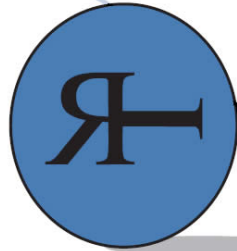
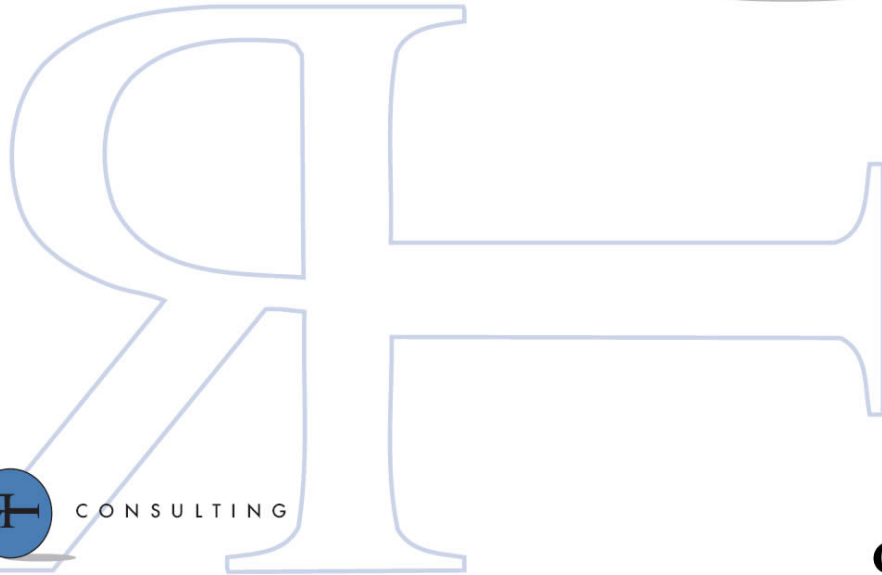


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**Castles Made of Sand:  
The 'Nirvanification' of  
the Mentawai Islands**

*di Jess Ponting*

## *Castles Made of Sand: The ‘Nirvanification’ of the Mentawai Islands*

*Jess Ponting\**

*Until 1992 a handful of scientific researchers and allocentric backpackers were the only foreigners to visit the Indonesia’s Mentawai islands – a remote and impoverished regency of West Sumatra plagued by epidemics of preventable disease and infant mortality rates as high as sixty percent. Within five years the global surf media transformed this depressed region into a surfer’s nirvana, the most filmed, photographed, written about and desired surfing tourism destination on earth. Despite this local communities are yet to benefit from surfing tourism. This paper provides a brief history of surfing tourism and presents empirical research demonstrating that the*

*surf media has been instrumental in socially constructing mythical surfing tourist space based upon four symbolic elements: perfect surf, uncrowded conditions, cushioned adventure and an exotic tropical environment. The generic nature of these elements has led to a disembedding of nirvana from its local context and the ‘writing out’ of local communities. The Mentawai nirvana is a castle made of sand under threatened by a rising tide of surfing tourism development and disgruntled destination communities. A re-embedding of nirvana in the local is advocated to secure the future of local communities in the management of their surf resources.*

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## *Castelli di Sabbia: La ‘Nirvanificazione’ delle isole Mentawai*

*Jess Ponting\**

*Fino al 1992 un esiguo numero di ricercatori scientifici, oltre ad isolati “allocentrici” saccopelisti, erano gli unici stranieri visitatori delle isole Mentawai.*

*Questo arcipelago, remota ed impoverita area del regno occidentale di Sumatra, era caratterizzato da epidemie di inarrestabili infezioni oltre a tassi di mortalità infantile vicini al sessanta per cento.*

*Nei successivi cinque anni l’ambito mediatico del surf globale ha trasformato questa regione depressa in un “nirvana per surfisti”.*

*I media hanno reso questa destinazione la più desiderata, facendone la più filmata e fotografata. Questo è avvenuto nonostante le comunità locali siano rimaste sostanzialmente lontane dal beneficiare dal segmento turistico degli amanti del surf.*

