


# Turning The Tides

Tucked away in the stunning Mentawai Islands, Kandui Villas promises a game-changing dream for wave chasers of any level. Could one of Dubai's top surfers and one novice both catch their perfect break in this isolated haven? We headed there to find out... *By Yi-Hwa Hanna*



“Oh come on, could they take *any* longer to take off? I just need to push this seat back and sleep!” Scott said with an exhausted groan, pulling his eye mask over his rather bloodshot eyes in frustration. “Maybe if we pretend to be asleep when they take off, they’ll just leave us be—we won’t even need to pretend, and how can they rouse us if we’re dead to the world?” I laughed, equally wearily. It was a Monday morning in May, and we were sat on a slightly delayed Garuda Indonesia flight from Jakarta to West Sumatra’s capital, Padang, after a considerably long journey

from Dubai—during which I happened to be sat next to the cast of *Shrek The Musical*—as well as a tedious layover in Jakarta. Once we reached Padang, we’d still have a ways to go. We’d have to spend the night there, then wake at 4:30am to take a speedboat for four hours deep into the Mentawai Islands to reach our destination: Kandui Villas, a luxury resort situated on a remote tropical island, that’s billed as the world’s premier luxury surf destination surrounded by the best waves in the world. We were on two

very separate missions: Scott was chasing the best waves he could find—a quest every passionate surfer will spend their lifetime constantly trying to do—while I was going to see if, after a failed attempt ten years before, I could finally learn how to surf decently.

I still remember the first time I went to a surf camp. It was the last stop on a two week trip I’d taken to Costa Rica with a group of friends straight after we’d graduated from university, and while I’m pretty sure the volcanoes, hot springs, cloud

forests and treehouse hotels had something to do with it, I distinctly remember that last stop on our trip—a hot, dusty few days in Mal Pais—as what, to this day, remains one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life. It wasn’t the setting per se—the rather oppressive wind and its consistent waves meant that it was hardly what you’d call the ideal beach for a suntanning-and-ocean-dips-only vacation. Yet that’s exactly what made it such a popular destination for





meals while looking at endless photos of their days out on the water, using phrases like “barrels” and “double ups” with a fair amount of “Yew!”’s thrown in. If it wasn’t that, it was surfing movies or videos of the greats, set to music that soothed the soul. It was there that I had my first-ever surfing lesson 10 years ago, and while the instructor had tried his best, I was exhausted and sore (I’ll blame the four-hour horse ride I did the day before), and

into the sand. The next day, every muscle in my body hurt, and I knew then exactly why surfers always have such a great physique—the sport requires and builds strong arms and shoulders, not to mention your lower back, for paddling, while a firm and steady core and legs will get you standing and balancing on the board as you ride the waves. I felt like I’d been hit by a truck—but I still wanted more. Yes, the whole experience left

## **That feeling I had when I first *stood up on a wave—even for just a couple of seconds—was one that I simply could not shake off***

surfers, and although none of us knew how to surf, we stayed at a surf camp. The moment I walked in, I felt an inner peace; the deep kind of calm over one’s heart that can only come from a true feeling of belonging. At the time, I couldn’t explain it—I couldn’t surf, and despite the fact that I’ve long felt a special connection with the ocean, after having grown up right opposite the beach and being called a “water baby” since I was old enough to remember, I didn’t know much about surf culture then either. Sure, I’d known

surfers for most of my life—my best guy friend since childhood has been proudly sharing endless photos of his surfing escapades since as far back as I can remember, so I knew the kind of hold it could take on someone. It had just never really gotten under my own skin... until now.

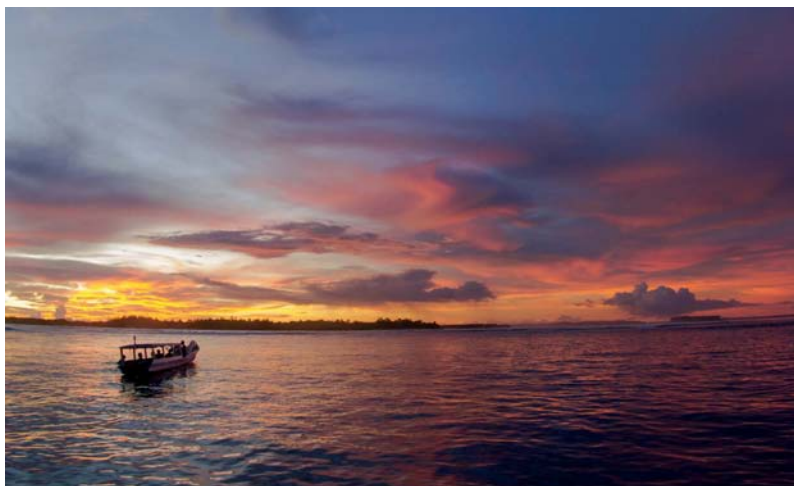
Every night at the camp in Mal Pais, the surfers would gather in the communal dining area and wolf down hearty

