


# The Ocean as your master

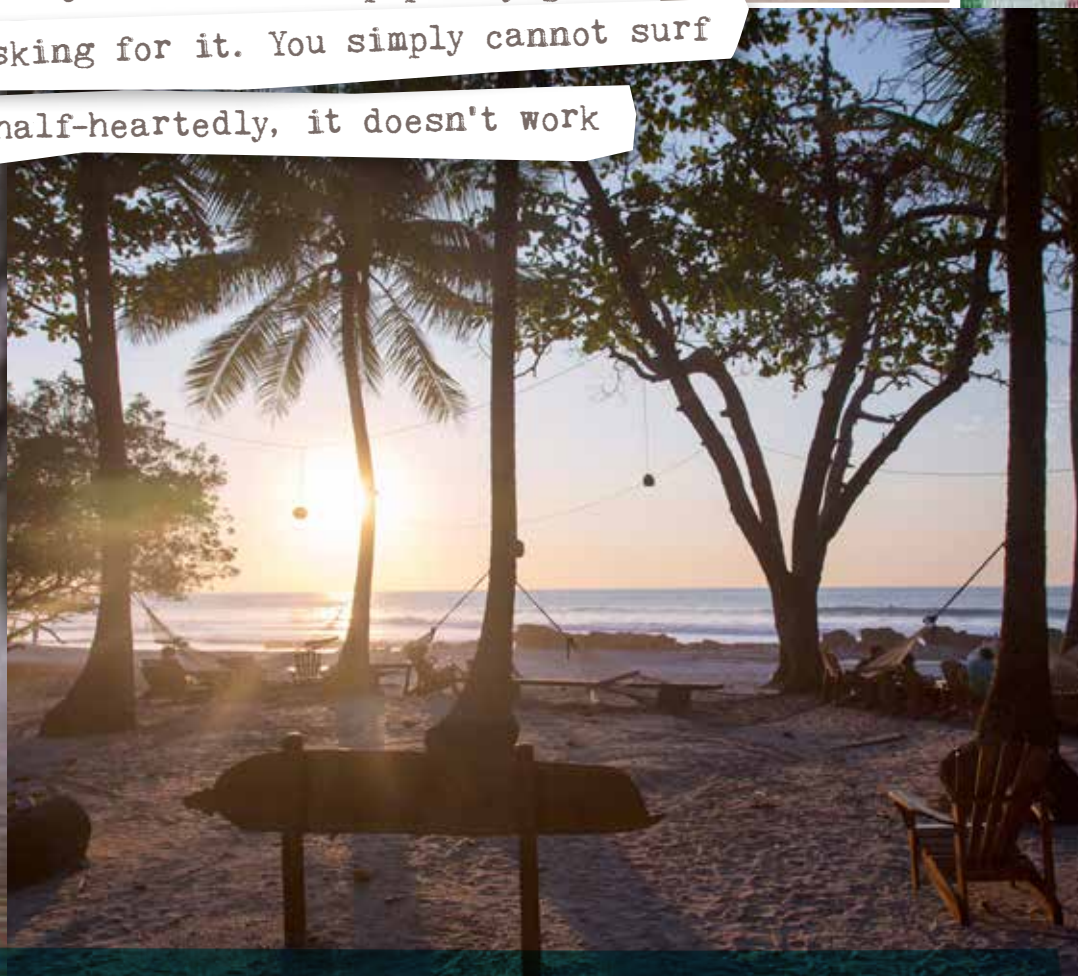
A full-page photograph of a person walking on a beach at sunset, carrying a surfboard. The person is seen from the back, walking towards the ocean. The surfboard is light-colored with blue and yellow patterns. The beach is dark sand, and the ocean has white-capped waves. The sky is filled with clouds, illuminated by the warm light of the setting sun. The overall mood is serene and adventurous.

Deputy editor Eveline Helmink had been dreaming of a surfing adventure for years. Not only because of sun, sea and sand, but also as a spiritual experience in surrender and control. On the Costa Rican coast, she discovered that the ocean was truly her master: strict but fair.





