



Morning rush hour on the Hainan coast.



# OK Joe

## *A Shaper Surveys Hainan Island*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MARK ANDERS

**T**he pockmarked concrete road we're following is befouled with landmines of horse and cow shit, sun-bleached weeds growing through the cracks. It's bordered on the right by neat rows of coconut palms, a gentle arc of smooth, tan sand, and the shockingly blue South China Sea. Nearby, local women sit cross-legged in the grass hand-tying massive fishing nets. If they notice us, they're not letting on.

Lining the other side of the road are a dozen white-tiled villas. Or almost villas. We're taking a shortcut through the grounds of a large beach resort that never was, much like the unfinished construction projects you see dotting the Mexican coast. Maybe the developers ran out of money. Perhaps they had problems navigating the communist bureaucracy. Probably both.

Nearby there are three massive rainwater-filled swimming pools with wall-to-wall bright green algae, a parking lot packed with shoulder-high brown grass, and the husk of a five-story hotel presiding silently over the empty left-point break—it's the kind of property any surfer would kill to own.

Long, clean lines pinwheel around the rocky headland, but it's only waist high. We're hoping the beach-

break on the other side of the point is more exposed to the swell and will yield some punchier peaks. So we're hiking. The morning air has a chill, but the water will be warm.

As for those unfinished villas, some are occupied by local fishermen. One is decked out with mismatched windows and doors, an A/C window unit, and a satellite dish. The rest are occupied by animals. There's the horse villa with hay spilling over the front entryway. There's the pig villa, owned by a family of swine that regularly patrols the beach. As we pass one structure with a load of laundry drying on the lines, I notice a large rooster crossing the road to meet us. I think nothing of it, until his feathers rise in attack mode. Then he squawks loudly and lunges at me. I jump back and the rooster lunges again, driving his beak into the tail of the board. My friends Christophe and Yohheii laugh their asses off as I defend myself.

"Maybe this rooster doesn't like American surfers?" deadpans Christophe, a French expatriate and our Chinese translator. "Maybe he is a French-China rooster?"

Finally, I swing my board like a golf club. It connects solidly and the rooster hurtles backward to the curb. But he hasn't had enough, stabbing at me once more.

I laugh, now at a safe distance.







**W**hen my friend, San Diego shaper Joe Blair, invited me to come along with him to the Chinese island of Hainan, surly poultry was the furthest thing from my mind. Actually, waves were too. Over the last couple years he's raved to me about his past surf trips here, but I've always been dubious. Joe, now 62, is prone to hyperbole. He's like a balmy great uncle who forgets which tall tales he's already told you. I'd heard the Hainan yarn many times before replete with the empty, head-high surf five-days-a-week, cheap good food, a karaoke bar at a nearby five-star resort with hot Filipino singers who let Joe get up on stage and jam on the guitar. Oh, and, of course, the six-dollar massages. Happily married and not much of a musician myself, I was most interested in the island's empty lineups and surf potential, but I never imagined I'd actually be here one day.

Originally this trip was to be a sort of a scouting mission for Joe's friend Fred Hohenadel, a longtime surfer from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. He'd been to Hainan a few years earlier and turned Joe on to the place. Fred loves the island and was considering producing a long-distance coastal SUP race there. So he asked us to meet with one of his associates in Hainan to do recon for the possible event. But when some local logistics didn't come together as he'd anticipated, Fred pulled the plug on the project and suggested instead that Joe and I hook up with Christophe and just go and enjoy some surf exploration.

Situated in the country's southernmost region in the South China Sea between Mainland China and Vietnam, the island of Hainan (literally translated *South of the Sea*) occupies 21,076 square miles and is about the size, and roughly the shape, of the state of West Virginia.

**D**uring the fall and winter season, from November to March, northeast wind swells arrive on Hainan's east coast, while in the summer time, from April to September, most of the surf comes from the south to the southern beaches around the city of Sanya. Occasional typhoon swells bring the largest surf, but those are tough to predict and generally produce windy and unruly surf. So, Joe chose a 16-day window for our trip during the first half of December—"That way we're guaranteed to get waves," he told me. "It'll be right in the heat of battle."

Known by some as the "Hawaii of China," Hainan, and especially the southern region around Sanya, is a popular tourist destination for the middle-class Mainland Chinese and Russians. Like Hawaii, Hainan is tropical, with warm weather, green valleys, clear streams, and sparkling water. But the Hawaiian comparisons stop short when it comes to waves.