frankly, quite unused to the kind of functional fitness that now drives my life. The first step, pop-ups on the beach—that’s lesson one, where you learn to jump up from your laid-down paddling position to your surfing stance on the board in one explosive yet controlled movement—took me into the water and standing on my third attempt, where I struggled to stay on the board and kept tumbling face-first

me pretty intimidated (not least because as a contact lens-wearer who struggles to see without them, it presented another obstacle), but that feeling I had when I first stood up on a wave—even for just a couple of seconds—was one I simply couldn’t shake off.

So last winter, when I was first told about Kandui Villas, the world’s premier luxury surf destination, with the chance to learn how to surf—for real this





time—and before I finished my 30<sup>th</sup> year on this beautiful blue planet, I just couldn't say no.

One quick message to my good friend Scott Chambers, Founder and MD of the Surf House Dubai, our very own local surf embassy, if you will, to ask about what he thought of Kandui elicited a response that had him practically frothing at the mouth while mumbling the words “bucket list” and “every surfer’s dream”. I knew it was a sure bet, and so the planning began. I won’t lie—getting there isn’t easy, and due to the rather complicated journey, planning it can take time—but this level of effort to get to a location that isolated is exactly what makes it so special to begin with.

### The Jewel of the Mentawais

Tucked away deep in the Mentawai Islands in the Sumatra region of Indonesia, the area is renowned for its world-class waves that draw in surfers from all over the world. And there, nestled among the brilliant blue ocean, is Kandui Villas, a beautiful expanse of land that boasts 12 private villas, or “umas”—traditional Indonesian-style housing that is built with sustainability in mind—along with an infinity pool, gym and yoga room, and an entirely organic garden that supplies its dedicated and large kitchen. Founded by Jordan Heuer, a American hailing from Hawaii who started visiting Indonesia back in 1992 and

then the Mentawais, as they are called by most, in 1999, Kandui Villas is a true labour of love. Prior to starting Kandui Villas, Jordan created Kandui Resort, another prime surfing location on the opposite side of the same island. When he arrived, the place was practically barren, and they built it all from the ground up. Jordan, who has now been based in Indonesia for more than a decade, and was affectionately named the “most barreled human on this stretch of reef” by Magic Seaweed—the ultimate go-to site and almost daily check-in for surfers all over the world thanks to its incomparable surf reports—has lived for the waves since he first stepped on a surfboard. He now lives at Kandui Villas with his family, and they are truly the heart and soul of this little slice of tropical paradise.

Arriving at Kandui was a spectacle in and of itself: All of our bleary-eyed exhaustion had started to wash away on the boat ride there, as we got to know our companions for the next couple of weeks—there was the group of Americans from Hawaii, another couple from San Diego, some pro surfers (who I was thrilled to see were young women, since surfing has traditionally been seen as a more male-dominated sport until recent years), and a group of old friends from Brazil who now live all over the world and meet for a surf trip as a means of reuniting every

## Kandui is made for a wave connoisseur—the surfers looking to push themselves with the best waves on the planet /

several years. The laid-back chit-chat as we soaked in the sunshine on Kandui’s private speedboat saw us getting to know each other in a relaxed environment, and Scott and I were relieved to discover that the group was composed of kind, genuine souls, all sharing the same values and in pursuit of the same thing: Happiness, a chance to get back in touch with nature in an exceptionally beautiful environment, and of course, the chance to catch the perfect wave. I was relieved to see that I wasn’t the only non-surfer in the group: Unlike a lot of other surf accomodation, which often doesn’t offer much

more than a place to sleep and refuel in between surf sessions, Kandui Villas takes pride in the fact that it’s also a great place to stay for the spouses of those who don’t surf, or those who may not want to just surf all day, every day. While there isn’t an immense list of to-dos given the fact that it’s so remote, at Kandui, guests can enjoy fresh coconuts by the only infinity pool in the region, a dedicated yoga room, a gym equipped with a surprisingly extensive range of equipment, and relaxing massages held in the privacy of your own uma, not to mention exceptionally good, fresh food made with as much

*Scott Chambers  
trimming in  
Indonesia's  
Mentawai Islands*



organic produce as possible, including locally-sourced fare and greens from Kandui Villas' very own greenhouse.