*Questo contributo fornisce una breve introduzione al fenomeno del turismo surfistico e presenta i risultati di una ricerca*

*empirica che dimostra come i “surf media” siano stati strumentali alla costruzione di uno spazio turistico dalla natura mitologica per il popolo dei surfisti. Quattro elementi simbolici hanno guidato tale processo: il surf perfetto, condizioni ambientali non affollate, piacevoli avventure ed un ambiente tropicale esotico. La natura generica di questi elementi ha portato a trasferire e spersonalizzare il nirvana dal suo contesto locale con anche il non coinvolgimento delle comunità locali. Il nirvana delle Mentawai è un castello di sabbia sotto il rischio di una marea crescente di sviluppo turistico surfistico ed il malcontento della comunità locale. Tornare però ad inquadrare il fenomeno nel giusto contesto dell’ area è auspicabile per assicurare il futuro delle comunità locali oltre che della gestione delle loro risorse legate al segmento degli amanti del surf.*

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# Castles Made of Sand: The 'Nirvanification' of the Mentawai Islands<sup>2</sup>

*Jess Ponting*

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the links between surfing tourism and the media. The paper develops a theoretical framework for understanding media/socially constructed surfing tourist space and presents findings of research into the role of the media in the 'nirvanification' of the Mentawai islands off the coast of West Sumatra, Indonesia. Until 1992 only a handful of foreign anthropologists, primatologists and allocentric backpackers had visited this region which is ravaged by preventable disease, poverty, virtually non-existent government services and infant mortality rates as high as sixty percent (Bakker, 1999; Barilotti, 2002; SAI, 2003, 2005). Within five years of surf media exposure the Mentawai were transformed into the most filmed, photographed, written about and desired surfing tourism destination on earth.

The media created a mythical surfers' nirvana in the Mentawai which surf tourism entrepreneurs were quick to capitalise upon. For the equivalent per-night cost of a four star hotel surfers can live the surfing 'dream' in relative luxury, separated from the terrestrial realities of the region on live-aboard chartered yachts and motor cruisers (Ponting, 2001; Ponting, McDonald, & Wearing, 2005). Despite the development of a multi-million dollar tourism industry local communities are yet to benefit from surf tourism. The surf media has been instrumental in discursively transforming some of the world's least developed regions into 'disembedded' (Giddens, 1990) mythical tourist spaces. These nirvanic spaces are based on a fragile balance of symbolic elements and represent castles made of sand under threat of melting in to the sea in the wake of a rising tide of tourism development and discontent destination communities.

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<sup>2</sup> *Magazines and videos produce dream imagery of these islands [Mentawai] that can gnaw like a giant worm through the consciousness to join food, shelter and the desire to procreate as a fundamental human compulsion, an addiction to dwarf the most malevolent drug. (D.C. Green, 2002 Surfer's Path Magazine: 85)*

## 2. Surfing Tourism and the Media: A brief history

Links between surfing, the media and tourism are as old as the modern surfing era. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with Hawaiian culture in tatters at the hands of missionaries and disease, surfing was all but forgotten (George, 2000; Kampion, 2003; Warshaw, 2004). At this time Mark Twain (in 1866 for the *Sacramento Union* newspaper) and later Jack London (in 1907 for *Women's Home Companion Magazine*) piqued mainland America's interest in surfing in the mainstream media (Kampion, 2003; Warshaw, 2004). The media and marketing appeal was recognised and in 1907 surfing was adopted as a central tenet of Hawaii's destination image "to spread abroad the attractions of Hawaii, the only islands in the world where men and boys ride upright on the crests of waves" (Ford in Lueras, 1984: 70-71). This role secured surfing's survival into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The introduction of surfing in mainland USA and Australia is similarly linked to place marketing and public relations media drives in the early 1900s (Reed, 1999; Walding, 2003). Its popularisation amongst youth in the early/mid 1960s was a product of a teenage trend that swept through the US in the form of Gidget surf movies

(beginning 1959), The Beach Boys (first hit in 1961) and a range of teen-targeted 'surf'/beach movies. Australia followed several years later (Booth, 1994, 1995; Cronley, 1983; Walding, 2003). In both cases media driven teen marketing led to a dramatic increase in the number of people wanting to surf and a cultural backlash by surfers struggling to maintain their identity in a sea of teen fad followers.

