gigante to have internet, a hefty investment of around $350 US dollars a month. The Giant’s Foot surf camp also got access to the internet at Brio in exchange for repairing surfboards. Edward and Pantilo had several “pangas” or boats that we used with them for surf and fishing tours.

Robert Dull has also set aside 36 acres as the Zacatan Ecological Reserve that is protected from development. Hotel Brio now functions as a housing quarters for the staff of the new hotel at Redondo Beach south of Gigante, Hotel Aqua Wellness resort and may be purchased by the original Giant’s Foot surf camp owner Jack Ucciferri. While much of this history does not have many female actors, professional surfer Holly Beck has started an international women’s surfing group and travel service, Surf with Amigas, that provides some services in Northern Nicaragua near Chinandega and Leon, diversifying surfing’s reach.

The paradigm of many surfers working and traveling to Nicaragua has shifted slightly and now encompasses some philanthropic ideas. Project Wave of Optimism was started in Gigante and aims to “facilitate community-driven

\[^{265}\text{http://www.aquanicaragua.com/}\]
development in Latin American surf travel destinations."267 Brian Nevins also writes about the Love Light and Melody organization, started by Brad Corrigan, which works with families in La Chureca in Managua. Nevins' sentiment about Nicaragua is being more widely embraced by surf culture, "with its place on the global surf circuit Nicaragua has a steady influx of travellers—who have an opportunity to make a stop and make a change."268 These programs and ideas dovetail well with the work of Kyle Thiermann, a Santa Cruz based surfer who travels trying make positive social change where he surfs. He has also started an organization called Surfing for Change that seeks to bring the problems that communities where surfers travel to the attention of not just the surfing community, but broader society as well.269

As an active member of surf culture and society, I have witnessed the evolution of my own culture, and the ones that have developed in other surf locales, though the broadening system of social media that allows us to stay connected. While in the past surf information and stories only traveled through word of mouth and articles, now we surf websites that allow us to book travel, and view cameras of the waves.270 This research has traced the footsteps of North American surfers throughout several locations in Mexico, El Salvador and Nicaragua, by following their footsteps, interviews, reading old magazines, and

267 www.projectwoo.org
268 Brian Nevins, "Los Dos Nicaraguas," The Surfer's Journal, Vol 18, No.1 Feb-March 2009. 77. See also www.lovelightandmelody.org
269 www.surfingforchange.com
270 Look at www.surfline.com and www.wannasurf.com. These are just two of the many web sites that offer information, travel bookings, video, pictures and stories about surfing in discreet or popular surf zones throughout the world.
surfing the web. Essentially, not just surfers have traveled to new locations to
learn how to surf and/or to search for more surf. Sometimes, in the search for
surf, love and sex happens. The topic of sex and romance tourism within surfers’
travels may seem a bit odd, but if one thinks about any traveler or visitor to a
foreign land, these things happen, it is human nature. Sometimes visitors will
frequent a certain vacation zone to specifically use brothels and prostitutes, or to
look for a romantic partner, at times with an agenda. Not every tourist and
traveling surfer is out on the prowl, searching for romance or sex. There is much
more room for exploration into this area, not just among surfing travellers.271

It has been argued in this work that surfers have traveled all over the world,
and by far are some of the most adventurous and motivated explorers
around. Often surfers will stay and “go native” in the land of waves that they
“discover.” Sometimes this means moving their family or core social group there,
and other times they assimilate or integrate into the existing culture, often
through marriage. This is not something new that surfers have down, it happens
all the time across the socio-cultural spectrum. However, there are at times
motivations that may brighten a marriage, often for both parties involved. While
many people get together and marry for love sometimes there are logistic
advantages and risks.

Property is often a motivating factor for many surfers that are looking to

271 For more research and analysis of sex, romance and tourism see Denise Brennan’s What’s
Love Got to Do with it?: Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic
relocate to a new surf locale. Some travel, just for surf and adventure’s sake, but sometimes end up falling in love with the waves, climate, culture, people, a man or woman. Purchasing and/or living permanently in another country can often be a tricky situation to navigate. Many countries have limits on the length of your stay and taxes for entering and leaving the country. Also their policies on immigration and purchasing of property can be hard to navigate as well. Sometimes a surfer and local may fall in love, or get in a relationship, and the romance can sometimes lead to mutually beneficial socio-economic results.