"One of the things for the travelling surfer is being able to have an adventure outside of just the surfing experience in the water," Scott said. "It's almost 80-20 percent: 20 is your surfing part, while 80 percent is the people you're interacting with there, and the journey to get there. Going to places like the Mentawai is a little bit like going to maybe Bali was 20 years ago: Where you do feel like you're doing something a little bit different and original, and discovering something that not everyone else has, and I don't think that's still there in some of the more popular parts of Bali now. You can also get away from the crowds and, without question, get the best waves that that part of the world has to offer," he

said. Jordan describes himself as a wave connoisseur, and as Scott pointed out, that's just the kind of person Kandui is made for: People who are not seeking a holiday with a focus on night-life and partying, but rather, the surfer really looking to push themselves with the best waves on the planet. "It's also [ideal] for the girlfriend, friend or wife who is the 'surf widow' as they say—they can still go along and get in the water, and maybe learn to surf or just improve on some of the more mellow waves," he added. He was spot on: In our group, the two "surf widows" enjoyed paddling out on their boards to watch their surfers catch the waves on the daily boat trips, while also enjoying massages, snorkelling, the yoga room, and trying their hand at surfing too.

I, on the other hand, was there to learn how to surf, and from the moment I met our

other companions—Kandui has tended to operate its trips in set periods, though this is set to change to accommodate guests who want more flexibility with their dates—I felt nothing but support and encouragement. Any doubts I had had that I'd be able to do it—or indeed any concerns that I'd feel like a bumbling fool in front of people who were all passionate enough about their craft to travel this far for it—immediately washed away. That's the thing about surfers—it's not just a sport: To them, it's a lifestyle, and one that chases good vibes as much as it does the waves, and as I realised over time, that was the hook that drew me in at that surf camp in Mal Pais years ago. From Wei and Mitchell, two colleagues from Hawaii, to Luke and Kamele, a friendly couple from San Diego, to Luana and Rafael, a couple from São Paulo taking their first-ever holiday outside of Brazil, to the group of old friends from Brazil, and even the pro surfers from the USA that came with their crew of photographer friends—not to mention all of the staff at the resort, from the kitchen staff to the photography crew, as well as Jordan's family—every single person there was just as excited as I was to see me catch my first waves and improve each day.

### Learning to Surf

The lessons weren't easy: On day one, I was exhausted from the long journey, and finally teaching myself how to relax after half a year of exceptionally hard work at a nonstop pace. A part of me just wanted to relax, but Scott—my teacher as well as travel companion—was so exhilarated after his first day of surfing in paradise that he was eager to get me out into the water as soon as possible. We began, as new surfers always do, with pop-ups on the beach, but after just a few attempts, Scott decided I was ready to head straight into the water. "You've got this, and you've nailed that move already so let's

### What To Pack

Taking the right gear with you can make or break a surf trip, even when you're somewhere as comfortable as Kandui Villas. Here's our list.

#### ► CLOTHING

- Swimwear: An assortment of sports bikinis and suits, a few rashguards, and a few bikinis for great tan lines as you relax by the infinity pool. We took a selection of Roxy, Billabong, Quiksilver and Seakiss swimwear, along with Onzie rashguards from The Hot Box Kit and Mia Ola rash guards for performance wear.
- Reef shoes
- Casual daytime and evening clothing that you don't mind getting wet during the day, and dry easily and quickly. For evenings, opt for items that cover you up to help protect from mosquitos, and keep you cool in the humidity.
- Comfortable flip-flops and flat sandals. No heels needed!