*Prior to Gidget a Malibu surfer could pretty much ride any wave he wanted. Crowding was virtually unheard of and every surfer knew every other surfer at the home break. Gidget changed all that in one season by making surfing seem sexy and adventurous to millions of movie goers...One year there were about twenty surfers at Malibu, the next year there were hundreds (Reed, 1999: 16).*

Crowding at many local surf breaks led to surfers searching further a field for uncrowded locations (Carroll, 2000). Around the same time a dedicated surf media developed and began reporting on, and indeed providing funding for, those exploring for new surf discoveries in exotic locations.

The surf media funded and documented the discovery of a high-quality surf break at Uluwatu, Bali in 1971 (Elfick, 1971a; Falzon, 1972). This has been acknowledged as something of a starting point for the mass colonization of Indonesia's surf breaks by Australian

surfers (Abraham, 1996; King, 1996). In de Certeau's (1988) terms, the media established the nature and boundaries of a new space for surfing tourists. In defining this new space a style of reporting supporting Pratt's (1992: 204) notion of the 'monarch of all I survey' and Selwyn's (Selwyn, 1993) 'view from the throne' undermined the legitimacy of local ownership of environmental resources whilst elevating the surfer to the status of superhero. The following quote from 1971 describes the scene as surfers first encountered the waves at Uluwatu:

*The natives who were lining the cliff tops freaked at this man walking on the water. They are frightened of the ocean, only venturing near it at low tide to set their lines, and here were these men walking at great speed on the water...smiling and ripping across the surface with excitement...they were sunshine supermen. (Elfick, 1971a: 16-17)*

The Australian surf media was defining a new tourist space. Bali became synonymous with 'juice surf...cheap living, ganja and a lush tropical climate', considered to be the components of an 'ideal place to surf it out' (Elfick, 1971b). Articulation of the new surfing tourist space was primarily concerned with perfect surf and the freedom of exploration, its' discourse encouraged a certain level of political and cultural disengagement with the destination. Barilotti (2002: 37)

observed that 'most surfers travel not to experience another culture...the indigenous people are an obstacle or a friendly nuisance to sidestep on the way to the water'.

After the media exposure of Uluwatu in 1971 and 1972, surfing tourism to Indonesia began to flourish and was first targeted by the wider tourism industry in the mid 1970s (Bartholomew & Baker, 1996). Rudimentary 'surf-camp' and live-aboard yacht charter tours emerged in the early 1980s and by the end of the decade entrepreneurs targeted less adventurous but wealthy surfers with a new, exclusive, industry produced 'business-class' style of surfing tourism involving direct flights, prompt and comfortable transfers and luxury yachts or resorts (Bartholomew & Baker, 1996; Buckley, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Carroll, 2000; Rich, 1981; Sparkes, 1985; Verrender, 2000).

'Soul marketing' emerged in the 1990s to exploit the adventure and freedom associated with the ethos of early surf explorers in mass marketing campaigns (Brown, 1997). A simulation of surf exploration in Indonesia was used to sell Coca-Cola in television, film, and print advertising. Surfwear company 'Rip Curl' soon followed with a marketing campaign that included continuous surf exploration, a video shoot, and a print media advertising

campaign featuring images of empty, perfect, undisclosed and often retouched surf breaks accompanied by slogans urging consumers to 'go search' and 'travel a little further, search a little longer' (Carroll, 2000). Surfwear multinational 'Quiksilver' recently concluded the 'Quiksilver Crossing' involving a chartered boat and amphibious aeroplane in an eight-year global circumnavigation with professional surfers, photographers and cinematographers (Hammerschmidt, 2004). A powerful marketing synergy between surf media, corporations and tour operators has created a sense of nostalgia for the 'pristine' surfing spaces constructed by the early surf explorers. Buckley (2003) captured the essence of this arrangement in describing the content of surfing magazines.