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I'm woken by a strange drumming sound. Through my eyelashes I can see the earliest light of dawn slanting through the curtains and onto the wooden floor in long strips. Plagued by half-waking dreams and a foggy jetlag, I try to pinpoint where the sound was coming from. Is it the rattling air-conditioner, or the fan over my bed? Is it a monkey on my balcony, playing with the shells I gathered on the beach yesterday? Then suddenly I realise: it's the rain. I'm hearing the sound of rain on the roof and the window panes. When I push back the curtain a little, I see water gushing down along the bars of the French doors. The palm leaves bend down humbly under the weight of the streaming water. Rain in sunny Costa Rica. Fat drops plop into the sand of the idyllic beach, onto the pebbled path into the jungle, onto the roof of my wooden cabin. It wasn't even supposed to rain here yet, not for several months. And most definitely not now, not while I'm here. I came here to practise surrender, or rather – to practise everything. I really didn't have to travel this far to learn that life doesn't unfold on my conditions. I got enough practical experience of that at home in the Netherlands over the past few years. But now it's keeping me awake anyhow. Rain in paradise.

### Insight

Seeing as I can't sleep anymore anyway, I walk out to the yoga deck at the crack of dawn. I must admit it's lovely and warm out, and the moist air feels fresh. I stand on the covered deck and view the green jungle and the gorgeous beach beyond. It's one of the most beautiful beaches of the Nicoya peninsula – possibly of the world. The imperturbable ocean pushes its waves up and down the sand. The light of the sun, rising from behind the hills beyond the beach, reveals a few distant black dots bobbing on the water. The first surfers are early, even today; the rain hasn't stopped them. I sit in the lotus position next to a Buddha statue, and together we watch as one of the surfers speeds ahead now and then to catch a wave. They seem to float, almost in slow motion. This is why I came here, to learn that too. Surfing. Partly because it's a wonderful metaphor for life, partly just because it's cool. For some reason, surfing and the ocean appeal to me. I took some lessons in Australia once, I did it in California and on the French coast. I want to see the waves and those who tame them. I admire them, I want to do that too. This week that moment has

come, my moment, and I want it all so badly – the water, the surfing, a peeling nose – that I have wished fervently for the circumstances to be nothing less than perfect. Perfect as in dry, for example. Chris, our yoga instructor, steps onto the deck behind me, as do the other women who are getting surfing classes this week at Pura Vida Adventures. The business is owned by American surfer Tierza Eichner. She found herself here, on the beach at Malpais, ten years ago and has stayed ever since. Chris, a true Costa Rican, grins widely while she zips open her monstrous wind-breaker and reveals her fantastic yogi body. "Rain!" she says, beaming. "It's been eleven years since it last rained here at this time of year. How wonderfully refreshing! What a great gift to nature and to us. The universe is so generous and providing!" Errmmm... yes. I hadn't quite looked at it that way, that what's causing me grief could be a blessing for vegetable patches, flower buds, and animals in need of drink. Besides, the sky is clearing up now. The sun has cleared the hills and does what it's supposed to do around the equator: shine. I smell the sweet, heavy scent of the wet wood, the flowers and the moist soil, and I laugh at myself while I take a yoga mat off the pile for our asanas. What a waste of energy, moping about nothing at the crack of dawn. I draw a card from the pile of insight cards spread out on a mat by Chris, and I put it at the head of my mat. Have faith, it says. Your dreams are manifesting. Remain positive and follow your guidance.

