On the Pleasures of Surfing

BY AUBRY WAND

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It’s a good day – glassy, three to four feet – and no one in the water but my brother and me. The sun is beginning to set. The endless ocean, reflecting the last rays of light on the horizon, is just as spectacular as the cliffs above, covered with shades of red and orange. This image lasts no more than a minute, and as the colors fade, the water gets colder. Our wetsuits seem to lose their defense against the frigid Pacific, but we stay out long enough to see a pod of dolphins swim by – and get pounded by enough waves to call it a day.

Walking up a dirt trail, board under my arm and dusk enveloping the beach to my back, I’ve never been more at peace. At the top, we perform the standard “deck change,” using a towel to cover ourselves as we struggle to remove the layer of neoprene sticking to our bodies, though none of the local campers would have cared if we had stripped down to our birthday suits right there in the parking lot. Hunger sets in, so we head to La Fonda, a nearby restaurant that arguably serves the best lobster in Mexico. Finally, we retreat to the tent. And with the help of a few margaritas, not even the rocky floor or a sweatshirt for a pillow could stop us from getting a decent night’s sleep.

For a long time, I believed surfing was about catching waves and nothing else. This trip made me think otherwise. Just being out in the water gives you a chance to get in touch with feelings ignored in everyday life. There’s self-doubt when the waves are bigger than they appeared from shore and pure confidence after riding a wave until it dissipates, your body losing its energy with the swell. While sitting on the board, this duality exists: on the one hand, few things are more tranquil than dangling your feet in the water, floating like kelp with the sway of the tide. On the other, a creepy vibe can develop, which soon turns to fear – instead of looking out, you’re looking below into darkness, just waiting to get eaten by a 14-foot Great White.

I refer to the two days my brother and I spent south of the border on a surfing trip, even though surfing was only a part of it. We had just as good a time driving down the coast, taking in the sun and looking at the sea from the roads above. The two of us sharing the moment but lost in our own thoughts, with the Shins playing in the background and the clusters of homes built into the mountainside becoming only a memory.

Getting stuck in traffic crossing the border, heat sweltering, unable to use the AC because the tank was on empty – and the last place you want to run out of gas is the frenetic road leading out of Tijuana. Throwing health out the window and chain-smoking Camel Lights, partly as a distraction from the heat but more out of nostalgia – a bad habit, yet a brotherly tradition nonetheless. Finally, passing by the old men playing guitars and the little boys selling ice cream on the street, we both knew that we were leaving something behind, even though we weren’t sure what that thing really was.

These are the experiences that encapsulate surfing, the memories I’ll recall long before any wave. Appreciating the beauty and power of the ocean, traveling to an unknown place, forgetting about myself and my cares: that’s what I find in surfing. The perfect wave comes around once in a lifetime, but the pursuit of it will bring years of pleasure. And as long as you keep this in mind, it doesn’t even matter if you catch it.

Sophomore Aubry Wand is an English major from Portola Valley, California. He enjoys surfing even though he has only caught a few waves in his lifetime.