*The main bulk of these magazines, however, consists of heavily illustrated articles, most of them featuring sponsored surfers at locations visited by surf tour operators, photographed by professional surf photographers. Video footage from the same trip is used to make surf videos and DVDs, which are advertised through the same magazines... These magazines help to sell surfing equipment and surfing tours, and the equipment advertisements and surf tour stories help to sell the magazine. (Buckley, 2003: 131)*

All of this prompts an important question, what discourse has emerged from this

marketing synergy and what influence has it had upon the development of surf tourism? The power of media representations of surf tourism is articulated in the following extract from an interview with a surf tourist in Indonesia:

*I think I was chasing these perfect waves more than anything. You hear so much about Indonesia and see so much, so many photos in magazines, and when you surf and to see that stuff and not be able to experience it; it could drive a man insane. (Ponting, 2000)*

The surfing media has, to a large extent, created the symbols sought out by contemporary surfing tourists. Surf tourism has become a commercially motivated and controlled leisure experience, the surf media creates a voyeuristic keyhole into a mythical surfer's nirvana. Surfwear consumers and would-be surfing tourists dream of falling through the surf media looking glass to find themselves cast in their own adventures in Wonderland. New surf locations have been presented to the surfing public as generic, paradisaical discoveries in secret locations defined by a suite of symbolic elements describing a commonly perceived 'dream' of a surfer's nirvana. This discourse has provided the lens through which many surfing tourists, particularly those who now travel on luxury package tours, view tropical surfing

destinations in some of the world's least developed regions. The nirvanification of such places has resulted in rapid, unplanned and unmanaged surfing tourism development directly linked to the release of particular magazine articles or films (Ponting et al., 2005). The surf media has become an extremely effective destination marketing channel which can push unsuspecting villages down the slippery slope to large scale surfing tourism.

### **3 The Nirvanification of the Mentawai Islands**

This section presents results of qualitative grounded theory research undertaken over six months of field research in West Sumatra in 2003 and ongoing contact with key participants in the surfing tourism industry, the surf media and the surf manufacturing and retail industries. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted in the field with a range of stakeholders including tourists (yacht and land based), tour operators (both expatriate and Indonesian), local community members, the surf media and global surf manufacturing corporations. The names of participants have been altered in order to respect their anonymity.

Themes of 'dreams come true', 'paradise found', 'Utopia lived', 'the best waves of

my life', quickly reached saturation in data collected from surfing tourists in the field. The following are excerpts of guest entries from a live aboard charter boat visitors' book provided to the research by the boats captain.

*The perfect waves of the Mentawai Islands are what dreams are made of. We got the best waves of our lives.*

*The Mentawais changed my way of thinking and gave me a good look at what Utopia and Paradise is like. Surfing here is better than sex: your mates get to watch and cheer, pat you on the back and share the video highlights afterwards whilst having a beer and a feed.*

*What more could a person ask for...we surfed world-class waves practically by ourselves. Thanks for a very memorable trip and making a dream of mine come true.*

*This was the funnest [sic] trip of my life...You guys have helped make a lifelong dream of mine come true!*

A high degree of congruency was noted in the articulation of nirvana between individuals of disparate ages, backgrounds and nationalities. This points to a common, pre-existing 'dream of nirvana' and overlapping understandings of the symbols which comprise it. Indeed the dream of nirvana drives every part of the surf industry and it is incumbent upon the surf industry to ensure it remains at the



forefront of surfer consciousness and discourse to secure ongoing profitability (Buckley, 2003; Ponting, 2001; Ponting et al., 2005; Ponting & Wearing, 2003; Surfer'sPath, 2002). As surfing became increasingly popular \ surf publications were commodified and taken over by glossy mainstream sports, fashion and consumer magazine publishing houses. The interests of advertisers and the priorities of publishers became of paramount concern. Those charged with marketing the global surf industries were quick to understand the powerful appeal of nirvanic imagery and discourse and have played a lead role in the apotheosis of nirvana in surf media and surf marketing discourse.