Before the trip, I scoured the Internet for photographic evidence of legit surf on Hainan, finding precious little. My research did reveal that former Aussie surf champ Peter Drouyn tried to establish a Chinese surf school on the island back in the mid-'80s, but that lasted only two months. More recently, longboarder Robert "Wingnut" Weaver had cameos at the First and Second Annual Surfing Hainan Open, founded by NorCal expat Brendan Sheridan, but from the photos it looked like Wingnut was skunked both times.



(above) "Here comes the blue team," says Christophe. Nearly all the Chinese tourists we encounter on Hainan wear these matching aloha shirts and shorts. (left) Huang Wen and Joe scan the map for potential targets while our driver waits for marching orders.

While we had no illusions that this was to be some groundbreaking surf expedition, a lot remains unknown about the coast of Hainan, and we were stoked to explore. And as one of my friends at home astutely predicted: "It's definitely going to be some *Endless Summer* shit."

**T**here are probably 60 Chinese people lining the beach. Hell, maybe 80. At least half of them have their cameras out. One guy even has his video camera set up on a tripod. And all of the eyes and all of the cameras are trained right on me as I milk yet another stomach-high wall to the beach. Just before I kick out, popping flash-bulbs illuminate the evening sky.

Waiting for the next set, I turn back toward the beach just to see if they're still watching. Yep, still watching. Today is pretty much the same as every other session we've had here in the past week. As soon as any one of us goes surfing, they gather. And for the most part, they stay and watch until the last wave is ridden to the beach. Some smile as we get out of the water, some take photos of us carrying our boards, and then they all leave, as if someone declared, "Show's over."

We posted up for the two weeks in this tiny village on the east side of the island as base camp for our explorations. The large bay contains that sweet left-point break, and also happens to be a regular stop on the tourist bus route that takes vacationing Chinese mainlanders on sightseeing journeys around the island. Every day brings new busloads of tourists who've never seen surfing in person.

Given the bulk of brand name surf gear and apparel manufactured here in China, it's ironic that the Chinese



Christophe and Huang Wen preferred to relax when Joe pursued his various interests.

are so unfamiliar with our sport. With a population of 1.3 billion, it's downright incredible how few Chinese surfers there are.

"Hainan is now home to perhaps two dozen native surfers," states the *Encyclopedia of Surfing*. If that's the case—and it indeed seems accurate—we now personally know an eighth of the island's total surfer population.

They are two brothers, Huang Wen, 25, and Huang Ning, 26, and their sister's husband, Huang Li, 27. They all live together at Mama's Restaurant with, you guessed it, Mama and the rest of the family. Their open-air, ramshackle restaurant/home is situated on that same left-point break. They're squatters too. Just like the other two beachfront restaurants in the village, they wildcatted with the knowledge that one day, if the property was sold, they'd have to vacate. But until then, life on the point is good.

Huang Ning, the quiet older brother with an easy smile, tells me that they first saw surfing here in 2002 when a group of Japanese surfers came to town. Over the years those surfers, and others like Yohheii Suzuki, who's here with us now, started leaving boards at Mama's and eventually taught the brothers how to surf. These

days, the brothers are completely stoked on the sport.

During the past eight years, Huang Ning estimates they've seen a total of about 400 surfers come to surf the point, mostly Japanese surfers and some American expats. That works out to only about 50 surfers per year, and this is one of the most well known, consistent breaks on the island.

"Do you like having other surfers visit here?" I ask Huang Ning.

"If he don't catch my wave, I like," he replies with a smile.

We both laugh.

Most days we hire a driver and ask one of the brothers to come along as we haul ass all over the coast looking for waves. Huang Wen, the youngest and rowdiest of the brothers, almost always volunteers. He also loves to surf almost as much as he loves chewing betel nut. The bitter Areca nut, wrapped in a leaf with a slice of lime, gives you a mellow buzz and eventually stains your teeth red. Most locals chew it, even Mama. Huang Wen is very sensitive about his scarlet choppers, but ironically he's also spent years carefully cultivating a four-inch-long tuft of hair that sprouts from a mole on his chin.

"Man, he's so proud of that thing," Joe laughs as Huang Wen strokes his mole hair gently.

Huang Wen doesn't speak any English, but traveling with him is easy. Shared surf stoke is enough.

Most days, Christophe sits shotgun, guiding the driver to likely surf spots we've picked out on the map. Meanwhile, Huang Wen and I sit in the back of the van drinking beer and laughing at Joe's stories, which range from fin placement on quads to crazed tales of working as a beach boy in Waikiki to his demented and overly detailed memories of the girls he encountered on the North Shore in the 1960s and '70s.