### Crystal-clear, lukewarm

I'm here to surf, but the day always starts with a yoga session. Yoga and surfing have a lot in common, and the combination is getting more and more popular worldwide. Surfers and yogis both practise control, concentration, flexibility and strength, surrender and connection. The yoga philosophy can easily be practised on a board; the actual surfing is like doing an asana. Chris explains over breakfast: you practise your breathing in and under water, and you tune all your senses to what happens around you while you're waiting for a good wave. She's a surfer herself, obviously; they all are. The waiters at the hotel, the taxi driver, the bank manager, the girl at the smoothie bar – everyone has a board. I can't wait to plunge into the waves every day. The water is crystal-clear and lukewarm. The waves are >





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> high and roll onto the beach for dozens of meters. The first few days we practise in white water, the foaming waves just behind the breakers. Faces covered in zinc ointment (at first I didn't want the scary *Scream* mask, but pretty soon I realised that the sum of tropical sun and salt water really didn't leave me much choice but to forget about my looks for a bit) and dressed in a UV-resistant shirt, we go for it. We practise pop-ups: get up on the board and stay up while the water pushes the board towards the beach. A childlike pleasure. Again, again! I fall hard in the shallow water and scrape my knees. Sometimes I just ride the wave to the end, lying flat on my stomach, just for fun. I'm getting better. My right foot plants itself faster and more firmly on the board under my chest. I get quicker at finding a point to focus on in the greenery on the edge of the beach, while I find my balance on the board by feeling. After a few days, I'm secretly pretty pleased with my progress.

### Strict but fair

It's wonderful to be so close to the ocean, night and day. I feel a profound respect for this infinite amount of water covering such a large part of the globe, rippling and weaving and flowing under the influence of the moon, driving its waves for thousands of kilometres towards coastlines far beyond the horizon. I love being near the water, and all week long I enjoy intensely the sound of the rolling waves on the beach. I can hear it everywhere, even in my sleep. It has me rocking in my bed, cradled by invisible tides. I spend hours looking for shells and washed-up treasure, or standing in the shallow surf and musing until my feet are swallowed by the sand.

After only one day of surfing, my ears are full of sand and water, which makes it hard for me to hear properly. But I hear the pounding of my blood in my ears and I'm not even aware that I'm deaf, until someone looks at me questioningly or nudges me. Every now and then one of my ears pops open, so for a whole week I get "beginner's mind experiences" with the ocean, free of charge – there it is again! Listen to that! During a massage in the shade of the palm trees, both my ears suddenly pop open at the same time. So much noise, and it's so wonderful. "You are not a drop in the ocean," as Rumi wrote, "you are the entire ocean in a drop." I keep thinking about that because I hear the ocean in me and outside of me

alternately. Sometimes it sounds as if the waves are laughing at me as they crash at my feet, roaring cruelly. Other times it feels as if the warm water embraces and absorbs me when I float on a tidal pool between the rocks. The ocean is totally unaware of me, it's just there and it couldn't care less. And yet I make friends with this honest, funny, merciless buddy. And it makes friends with me. It sets itself up as a strict but fair master every time the connection with my source of energy groans and creaks.