*Over the last 20 or so years these nirvanic pictures of places have become important commercial currency for big surf companies...then, the surf mags have grown increasingly into a marketing arm of the surfing industry. (Tom)*

A strong link emerged between conceptions of nirvana, the desire to travel and the surf media. For many the dream of nirvana began with childhood fantasies inspired by surf media imagery.

*It motivates all of us as surfers, that thing where you're dreaming lying on your bed at home as a small kid and you've got posters up on your wall*

*and all of those posters are beautiful tropical islands and insane waves all over the world. (Griff)*

*It boils back down to the posters you had on your walls as a kid. How often did the guy in the posters become you? (Sean Doherty)*

Some participants recognised the significance of a particular single image in the construction of their own understanding of nirvana and in motivating them to undertake surfing tourism.

*I think everyone traces the popularisation of the Mentawais back to the picture of the huge left that Ross Clarke Jones was on. That one image was probably more powerful than the talk I heard. I think that holds true for a lot of surfers. One image, they can pick it up in a mag and it'll stick in their brain and there's something about the image that captures their imagination and they sort of have to go there. I can't explain it better than that. (Paul)*

Quiksilver surf film *Surfers of Fortune* (1994) was one of the first films based solely in the Mentawai to penetrate deeply into the consciousness of the global surfing community. The film was widely referenced by participants in this research, particularly those who stayed on beyond their initial visit as a surfing tourist to establish their own surfing tourism operations.

*I watched a movie by Quiksilver called the Surfers of Fortune...I just knew I wanted to go where this*

*movie was filmed...Such perfect waves you know. In the movie they were just getting these incredible barrels and I just thought 'I've got to go and find what these guys are surfing'. (Marco)*

*To make a long story short I saw a video called Surfer's of Fortune put out by Quiksilver and I watched it again and again and again and again because I was just blown away. (Carter)*

The release of *Surfers of Fortune* and the concurrent global surf media obsession with the Mentawais in the mid-1990s fuelled demand for Mentawai boat charters, surf tourism entrepreneurs slowly built supply and before long two weeks in nirvana in previously impossible levels comfort and safety was within reach of any surfer able to pay the price of admission. It is important to note the pivotal role played by the marketing exercises of surf corporations transmitted through the surf media in generating awareness of the Mentawais and in driving demand. Surf corporation marketing executive 'Ray' explains.

*All these great photos, besides promoting the image of our companies as being real and a part of the movement - 'at the forefront' - it was also inadvertently fuelling this desire to go to these exotic far flung locations...No wonder all of those operators popped up because we were creating the demand of all these people wanting to get there. All the operators had to do was stick their accommodating vessel there and we were inadvertently creating the market for it. (Ray)*

#### **4. Four Symbolic Elements of Nirvanification**

Four categories of data, referred to here as symbolic elements, emerged from the data to house the dreamlike and dreamed of utopian qualities of nirvana described by surfing tourists and tour operators. These can be traced back to nirvanic imagery popularised by the media.

1. perfect waves,
2. uncrowded conditions,
3. the 'cushioned adventure' provided by charter boat surfing tourism, and
4. an exotic, tropical natural environment.

Nirvanic space is extremely lucrative both in terms of its tourism potential and in terms of the imagery it provides for surf industry marketing purposes. It occurs in the Mentawais at the intersection of the four symbolic elements. All four are not necessarily vital for the establishment of nirvanic surfing tourist space in other regions however the perfect wave is an element common to all conceptions of nirvana.

