

GERMAN CITY BOY CHALLENGING NAZARÉ — THE WORLDS MOST DANGEROUS SURF SPOT

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by Heidi Hansen

Nazaré used to be a quiet Portuguese fishing town where residents were taught to stay away from the water due to its dangerous beach break. The waves were considered impossible to surf, particularly during winter, until McNamara set a world record in 2011 for the largest wave ever surfed. Whether surfer or not, Nazaré became known the world over and people became aware of the potential for the waves. Since then, numerous surfing records have been set in Nazaré, including the Guinness World Record for the largest wave ever ridden; which was 80 feet high, by Rodrigo Koxa in 2018.

The secret behind the enormous waves

Large swells usually slow down when approaching a coast due to interaction with the ocean bottom. However, the impending swells offshore Nazaré do not lose energy until they reach closer to shore due to the 230 km long and 5000 m deep east-west oriented underwater Nazaré Canyon. The deep canyon maintains the wave energy and forward speed; funneling and magnifying the swells into enormous waves and abruptly hitting the much shallower headwall, breaking onto Praia do Norte, the North Beach of Nazaré.



Fearless surfer riding one of Nazaré's giant liquid mountains. (Photo: ©Heidi Hansen)

The biggest waves are a product of two swells; one swell approaching from the canyon and one sideways from the shallower continental shelf. They converge and result in constructive interference and a new increase of wave height. Tidal conditions also help increase the height of the waves.

The big waves combined with their regularity have made Nazaré a hotspot for big wave surfing. Every year more and more attempt to challenge the biggest wave in the world, and around 20 professional surfers stay in Nazaré during wintertime.

"There is nothing compared to this place. It is the most consistent place for big waves. It's the most scary and the most challenging. It's the biggest you can get. You can get the biggest paddle waves of your life and the biggest tow-in of your life. It's crazy," says German Big Wave Surfer Freddy Olander. He plans to settle in Nazaré this coming winter.

"If someone told me I would tow-in surf with a jetski one day, I would say 'You're fucking crazy! Jetskis are the worst thing ever'! It's loud, oily, petro smelling," Freddy laughs. "Never ever! It's so against surfing!"

It is November 2019 and I am meeting Freddy Olander for the first time at Alex Wippel's place. Alex [Austrian Big Wave Surfer] has a jetski for sale, which Freddy considers buying. *"I actually never planned to tow surf,"* Freddy says. *"It has always been paddling to me and I originally came to Nazaré to paddle without a rescue."*



"That's why I'm doing this. For the moment when you make the drop and you know you will make it through the line." (©Heidi Hansen)

Freddy Olander (©Heidi Hansen)

Freddy tells me how a scary experience from the last big paddle session changed his mind. *"I was out in the water with Eduardo Garcia [surfer and CEO of ORG surfboards] when this big cleanup set came and a big wave smashed us both. I dived under, but the leash opened and the wave took my board. I was so angry! So I was sitting there, with my impact vest, without my board when another big wave came."* The white water smashed around Freddy, terrifying him. *I was thinking. 'OH! MY! GOD!' "I hope that I will survive."* Freddy laughs and recalls how he dived down again and, after a while, pulled the life vest.

"I came up very fast and realized, 'Oh, my God, I'm still in this fucking impact zone!" He did not have a board. The beach was far away. The lineup was far away. He realized he was in the worst zone where the huge waves were breaking. A jetski driver came, looked at him, but picked up another guy and left before the next set of waves came.



"I remember this day. I paddled over some waves where I thought I would be too late and die" Freddy says laughing .
(Photo: ©Heidi Hansen)

"I was so panicked. I was shouting 'Woa! Help! Help!'" Marco Medeiros, another jetski driver, picked up Eduardo. *"I was screaming to them. They came over and both of them were screaming 'Hey! Come! Come!'"* and they took me on the sled. *We went out real fast and jumped over the waves and I was thinking 'Oh! My! God!'"* and realized — *!! NEED! SAFETY!"* Freddy laughs out loud. "If someone told me I would tow-in surf with a jetski one day, I would say 'You're fucking crazy! Jetskis are the worst thing ever!' It's loud, oily, petro smelling," Freddy laughs. 'Never ever! It's so against surfing!' But after a while in Nazaré I realize I need the whole package."