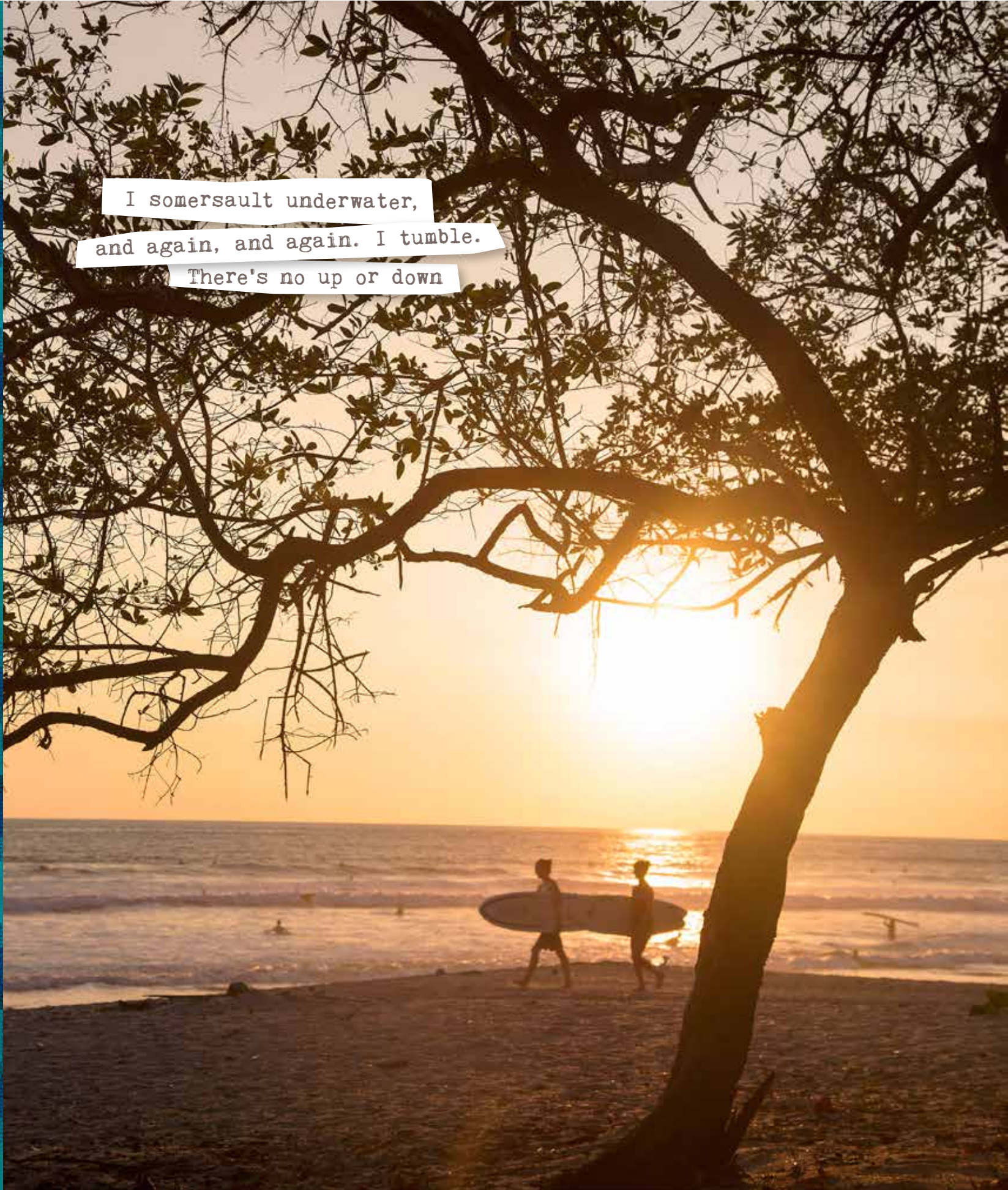
### Fail

One morning I feel tired and stiff. I'm battered and bruised and the salty water suddenly stings, although in the previous days all my pains and aches vanished in the rush. After my umpteenth flop up, my surf instructor Alejandra calls: "Why don't you go back to the beach to practice your pop-ups and remind your muscles how to do it?" Ouch. That's the last thing I want, to be sent out of the water. It feels like I'm back to square one, surfing on dry sand. Fail! With my board under one arm and my ego under the other, I wade back to where the sand is no longer shiny with water and plop down.

I look left, front and right. The spot where we surf today is every bit as beautiful as the name suggests: Playa Hermosa, gorgeous beach. It's very relaxed and quiet. The surf culture here in Costa Rica is not as hectic yet as in parts of Hawaii, California and Australia, where people compete over waves, gear and tricks. The power play is more important there than the surfing itself. Out here the circumstances are perfect, the atmosphere is friendly, and there are good, high surfing waves practically every day. Everything is just right. So why can't I manage it today? Ale gestures to me from the water: Everything okay? She does it by tapping the top of her head with her right hand. I return the gesture: Everything is fine. I should pull myself together and go back into the water. I walk back, but I feel the half-heartedness in every step. Come on, this isn't fearless, this isn't energetic. Pretty soon I get a good wave and I happen to be in a perfect position. I turn my board. "Paddle, paddle, paddle!" Ale shouts enthusiastically from a distance, and I start paddling. But before I'm even upright, the high wave swoops me off my board. A wipe-out, and a nasty one at that. A fierce tug on my left ankle – the board is always fixed to