##### *Perfect Waves*

George (2000), Kampion (2003), Ormrod (2005), Walding (2003) and Warshaw

(2004) all form direct links between the notion of the perfect wave, its entry into the lexicon of surfing and Bruce Brown's 1964 surfing film *The Endless Summer: In Search of the Perfect Wave*. Shared understandings of what a perfect wave looks like are socially constructed and communicated to surfers through the surf media (Preston-Whyte, 2002). The shape and size of the perfect wave has changed markedly since Brown's 1964 depiction of a long, soft breaking chest high wave. Surfboard design evolved and became more refined and better able to ride larger, steeper waves, eventually allowing the surfer to ride inside the 'tube' or 'barrel' of a hard breaking wave. In the late 1960s/early 1970s larger, tubing waves, such as those found throughout the south western coasts of Indonesia's islands became the most common interpretation of a perfect wave (George, 2000). All surf tourist participants cited perfect waves as the primary focus of their trip to the Mentawais.

*Most of it is chasing the Holy Grail, the chance of maybe getting insane waves... That hope of f\*\*\*\*n' just all time perfect insane waves. And when you find it it's just like YEAH! Found it! Matt*

Most operators reinforced that the motivating force behind surfing tourism in the Mentawai was a search for the perfect

wave informed by the media. That the surf tourist

*...wants to know that he's going to get that nirvana - that he's going to get that perfect wave everybody's been promising him. The media, the websites of the operators, the movies that he sees that only use the best waves. They don't show the slop. And then when it eventually does happen he'll be standing right next to you and the waves will be absolutely gorgeously perfect. He'll turn to you and ask, 'is that perfect'? You actually have to assure him that yes that's it. You dream has come true! You have arrived. It has happened. (Marco)*

#### *Uncrowded Conditions*

Perfect surf is rarely mentioned in the context of nirvana without qualifying that it should be uncrowded. Crowding has been the subject of academic discussion both in the context of outdoor recreation (Manning, 1999) generally and in the specific context of surfing tourism in the Mentawais (Buckley, 2002b). However surfing tourists' own words are most effective in explaining the importance of uncrowded surfing conditions and why this is a key symbol of nirvana.

*It sounds greedy but the dream scenario is when you're out in perfect conditions just with your friends or as small a group as possible so you can get all the waves you want and don't have to share. (Tony)*

### *Cushioned Adventure*

The element of being onboard a live-aboard boat appears to hold a romantic appeal for many surfing tourists on a number of levels. The boat itself does indeed appear to symbolise freedom and adventure and as such holds a certain mystique for those who have not travelled in this manner before. Further, the luxuries afforded by travel onboard a purpose outfitted surf charter boat in remote regions like the Mentawais are valued by tourists.

*There's definitely a sense of adventure being out on a boat, out on the high seas, sort of a classical romantic element to it...It was something I'd never done before, it was sort of adventurous not only to be on the trip but to be on the boat. (Tony)*

While the surfing tourists enjoyed the sense of adventure they also acknowledged the cushioning effect of the tour operator which allowed them to simply focus upon surfing rather than expending energy interacting with what is a difficult travelling environment.

*This is the easy way to do it, to go on this trip. Pay to play. Hold your hand. Its like we're in a little plastic bubble and everything is catered to us and we're taken around here and there. (Jeff)*

Some tour operators bordered on being resentful of the ease with which boat based

tourists are able to experience the Mentawai region. Tourists' perception of adventure is juxtaposed against the operators' view.

*This is a package holiday, nothing more than that. Their food is cooked for them, they're stitched up if they get hurt, and they've got travel insurance. They get picked up on day one at the airport and dropped off at the airport on day 14 and hopefully everything goes smoothly in between. There are very few uncertainties. Marco*

Limited or controlled interaction with local people was identified as an important component of nirvana by tour operators. Local people don't feature in the dream of nirvana. Certainly the soft focus imagery adopted by nirvanic marketing campaigns does not include local people in any meaningful way, other than as 'local colour'. It then comes as no surprise that local people have been written out of nirvana. Surfing tourists do not look for them in their quest to gather proof that the symbols of nirvana were satisfied on their trip. Interaction with locals could be disturbing, risky and potentially frightening for surfing tourists.