#### ► MEDICAL KIT & TOILETRIES

- Shower products: The hotel does provide shampoo, body wash and conditioner, but it's a long way from town if you need anything specific!
- Mosquito and bug repellent (such as Mosiguard), as well as anti-itch treatment (such as Fenistil gel or tablets).
- A first-aid kit for scrapes and cuts, including items like iodine, gauze, band-aids, a cream for bacterial infections such as Fucidin, rehydration sachets, and so on.
- Sunblock (SPF50 and up), along with aloe vera or other after-sun moisturiser, as well as hair protectant spray (we love Nuxe's Protective Milky Oil) and lip balm with SPF.
- A low-maintenance makeup or beauty kit: Aside from a great day and night face cream and an exfoliant, going bare-faced is best here. Stick to the basics like concealer or waterproof foundation if you need it, a slick of bright lipplie for the evenings, and waterproof mascara—though we warn you, that's likely to come off if you're really chasing the waves! We'd also pack an anti-frizz hair cream.





get out there!” he said, dragging my board—the largest SUP we could find, due to the type of waves and the fact that the larger the board would be, the easier it’d be for me to start on—into the water. I already knew that I was goofy-footed—which means my surfing stance sees me naturally balance with my right foot forward, unlike the more common “regular” surfers, who stand with their left foot forward—and the fact that I paddleboard regularly meant that I was already comfortable on the board. Still, this was a whole different ballgame. Just learning to paddle was tough, not least because the board was so big and heavy. Scott explained that a lot of the time, surfing can be mainly paddling as you head out to catch a wave, find a break or just try and get yourself into the line-up, and this can be one of the most tiring parts. Reading the waves and knowing what to catch, when to catch them and

where to do so is another major challenge, and it’s normal to have a little help. We began with Scott pushing me into the waves, and I was ecstatic to have stood up on every single one. This wasn’t the distressing experience I’d had in Costa Rica—I felt like I was flying, and although I was just on the white water, the rush of riding it in and feeling the power of the ocean behind it all was immense. Each time I fell off, or my arms ached, I recalled that feeling and dug out a renewed vigour to head back out just so I could feel it again. It kept me going in every session, and became more addictive the better I became.

By day three, Scott decided that I was ready for a smaller SUP board. Surprisingly, I didn’t find it too much harder to balance on, and I started to recognise the feeling I was taught to look for when the waves were coming and it was time to start paddling as hard as

I could so I could catch their momentum. That day, we started out further than I’d ever attempted to in the past. A SUP session with the girls during the day that had seen me take a tumble into some coral, along with a heavy session in the gym, had left me a little scratched up, and Scott could see the fatigue written all over my face. But then the wave came: As I rode it all the way to the beach for the first time, any lassitude melted away, and once again, we practically floated back to the *uma* afterwards, giddy with excitement. Finally, it was time to move on to a longboard. We grabbed the biggest one there—Kandui has an impressive quiver of boards to rent, of every size and style you could need—and I headed to Four Bobs with Jordan’s kids and their teachers, Andres and Jules, who promised to help me out. I figured if Kaana and Kya, Jordan’s positively magnetic

children, could do it at the ages of 6 and 12, then I had no excuse—so there I found myself, out with the groms, ready to try my first proper break on a real surfboard. Days before we left Kandui, Scott helped me get onto my biggest waves yet. After one pretty bad wipe-out, I was determined to try again, and I couldn’t believe it—I rode my largest-ever wave right from the start, traversing it sideways until it ended. It was electric, and each day, I could feel a change taking hold of me: Rather than the nervous pitter-patter of my heart before each lesson, it beat with the elation of anticipation, eager to get out there and try to catch one bigger and better than the wave before. It wasn’t just in the lessons that I noticed the shift: Each day, I’d join the group as they went wave-hunting across the endless options surrounding Kandui, and without even realising it, the boat banter began to hold new



only added to the already impressive turf: “The natural beauty of those islands and that part of the world—it feels quite untouched and you feel like you’ve really removed yourself from your normal life and the hustle and bustle,” he added. Another aspect that we both agreed on was the fact that the food was, simply put, delicious. From rich eggs benedict doused in a spicy Hollandaise sauce to coconut and cashew banana pancakes at breakfast, to fresh grilled fish and prawns served with black rice and crunchy salads served fresh from the garden, tender steaks and juicy chicken wings, served with tasty desserts like rich but light chocolate mousse and pineapple upside-down cake, each meal was a delight, not least because of the hunger stirred up by all of that activity in the sun and surf each day. Mealtimes quickly became as much of a pleasure as the surf, with the entire gaggle of guests meeting at around the same time each morning, afternoon and evening. Before long, we felt like an extended family, sharing not only waves and meals, but personal stories that brought us ever closer together. On the flat days, we gathered for excursions to nearby islands on a SUP, or snorkelled in the colourful reef just beyond. The bar and pool area became an extended outdoor living room,