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> the foot that goes at the back – tells me that my board is yanked away. A wall of water pushes me down into the waves. I somersault underwater, and again, and again. I tumble. There's no up or down. It's deep here, but I'm not afraid. What's more, I can feel my heart start to glow. I laugh, and I'm still laughing when I surface again, gasping for air. The ocean just shook me up pretty good, and I was asking for it. You simply can't surf half-heartedly, it doesn't work. Either you're in, or you're not. You turn doubts and fears into fuel for strength and focus. I get it now.

Spiritual life insurance

In spiritual circles, surfing is often used as a metaphor for life. They say things like, "You have to learn to surf on the waves of life." It's a good comparison, because everything is in constant motion in life, as well as in the water. Surfing is an exciting balancing act between surrender and control. You can't just bob around, let everything happen to you and let it push you around like an eggshell. On the other hand, you can't control the circumstances, no wave is ever the same, and every day is different. Sometimes life goes on quite nicely, other times the waves are too high and too strong. The surf culture has its origins in Hawaii. Many centuries ago, the islanders surfed on long wooden planks. Some waves were only for initiates, and some were so dangerously high that the Polynesians called them *awali*: waves reserved for the gods. There are numerous customs, gestures and rituals; some surfers still put a ti leaf in their shorts, an ancient ritual for a safe return to the coast because leaves will always wash up. I ask Percy, one of the surf instructors, to point out a ti plant to me. I put a leaf inside my bikini top. It seems to me a simple way to take out a kind of spiritual life insurance. Surf instructors Percy and Alejandra are from Costa Rica, but the other surfers I meet this week – Helen, Sara and Brett – sort of ended up here. Malpais is not a large community. The main road is a sandy path full of holes, with quads, dusty motorbikes and jeeps trying to navigate it. It's lined with a range of restaurants, smoothie bars, cafes, and some grubby surf shops and souvenir stalls. Let's just say this is not the place for architecture or a rich cultural experience. Not for luxury either – food shopping is outrageously expensive, there are regular blackouts, and online

stores don't deliver here (horror!). However, everyone here is enchanted by this heavenly place. We eat together every day and talk a lot about surfing and about their lives here. Percy's face lights up every time I ask him about the soul of surfing. "It's pure energy," he says in his charming Spanish English, his eyes big and dark. "It's so magical, that long road the waves travel before they reach this coast, that vital energy that makes the water roll on and on. Call it prana, call it chi. I can never get enough of it. Surfing is a lifelong journey." Helen, a British journalist, left her job at the BBC to be here. "This community is a tribe," she says. "Everything is about surfing, that's what you have in common. The things you eat, the time you get up, the places where you can be found; everyday life is dominated by the waves. I am living among soulmates."

Easy option

They are tanned, cheerful and relaxed, and really, really good at surfing. But I can't quite figure out if their surfing existence appeals to me or not. Sometimes I think, this is the real life... pure, simple. I have a ridiculous amount of possessions; 95% of my "essential" things would be completely useless here. Flip-flops, my bikini, a dress – that's enough. The food is pure and fresh: fruit from the trees, fish from the sea, coconut water from the woman with the mint green cooler, who picks the coconut for you on the spot. It's always warm, day and night. For days now

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I haven't felt the slightest inclination to watch the news. Current affairs exist somewhere else in a parallel universe. But sometimes I think, this is not real life. How can you grow old here? Is it PC to keep yourself so aloof from the world? What drives you, what about ambition, responsibilities, roots? It's not the first time that I feel this ambivalence about free souls. Somehow it's an easy option to be happy this way. Much easier than at home, where my happiness goes >



> hand-in-hand with a lot more fuss – it just does. I could be very happy here too. Wait, I am very happy here. One night I share my thoughts with Sara. She laughs, “I sometimes call this Peter Pan’s Neverland, nobody ever grows up here. But you mustn’t think everything about this place is easy. This is not a break. Nowhere else have I learned so much about disengaging, letting go, living in the here and now. It’s impossible to run away from anything or anyone here, and that keeps you prepared to see the best in every situation. The things I was so attached to at home are simply not here. Everything is an education here, not just the surfing. You have no choice but to accept and to go with the flow.”