"You are always in danger. You always have to look"

All big waves are dangerous, but Praia do Norte is one of the most difficult places in the world to predict what will happen, as the conditions can change in an instant. *"You know, you sit in the line up and the waves can be everywhere and coming from every side. It's so risky. You are always in danger. You always have to look,"* he says laughing.

At other big wave sites the waves break in the same place with a recognizable safe zone and impact zone. In Nazaré the waves are unpredictable. The waves are so powerful and fast-moving that anything can happen and even the most experienced Nazaré surfers can't predict what monster waves will jump out of the canyon next. This means paddling to catch waves and navigate around the surf is impossible on big days and far too dangerous.

Freddy is well aware that it can be very dangerous to be out in the water without rescue and someone who can get you out of dangerous positions. At one point the waves get too big for paddling. There is just too much water moving and more speed is needed to catch the waves. *"So, yeah, I guess I will be tow surfing as well,"* Freddy laughs. *"But, my goal is to paddle the biggest wave. Not to get towed into the biggest one. Tow-in would be more of an achievement than a goal."*



"Getting ready for the nasty shorebreak. On one hand it can take all your energy, on the other hand it makes you stronger than ever."
(Photo: ©Heidi Hansen)



Freddy's first tow-in surfboard supported by Org Surfboards and Dylan Longbottom.
(Photo: Freddy Olander)

"I don't want to catch my first wave and end up in the cave"

I ask Freddy about his very first time surfing Nazaré. He tells me that due to his lack of experience surfing Praia do Norte, he decided to paddle from the South Beach. When arriving at North Beach, a jetski driver kindly picked him up and put him into the lineup. *"But the current and water was moving crazy fast and I had no chance to stand in the lineup,"* he says. The current was too strong to paddle against and it kept bringing him closer to the lighthouse and cliffs. *"I thought, ok, I don't want to catch my first wave and end up in the cave,"* he says laughing. *"So I gave up and paddled all the way back to the South Beach."*



Photo: ©Heidi Hansen

You have to be kind of crazy to paddle out on a really big day. I wonder if Freddy is not afraid. *"When I see crazy big walls I'm thinking, oh my God, I'm so happy! But there are some sizes where you get scared, you know,"* he answers laughing.

"It's a crazy good feeling! And if you realize you will NOT make it, you just.... pee in your pants"

We are talking about different types of waves and I ask what his favorite part of surfing is. *"Handling big drops! I love big, heavy drops, critical zones of drops, riding down the line and just feel the nature! To speak with the nature and be one with the nature. You know, when you ride down these big walls with the hand touching the water and you look up and, 'swoosh', you hear the sounds. It's a crazy good feeling! And if you realize you will NOT make it, you just.... pee in your pants,"* he says laughing out loud.

After listening to scary wipeout stories from around the world I ask if he gets more cautious after experiences like that. *"This is a crazy point. I mean, then I want more!"* Freddy laughs.

"If I stay too long away from surfing I get depressed, rude and aggressive"

When talking with Freddy at the end of the winter season we are not aware that the Corona virus will affect the way we live. Back then he told me that for him surfing is like a drug addiction and that he wants to surf all the time, and the only thing that make him depressed is if he gets injured and can't surf. *"That's the worst, you know, or if I am too long away from the coast."*

Early July I call him to check on him and how the Corona and quarantine situation has affected him and his life. He was planning to go to Mozambique or Namibia and Mexico this summer, but apparently the new situation means he's stuck in Berlin. *"If I stay too long away from surfing I get depressed, rude and aggressive,"* Freddy says laughing. *"So I am not in such a good mood anymore. I miss the surfing a lot, but maybe it's good in a way. We might realize more how much we miss the ocean and surf and appreciate it more when we are able to travel and be in the ocean again. Now travelling starts again, so it's all good. It's kind of luxury problems really."*

Freddy is right. Many things we previously have taken for granted will now, hopefully, be more appreciated. Let's hope the situation will change to the better and that we will both be back in Nazaré when the huge swells start rolling in coming winter. Keep your eyes open on this rising star big wave surfer Freddy Olander. He is going to be one to watch in the next few years. And to all the sponsors out there; he is looking for you right now ;-)



Freddy charging one of his favourite surfspots ; "Mexpipe".(Photo: ©Toni Sahn)