the Magic Seaweed daily swell report to see what I could catch tomorrow, rather than just look it over with the sterile eyes I had in the past. During the daily photo slideshows, I couldn’t wait to check my form and see how I could do better the next day. My craving for that rush began to take me over like an insatiable hunger, and I fretted over what I’d do once I got back home and would have to stop chasing that feeling of pure, unadulterated joy on the water.

### Chasing The Swell

I wasn’t the only one with an esurience for something bigger, better, and more challenging on this trip: Outside of our lessons,

Scott was chasing the waves of his life. He wasn’t the only one: Day after day, different guests would come back and say they’d caught their best wave ever. “Day one at Kandui Left, just outside of the resort, involved me getting what was probably one of the barrels of my life,” Scott said, continuing: “Just having that wave in front of your villa within 200 yards is unreal, and I’ve never really had a setup like that in any surf travel I’ve done before. Just the length of it, the crazy colour of the water, the speed at which you’re going—not just getting barrelled but having to race that hard for it, made it a very exhilarating ride.” The setting

meaning for me. Lefts and rights, barrels and close-outs, whether waves were mushy or clean—I’d had a vague understanding of them in the past, but now that I’d felt them myself, even on my “baby waves” the power of the ocean was undeniable, and I found myself itching to check

## A SURFER’S PLAYGROUND

The Mentawai Islands are renowned for having consistently incredible waves year-round, and a huge variety of them at that. Here’s a quick taster to what’s within reach of Kandui Villas.

> **4 Bobs.** A playful right-hand wave just a 2-minute boat ride from Kandui Villas. While it’s not the most challenging for seasoned surfers, and can get quite shallow at low tide, it’s reliably good no matter the conditions, is great for any board, and suits all levels. We had very special sessions here.

> **A-Frames.** This super-consistent left boasts an idyllic island view and was one of Scott’s favourites: “It’s not the greatest wave, but the setup is amazing, it’s so close to Kandui, and it’s pretty reliable on any given day.”

> **Bank Vaults.** A thick right that saw a few in our group claim the barrel of their life, this can be challenging thanks to its shifting line-up that means it’s known for surprise out-of-nowhere sets, but when it’s clean, it’s epic.

> **Nipussi.** This right tucked into a reef-laden cove boasts a stunning view

that’s truly breathtaking at sunset, and while it’s quite mellow, it’s also consistent and can boast a fair amount of power on the right days.

> **Kandui Left.** Described by Kandui Villas as a “startlingly fast, hollow, perfect wave,” this beautiful wave (also called Nokanduis) is known by many as the best left in the world, with pro surfers including Kelly Slater having shredded here. This is founder Jordan’s favourite wave, and as they claim, “surfers from around the world come back to figure it out and get it wired, and once they have caught one good wave there, they are hooked for life, and keep coming back to add minutes and hours of tube time to their life inventory.” Scott agrees: It was the barrel of his life so far!

> **Rifles.** One of the longest waves in the world, this was a firm favourite, offering seemingly endless barrels at times, with beautiful waves that Surfer Magazine once named the 6th best wave in the world.

> **Last Resort.** Another highlight for Scott: “It’s exciting because you’re at the very tip of that stretch of reef that involves Pistols, Rifles, Idaho... and I think from there, there’s no land until the South Pole, so it’s this real feeling of you getting the brunt of deeper ocean swell, just hitting that slab of reef.”





where we'd chat about what each of us had found that day, and watch everything from movies to surfing videos.