*It's that little bubble, that perfect thing. It doesn't really include any local cultural exchange in their nirvana dream. So as a result of that they [surfing tourists] maybe don't look for it. In the fulfilment of that dream they're looking for the elements that*

*have been part of their imagination. Local culture isn't part of that. (Griff)*

### *Pristine, Tropical Environment*

*Little sandy atolls and coral reefs with beautiful fish, palm trees, warm beautiful water that changes colour every ten minutes. You get deep aquas and turquoises, every single shade of blue and green you've ever seen, and you can see all of them in a day. And you can see another set the next day: green, blue and white. (Sam)*

The imagined landscape of nirvana amongst surfer participants was universally assumed to be pristine, tropical and exotic, relatively untouched by human development. In the quote above Sam has distilled the natural environment in nirvanic imagery and his own imagination down to three colours, 'green, blue and white'. The generic symbols of tropical nirvanic imagery – clear blue or green water, sand islands or coral atolls, white sandy beaches and palm trees – look quite similar through the soft focus lens of the surf media and the distracted gaze of the surfing tourist.

*You don't want to narrow things down too much for people. You want to let them fill in the spaces... We knew that when we went to the Mentawais we knew that we had that, the pure perfection of Lance's Rights. So many people could relate to that, that was really attractive...I identified that for us as really quite an important thing...the only thing that could be better would be if those waves*

*were in Tahiti, because its blue. The Mentawais is green. (Ray – global surf corporation marketing executive)*

The tendency of surf marketing to be ambiguous about locations adds to the idea that nirvana could be anywhere. This is reflected in Ray's comment about the Mentawais, his focus as a surfwear marketer is exclusively upon the islands' value as nirvanic marketing imagery. From this perspective, given the soft focus approach to particular destinations, the Mentawais are reduced to just another photo shoot location for display in the media. Not particularly special or unique.

*I don't think that the Mentawais is anything unique. It's not like it's any different from Hawaii or Tahiti, Fiji or Bali in that it's just another new set of images that excites the imagination of boardriders. It's no more different than Bali was from Hawaii or Hawaii was from Tahiti. (Ray)*

## **5. Theorising Nirvana – Castles made of sand**

John Urry highlighted the importance of the media in creating the anticipation of 'intense pleasures...constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records, and videos' ((Urry, 1990: 3; 2002: 3). Over the last 50 years

the media have carried imagery of perfect surf on deserted paradisiacal islands (Cronley, 1983; Kampion, 2003; Walding, 2003; Warsaw, 2004). Preston-Whyte (2001: 309) credits the surf media with constructing and maintaining imagery of 'the perfect wave' which has become the source of surfers' search for the perfect wave.

The focus of surf travel media, based on the interest of the consumer and industry sponsorship, is based very much upon product and logo placement, surfing conditions and the reactions of professional surfers to those conditions rather than informed representations of cultural and environmental diversity. Duncan (1993: 46) notes the 'other' in travel media is generally located in the past and exoticised by the dominant discourse. Indeed the surf media has tended to represent contemporary indigenous communities as timeless 'lost tribes' even head-hunters (c.f. GBI, 2000; Ridgway, 1995)

Taking a position similar to Edensor (1998; 2000), Suvantola argues that tourist space is largely mythical and involves the deployment of standardising mechanisms associated with commodification so that 'different places are easily perceived to be similar everywhere' (Suvantola, 2002: 132). In this view, by marginalising and

standardising the 'other', surfing tourist discourse encourages perceptions of generic tropical paradise locations. As the previous section demonstrated, in the case of the Mentawai these generic locations are symbolised by the perfect wave, uncrowded conditions, cushioned adventure and exotic tropical environments.

Terkenli (2002: 228) conceptualises a global cultural economy of space in which the tourist is positioned as an 'increasingly passive agent observer, fascinated, entranced and entangled with the images of the contemporary objective world'. The tourist in this case is seduced by surf media imagery of the perfect wave in a generic tropical paradise. In Terkenli's view the tourist's focus has become more centred upon pleasure and hedonism. The pleasure/hedonism concept applied to tourist space can be likened to the global homogeneity of shopping malls, leisure centres and supermarkets, or 'non-places' offering comfort in a 'dream-like admixture of codes' – this type of commodified leisure Rojek (1993) argues is 'the dreamworld of Modernity'. Zukin (1991: 27) makes the case that the mobility and flexibility associated with postmodern space undermines one's sense of living in specific and unique locales and increases the feeling of belonging to a universal

