



SURFING PNG

Teresa Lyons

Photography by Jason Pini and courtesy of SAPNG

The Surfer's Association is a growing force behind tourism and sporting in Papua New Guinea. Who and what is behind the Surfer's Association of Papua New Guinea, and what have they been up to for the last twenty years?



In the early 1980s, a young boy fell from his motorbike while motocross racing, breaking his leg in the fall. He was rushed to a local hospital, where medical staff set his leg and sent him home in a cast. It eventually became apparent that the job was botched when he began walking with a limp – his leg was a centimetre shorter than it should have been. His father sent him to Brisbane in Australia, where the boy's leg was re-broken and set correctly. Strapped up to twenty pound traction weights and with metal pins protruding from his leg, the young lad was then moved to Maroochydore, where he would spend three months recovering.

With his leg in a cast, the boy would make his way gingerly down to the beach on crutches, and spend his afternoons watching the local surfers. The more time he spent at the beach, the more he longed to learn how to ride a surf board. Inspired, the boy convinced his father to allow him to complete his senior high school in Australia, so that he could take up surfing as a sport.

A few years later, Andrew Abel returned to Papua New Guinea with his surf boards. An accomplished young surfer, Andrew began to scour the

coastlines of PNG for good surf breaks. He could not have known then that what began as a young boy's passion for surfing would one day grow to become the driving force behind one of Papua New Guinea's most successful sporting and tourism bodies.

The Surfer's Association of Papua New Guinea was created from humble beginnings. A rag-tag team of Port Moresby based surfers got together and formed a close-knit group of surfers in 1988, some of whom included Andy, James Kruse, Michael Wright, Peter Aitsi, Stuart Wallace and several others. It wasn't until 1989, however, when Andy teamed up with good friend Hon. John Tekwei, who was then Governor of Sandaun Province, that the SAPNG was truly established.

One day, Andy received a phone call from a mate known as 'Crazy Tas', at the time a pilot for Talair who had been relocated from Port Moresby to Vanimo. Andy listened with growing excitement as Crazy Tas described magnificent point breaks and, astonishingly, whole communities of local Papua New Guineans who were seasoned surfers.

Without any tutoring or outside influence, villagers along the coastline

in Vanimo were seen riding wave breaks on pieces of carved wood from abandoned dugout canoes, fashioned into streamlined 'splinters', with the exception of one particular village which had been left with a surfing magazine from a lone surfer who had passed through in the early 80s. Without any access to modern surfing technology, they fashioned boards identical to the ones they saw in the pages of the surf magazine, complete with wooden fins and strips of inner tyre tubes for ankle straps. Even today, this community can be seen using these primitive versions of modern surf boards, quite unlike the 'splinters' seen in other villages.

Perhaps the most astounding discovery about all of these wave-riding communities was that there was strong evidence to suggest that they had been surfing waves for centuries. An ancient cultural festival involving the 'calling up' of waves indicates that these wave-riders have been surfing waves for a very long time - it has even been speculated that they have been surfing long before the Polynesians.

When Andy received that fateful phone call from Tas, he flew up to Vanimo and spent two weeks meeting



Above: 'Crazy Tas' and Andy Abel in the late 1980s. Below: The original members of the Vanimo Surf Club pause for a photo while clearing jungle to make room for their surf camp. Below right: A young grommet heads out for a wave with his body board. Opposite: Grommet on a splinter.

many different village communities and checking out their surf breaks. "Those were crazy days. Tas and I would hit the waves at five in the morning, and by seven-thirty Tas would be getting dressed in the cockpit, combing his wet hair and welcoming passengers on his flight."

Impressed by the region's breaks and even more so by the attitude of the people towards wave-riding, Andy returned to Port Moresby with a budding idea for surfing in PNG. Andy travelled back and forth between Port Moresby

and Vanimo, teaching young rural kids to surf and donating most of his surf board collection to eager surfers who had never had the luxury of a proper board.

In 1989, Andy and Hon. John Tekwei founded the first surf club in Papua New Guinea, the Vanimo Surf Club. Andy and John based the club out of Lido Village, established a surf camp for visiting surfers, and began to take memberships for the club. It was here that the marriage between surfing as a sport and surf tourism as a sustainable source of income began to present itself as a means to develop the sport, sustain their surf club, and directly benefit all parties involved in surfing and surf tourism.

Andy and fellow pioneering surfers started to guide their surf club and burgeoning surf tourism venture towards a community based approach that began with fulfilling the needs of local grass-roots communities.

With his view towards building up PNG surfing from the "bottom up", which would later become his trademark "bottom up approach", Andy's work with the Vanimo Surf Club took on a more focused role. That once rag-tag team of surfers consolidated to become the Surfer's Association of PNG, operating under the patronage of Kieran Nash, who has surfed in Papua New Guinea for some 30 odd years, and Andy's late father, Sir Cecil Abel KBE OBE.

Watching the ever increasing market for surf tourism and the growing demand for more exotic locations, the Association recognised in a statement by Kieran Nash in 1995 that the geographic

characteristics of Papua New Guinea required the sport to develop in each province, and would therefore need the support of individuals living in those areas. Perhaps most importantly, the Association acknowledged the need to encourage the growth of the sport at a rural level. "There is a real need to marry the aesthetics of the sport with commercial common sense, whilst never denigrating the cultural and geographical