### Life Lessons

Settling into life at Kandui was easy: The spacious umas instantly felt like home, and the comfortable beds with their “cone of protection” as I had quickly dubbed the mosquito nets lavished around each one were a delightful refuge in which to read by the dedicated night light before bed—when we were all happily fed and watered, and feeling gloriously clean, warm and dry after a day of soaking up the sun and salt water. During the magic hour, that breathtaking time of day that strikes as the sun begins to set, the lush green grass behind our villa was ignited in a soft, shimmering gold light as the sky slowly began to run awash with shades of orange, pink, purple and fiery red, setting it all ablaze as if to passionately bid us adieu, at least until the next day when we'd witness it all over again as if for the first time. At night, the sky would

turn to a canopy of thick velvet, scattered with twinkling stars as far as the eye could see, so bright that you almost felt like the starlight could illuminate the ocean that lapped softly behind it, slowly and soothingly singing us to sleep. Even during the few nights that the storms sometimes came, the thunder and streaks of rousing lightning felt hypnotic from the comfort of our cosy uma, transporting us worlds away from the hectic, fluorescent and fast-paced daily lives we lead back home.

While our arrival had seen us scratching around in anxiety at the weak internet connection—although Kandui boasts one of the fastest WiFi connections in the Mentawai islands, the island's location is so off the beaten track that there are no cellphone towers nearby, and internet is hard to come by, particularly when everyone is trying to get online at the same time—by halfway through the trip, we had not only become accustomed to it, we began to relish it. The lack of screen time saw us read and socialise more, or in my case, even pick up my

sketchpad, and we started to remember what it felt like to not feel so switched on all the time and really listen to the world around us. The more we disconnected, the more we began to connect with not only ourselves but those around us, with long talks into the night leaving us feeling truly calm and centered in a way that my stressed-out, over-scheduled life at home would ordinarily never allow me. And it didn't stop at Kandui: Since returning home, I've felt a shift in my soul that's reminded me just how important it is to disconnect every now and again, and just take some time that's truly for yourself. It wasn't just the location that awakened a revolution of spirit—whether you're a novice or a seasoned surfer, the verve of the Mentawai Islands will creep into your very being and you'll never want to shake it off. I'd once read that surfing teaches you about life: It teaches you patience, as you learn to wait for the swell to come in. It teaches you how to manage greed, by learning when to take

the wave rather than always waiting for a better set to come in, lest it doesn't come and you miss the right one when it's actually there in front of you. It teaches you humility, since no matter how great of a surfer you are, you can't fight the power of the ocean when it's your time to either wipe out, or have a barrel fold in on you and crush you. It teaches you how to focus and stay balanced, so you can feel pure joy. It teaches you to be considerate, as you learn proper surfing etiquette, as well as dedication and commitment, since you have to keep going out there to get better. It teaches you how to dance with nature, listening more to the earth and all of its components from the wind to the water, and as a result, how to be more in tune with your body and the planet around you. As Jon Kabat-Zinn, an expert in mindfulness, once said: “You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” We couldn't agree more, and we already can't wait to come back to Kandui Villas and catch our next great wave. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: KALANG AT @BLACKPEARLPHOTOGRAPHY; RODRIGO ZENI (“LEARNING TO WATCH FOR WAVES AT A-FRAMES”) AND COURTESY OF KANDUI VILLAS.

## Surf School

Is it really possible to learn how to surf—and do it well—in 10 days? Yes, we did! While the reef, and the lack of beach breaks, in the Mentawais can be a little intimidating for newbies, it's still a great place to learn. "The fact that they have a completely great beginner wave just out front, makes it a great place to learn. Just take your reefbooties!" said Scott, my teacher and travel companion—who gave me top marks for exceeding expectations in surfing ability and progress. "I really like that you could go from that initial rolling whitewater to going to Four Bobs where you're actually catching a wave in 10 days. Yes, it's a reefbreak, but it's the right kind of mellow wave," Scott says. While it may not be the best for a learner travelling on your own (unless you can hire a dedicated daily instructor at Kandui), if you're going with a friend or spouse who is a good surfer, it's an amazing setting to learn in, with plenty of options in which to upgrade as you become more confident. Here's how our Editor-in-Chief, Yi-Hwa Hanna, fared...



*Kandui's back door: An ideal learner's wave*



*Starting on a SUP board, with a little push*



*Stretching out between surfs with yoga*



*Learning to watch for waves at A-Frames*



*Catching my own waves on the whitewater*



*The sunsets made for an epic classroom*



*Finally ripping it up at Four Bobs*



*Paddling out is a key lesson, and hard work!*



*Real waves by day 10: Mission accomplished!*