cultural space. Giddens (1990) referred to universalised cultural space in terms of 'disembeddedness', meaning that identity and action are influenced by references with vast geographical reach. In the context of surfing tourism the constructed notion of the 'perfect wave' and the comfortable hedonistic pleasure associated with the nirvanic dreamworld provides references that prevail over multiple destinations in euphoric physical transcendence of, and detachment from, the realities of everyday life in each geographic location. The disembedding of nirvana has enabled the development of a model of surf tourism which is market focussed, economically neo-liberal and disconnected from local place and people. Unregulated free-market approaches to development in less developed regions place local people as just one relatively powerless stakeholder group amongst many others. As a result local people are usually the last to benefit from economic development based upon the exploitation of their resources yet shoulder the bulk of deleterious impacts (Mahapatra, 1998; Smith, 2000; Timothy & Tosun, 2003).

## 6. Conclusion

On the basis of primary research this paper has argued that nirvana is a fragile

symbolic construction based upon four symbolic elements: perfect surf, uncrowded conditions, an exotic environment and soft adventure cushioned by the tourism industry. Surf marketing encourages an intentionally generic approach to surf destinations in its marketing and in the media to suggest a timeless quest for a surf Shangri-La. Indeed parallels exist between nirvanic surfing tourism and Shangri-La tourism which seeks the site of James Hilton's (1933) fictitious utopian lamasery. Exposure and exploitation of these regions by the tourism industry, despite best efforts to maintaining their Shangri-la/Nirvanic qualities leads to a betrayal of the myth. As such the symbolic anchors of Shangri-la/Nirvana are destabilised and the mythical space becomes mobile, and moves in search of a new area in which to anchor its self (Bishop, 1989; Cater, 2001; Hutt, 1996).

Analysis of primary data from the Mentawai reveals that surfing tourists share a common media disseminated understanding of the symbolic elements from which nirvana is constructed. The Mentawai people do not rank among these symbolic elements and have been written out of the nirvanic myth. Now, after more than a decade of watching surfing tourism dollars literally sail past their villages, the

Mentawai people are beginning to force change upon an industry which continues to ignore their presence for fear of tarnishing the dream of nirvana (Persoon, 2003; Ponting, 2001; Ponting et al., 2005; Reeves, 2002) . The situation has begun to attract international attention and the surf media have begun to question the original positioning of the Mentawais as an uninhabited surfers' nirvana. The nirvanic sand castle is melting slowly into the sea.

The overlaying and displacement of local space by surf tourist space in the Mentawai has taken place in the absence of systematic attempts to foster cross-cultural understanding. Such approaches were enabled by a lack of media scrutiny of the well being of local communities as, uninvited, surf tourism invaded their realm. What is required in order to secure local communities a presence in nirvana is a 're-embedding' of nirvana in the local. The surf media needs to re-embed nirvana in the local realities of a destination rather than condemning these places to the anonymity and substitutability of a generic and disembedded nirvana. The analysis presented here suggests that the media should behave in a manner which acknowledges the inevitable response of

surfers to the exposure of new surfing destinations and the gravity of this response for local communities. The surf media and surf corporation marketing activities DO start tourism gold rushes with real life impacts for destination communities. Unprepared destination communities allow foreign interests to take control of the surfing resource, setting local interests back decades.

This research also suggests that there needs to be a change in the discourse of the surf media from a position of advocating the rights of surfers to travel freely where ever they wish and access the surf resources of local communities, to a position which respects local ownership of ocean and reef resources by local resource owners and centralising their needs and concerns in the surfing tourism equation rather than the other way around. To achieve sustainable results the industry needs to engage with local communities and enter into joint ventures which provide human resource development opportunities for local people all the way to management level and not just in terms of service provision. These issues need to be discussed by the surfing media rather than avoided as has been case in the Mentawais for fifteen years.



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