We surf, and surf, and surf. It’s so great to be outdoors, surrounded by the elements. The salty water flushes all my worries away. It’s hard work, but so rewarding. After our surf sessions I often sit on one of the tree trunks on the beach and watch the surfers who are still in the water. Every night, there’s a spectacular sunset when that pulsating red ball sinks through a sky filled with pink, purple and yellow stripes, it’s almost obscene. The surfers bob in the front row, sitting backwards on their boards, waiting for the sun to disappear. Then they grab the last few waves. A beautiful sight. I’m beginning to notice that even the best surfers are not always able to grab the wave they want, and that they fall a lot. Maybe not right away, but they do eventually, and often. Surfing also means being prepared to go under. Somehow that comforts me. The plodding is part of the deal.

### Anyone who wants

There’s plenty of plodding going on. On the evening before my last day, the instructors are in a state of excitement. They check their phones during dinner, they look at maps and statistics. Their experience gives them an impressive wealth of knowledge about waves, currents, winds and tides. One of them noticed that there’s a chance of perfect waves tomorrow morning on the other side of the peninsula at a so-called point break. We will go far into the ocean, the ride through the hills will be absolutely crazy, and we’ll leave before dawn. But anyone who wants to go is welcome. Obviously I want to go. I’m the first in the van the next morning. The boards are already tied on the roof. We keep looking out the window along the way, at the tips of the trees and the wind,

and every time we reach a hilltop and the ocean comes into view, we look at the water. Everyone is excited. I’m not sure what to look for, but the faces of my fellow surfers tell me the news is good. In a small bay with hardly any other visitors, we put our boards on the pebbles. I wax mine for the last time, with an almost religious dedication. It feels like an intimate bilateral before a match. Then, it’s time for the first trial: an infernal hundred-yard walk through shallow waters, our bare feet stepping onto sharp stones. I can feel the rocks slicing into my toes, and it’s almost impossible to keep my balance with the board under my arm. Then there’s a second ordeal: paddling way out into the ocean. The waves keep pushing me back, and with every yard I progress, my courage fails me more. My hands dig in the water, my shoulders burn. How much further? I know that 95% of surfing is paddling, but still. Frankly the whole adventure is getting less and less cool, and by the time I’m bobbing far out on the ocean, I’m not sure that I should be here at all. Is this where pride goes before the fall? I move to the side of the set of waves and watch. The surfers who catch a wave go far back into the bay, towards the coast. It might be better if I just try one wave and let myself wash up on the beach. The others are good, much better than me, I don’t want to get in the way. And I seriously doubt if I can paddle back again this far. Ale calls out cheerfully, “Eve, look! It’s yours, girl!” pointing at a new set of waves in the distance. Okay then, this will be it, my very, very last wave.

I hear the water approaching. I feel my board coming to life with the speed of it. Without thinking, I jump up. I straighten up. I’m going. There’s no end to it. It is awesome. Only when I reach the shallow waters do I let myself drop backwards into the water, my arms raised. The safe beach is ahead of me. I turn around. I turn around and I paddle that awfully long stretch back. No one is really surprised. Of course I’m coming back. I will keep going, and keep coming back, until the waves calm down. This is why you surf, why you live: these moments that make everything worth the effort. My surfing buddies already knew that. They had already told me. It’s a lifelong journey. 🌿

**For more information, [www.puravidaadventures.com](http://www.puravidaadventures.com) offers surfing, yoga classes and retreats**

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