"This girl would come into my shaping shack, dust me off, and just get started," laughs Joe. "That's why I've never made any money. I've been following chicks around."

Christophe—essentially the polar opposite of Joe—is well read, polite, thoughtful, and quiet. He came to China more than a decade ago and has since bounced around from Beijing to the small towns working as a bartender, translator, English teacher, and a surf guide. About seven years ago he started coming to Hainan for the winters. During that time he's probably done more surf exploration here than any other surfer. The brothers' Mama soon adopted Christophe and now affectionately call him Loa Sun or "the Monkey King."

Mostly Christophe pretends to ignore Joe's off-color stories, but occasionally it's too much to handle and he explodes in laughter.





(above) We didn't catch this spot very good; the locals used the conditions wisely, pulling in a catch of their own.  
(below) Joe playing it cool with the waitress he hopes to bring home as a souvenir.







The point near Mama's Restaurant, finally doing its thing.

Meanwhile Joe badgers Christophe ceaselessly for help flirting with the local women.

"Ask him if I can take one of his waitresses back to America with me," Joe says to Christophe, motioning to the restaurant's smiley proprietor.

"I'm not going to ask him that."

"C'mon, ask him!" pleads Joe. "What do you think we're paying you for? Do your job!"

Christophe concedes.

Joe waits impatiently.

"He says, 'Yes, of course you can. This is no problem,'" translates Christophe.

"Excellent!" laughs Joe.

**O**n our way to find new waves, we pass through the occasional town, but mostly we see endless dirt road villages and farming shanties that dot the rice paddies, fish farms, and impossibly neat and organized farmlands. There are few other cars—mostly bicycles and motorcycles and rickshaws piled to the hilt with passengers or farm implements or vegetables. We pass one moped with a caged hog on the luggage rack and a bicyclist leading a huge water buffalo by a string along the road.

"This is another 'happy ending' town," announces Christophe as we enter Wanning.

"Stop!" Joe yells from the backseat.

Judging from the crowd of locals that gather





YOHHEI SUZUKI

whenever and wherever we show up, we must look like a bunch of alien clowns piling out of the van.

They stare. They point. They laugh. But Joe seems to get much of the attention. A gray-haired mix of Shrek and Hulk Hogan, Joe is loud and big (he played football in high school but got kicked off the team for surfing) and is impossible not to love. At first blush you might take Joe as the classic Ugly American as he stands there shirtless in a pair of blue flowered aloha trunks pawing through a table of fresh fruit, but Joe has an endearing aura that transcends the cultural divide—and, oddly, his biggest fans are the elderly Chinese and the smallest children.

The beaches are difficult to find. We know where the coast is, but finding roads leading to the ocean is a different story. We relentlessly ask for directions. Sometimes the locals offer to hop inside the van and deliver us directly to the beach.

Other times it requires clomping over cow pastures, up and down hills, and through tight jungles. One day, after an hour-long hike around a desolate rocky headland, we happen upon a hidden temple right on the water. It's quite old and some of the columns and stone steps are crumbling into the sea. No one is around—and there isn't a road for miles—but we find sticks of incense still smoking in the sea breeze.

The place, a rivermouth break, has definite surf potential, but the tide and winds are all wrong. So we settle for a thumping beachbreak on our way back to the van.

"I'm sure we're the first to surf this place," Christophe tells me.

As we float there waiting for another set, I first try to think of a fitting name for the spot then abandon that in contemplation of how rare and special it is to be the first to ever surf a place.

"This is like when I was on the North Shore," muses Joe, who honed his chops mowing foam for Dick Brewer and Simon Anderson on the North Shore in the '70s. "It's a little like pioneering a place. I think you'll look back some day and realize this is really a special time."

I wasn't prepared to like China as much as I did. It had always hovered low on the list of places I dreamed of visiting, somewhere just above India. But I realized quickly that the China I didn't want to visit wasn't the real China—it was the one that the mainstream media feeds us on the nightly news. We're led to believe the Chinese are a bunch of robot factory workers who slave away making toys for our children with lead paint. Yes, it's a gross generalization and I'm sure some of that indeed exists, but the Chinese people I got to know on this trip are happy, boisterous, emotive folks with a zest for life. As for the brothers, Mama, and the other Chinese surfers we met, their unbridled and untainted stoke is absolutely infectious. I imagine it's how surfers here in the States were back in the '40s when surfing was still so new to the mainland.

The surf never got epic, but then again I wasn't expecting Indo. We surfed every day and there were plenty of *Endless Summer* moments, like the last morning of the trip when we woke to damn fine, chest-high waves reeling off the point. Sometimes that's the only ending you need. ✓