Now this is not the only scenario, just one that I have observed many times in my own personal travels with friends and surfers that I have met along the way. A surfer with some wealth, from the US, Europe, Australia, etc. may meet someone in a third world country, or a country of lesser economic status, usually a post revolutionary or post conflict nation, and this relationship can lead to marriage which can offer many things. Often the couple will be able to purchase property, so the surfer fleeing crowds and life in their home country can settle down in a cheaper and better climate with fewer surfers, albeit more will surely come. A union may also signify social and economic mobility for the partner in the country they reside in.

Often times, from my own ethnographic research, it is male surfers that marry local women in foreign surfing coastal zones. In fact, a great avenue of further research in this arena would be the construction of masculinity within surf
Now this is not always the case, there are instances of female surfers marrying local men and relocating to surf rich environments. The one constant seems to be that the surfers originating from a more wealthy country are moving to and purchasing property in a new country where there are fewer surfers, the climate is better, and the foreign surfer’s money will go further. Whereas many people from poorer countries will immigrate to more economically successful countries, such as the US or European countries, for opportunity. These poorer wave-rich countries offer a different type of opportunity to these surf migrants. Essentially, the foreign surfer gains a location where there is good surf with fewer people, and their partner can also achieve some upward social mobility and economic stability. This is not always the case, but it is a common scenario.

This migration of surfers to wave rich zones that are cheap, unexplored and not very populated is in no way a new phenomenon. The idea of sex tourism is not necessarily new, but the recent development of its study and research is relatively new, and offers insight into local and global issues. Communities are affected by sexual activity amongst its members as well as that of tourists. There are opportunities to learn about this intersection of surfing tourism and leisure.


migration. Specifically, disease and pregnancies should be an issue under study in surf specific zones. Some tourists and surfers may visit brothels and also interact with sex workers and prostitutes. Aside from this there is also the aspect of dating and marrying people in the countries they visit. Where sex is happening, obviously there are concerns for disease and pregnancy. I would urge further study in anthropology and sociology to observe and record data of surfers, tourists, etc. and sex related behaviors in these situations. Anonymous surveys or interviews might be one route to further studying and observing sex tourism in surfing.

Many tourists, surfers, and locals may not be willing to disclose information about their sexual activity, as some social and cultural taboos may prevent it. Romance and sex tourism aside, there is also the formation of transnational communities and identities as a result of tourist and surfer migration into other countries. Oftentimes expats that reside in a location together abroad may form communities within the local communities to which they have migrated. Much like a Chinatown in San Francisco, there can be small surf hamlets in coastal areas where they may form schools, churches, social centers, surf schools, motels or restaurants. Children of locals and surfers in certain

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274 What may interesting here are memoirs or accounts of surfers, such as Jimmy Rotherham who has an American father and a Salvadoran mother, and how their mixed cultural background feeds the evolving domestic surf culture where they have grown up. In Punta Roca/La Libertad in El Salvador there is a unique blend of American, European and Salvadoran surf culture, a similar framework for understanding this type of history might be modeled after Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp’s research on Middle Eastern immigration to Mexico and the formation of the unique identities in these communities. Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp, *So Far from Allah, So Close to Mexico: Middle Eastern Immigrants in Modern Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas press, 2007).
areas can benefit from a cross-cultural home, where two languages may be spoken and they are exposed to different familial and social frameworks. These surf families may also benefit from social, economic and physical/geographic mobility as a unit.

Much of this is in generalities about surf migration, sex, romance, and socio-cultural issues, however surfers have become more self-aware as a culture and community recently, given the surfer driven organizations that are being formed. They are actively participating in improving environmental and social conditions in their home surf locales and ones abroad that they may visit or live in. Florence E Babb has studied tourism and its effects on Latin America, and through her historical and ethnographic research explains that "if travel enhances rather than diminishes opportunities for positive cultural exchange, then international tourism development and the tourism encounter may help lay the groundwork for a more just and democratic world."275 This type of growth and acknowledgement of surf culture’s power and ability to effect positive change and growth in surf zones around the world should be further developed and discussed. Voluntourism and academic dialogues are becoming much more frequent these days and hopefully surfers will further reflect and act in a fashion that benefits us all, in and out of the water, home or abroad.276 Hopefully these

276 These are some of the organizations and networks that provide resources and work within these surf traversed communities: Surf Resource network, Waves for Development, Waves of Health, SurfAid, Eco Surf Volunteers, and Project Wave of Optimism.
organizations, in a combined effort with scholars and researchers, can provide more information and studies that will aid in the development of these surf tourist destinations and communities. As North American and other international surfers continue to descend upon these developing nations for these peeling, glistening, beautiful natural resources known as waves, my hope is that they will aid in the growth of tourism and surfing in these nations, and give as many waves that they ride to the locals in the water with them.
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