

Twenty-foot highrises at the granddaddy of 'em all: Waimea.



IN THE BASEMENTS OF SKYSCRAPERS

By Hillary Hauser

HILLARY HAUSER

ON A MAGNIFICENT DAY IN JUNE 1991, the surf was going off pretty good at Cloudbreak, and Rell Sunn and I were free diving along the reef, not far from the lineup where the surfers waited for waves.

This was during pre-Parmenter days, and Rell was on Tavarua Island quietly hanging a lot by herself, meditating, surfing, and seeking solace in the ocean she loved. The late “Queen of Makaha” was at home in the ocean in every possible way, and she was as passionate about spearfishing as she was surfing. Watching her move through the water was like watching an underwater ballet—graceful, easy, smooth, Hawaiian sling poised, diving down, swirling up—then blam—there went a big grouper.

The underwater slope leading up to the Cloudbreak lineup looks sort of like the side of Haleakala Crater on Maui—vast and gradual. As Rell pulled in her fish, I proceeded to swim around, looking at the bottom 50’ below, when I saw something big out of the corner of my eye.

It was an enormous green sea turtle, probably weighing around 300 pounds. Swimming over to check it out, I saw it was trying to swallow a jellyfish much bigger than itself. It gulped and gulped endlessly, and with the jellyfish disappearing down its gullet only a millimeter at a time, its lunch would be over by midnight.

Sticking my head out of the water, I yelled out at the surfers closest by, “You should see what’s going on down here!”

They said unprintable things back at me! They didn’t want to know what was going on “down here!”

This whole scenario is where the idea for this story came from, to dive beneath the lineups of some of the world’s greatest waves—Waimea/Pipeline, Jaws, and Maverick’s. Not a scientific essay on how waves are formed, but to look around, see what the reefs are like, and to experience whatever adventure lies in the basement of these skyscrapers. The explorations were made during summer months, when seas are flat and visibility is better—but mainly when it’s not breaking 50’ and we wouldn’t all get killed.

The project took three years to do because of one thing: Maverick’s, which became more dreadful every time I tried to sort out how we were going to dive that place. I not only blame Maverick’s for the project taking so long, but I also blame Maverick’s for ruining one of the objectives of my story—which is, or was, to prove the idea that when you can see, fear is removed.

"I had heard how county lifeguards are instructed not to rescue people in trouble on the south side area called "The Death Zone."

Waimea's "Unridden Realm" is explored beneath the surface (here and on the preceding spread) by veteran North Shore waterman Jeff Johnson.

Waimea and Pipeline are pieces of cake to dive during the summer when there are divers and snorkelers all over both places. Waimea is on a rugged part of Oahu's North Shore coastline riddled with picturesque lava caves, gullies, and miniature subsea canyons.

My old friend, Jeff Johnson, a North Shore legendary waterman, has dived all over these waters both for fun and profit, which in the late '60s and early '70s included diving for black coral and fishing turtles with Jose Angel. Jeff was enthusiastic about an underwater exploration of Waimea, Pipeline, and Jaws, and had boats and friends who would help. In a heartbeat, I was ensconced with Jeff and his wife, Patti, in the Johnson family house at Pipeline.

"There's a 40 to 80' lava cliff around this whole island, made by the Ice Age," said Jeff, gesturing toward the sea. We were bombing along toward Haleiwa Harbor in his truck on Ke Nui Road, towing his Zodiac inflatable boat. "This lava cliff is out a half mile. When it gets really huge, that's where it breaks —out in the open ocean. When it hits the top of the reef, there is a quantum leap from deep to shallow."

There's a Babylonian tale that goes something like, "When the face of God brooded over the waters, great gods arose from the depths," which is what I think Jeff was referring to.

Moments later, three great gods in the form of U.S. coastguardsmen arose from the Haleiwa Harbor and apprehended us on the dock. "Where are your lifejackets? Where is your horn? Where is the whistle? Where are the papers for this boat? Where is the recipe for your mother's corned beef and cabbage? Blow your whistle, does it work?" Jeff was written up for an expired registration and we got out of there.

Heading out from Haleiwa east toward Waimea, we first stopped the boat in an offshore place where the water was 40' deep. Jeff suggested we look around here—at Papaloa, a cloudbreak wave site where he regularly tows in his sons Trent and Petey when the surf gets humongous. As we hooked up our scuba regulators and got our dive stuff ready, Jeff explained some wave math: The maximum size of a wave is 1.6 times the depth of water, he said.

Let's see, we're in 40' of water, times 1.6, that makes 64. What in God's name does a 64' wave look like?

We dropped over the side and fell through blue water to the bottom, where we saw big boulders everywhere. We swam over a pock-holed lava bottom toward a ledge, where on the other side we bumped into a 200-pound green sea turtle that lifted off the bottom at our approach. That turtle started paddling with us, reptile-eyes watching, flippers flipping, until we arrived at a large lava cave underneath the Papaloa lineup.

This was the kind of cave found all along the North Shore, except where so many such caves have been beaten up by the ocean, this one was relatively intact. Just as Jeff swam into it, a strong beam of sunlight radiated through the top of the opening, and lit him up like something out of *Star Wars*. It lit up the water inside the cave to turquoise brilliance, and neon-lit the sand on the bottom. We swam and looked around, then got back into the Zodiac and zoomed off to Waimea.

HAUSER

The bay was flat calm as we approached.

I had seen Waimea when it breaks only sort of big, but I'd seen pictures and movies, and have read stories, about it getting so big no one can get out (or are insane if they do). I had heard how during some periods of violent weather the Waimea River will spill over the road and meet up with the sea,



If boulders roll on the ocean floor and nobody hears them...do they make a sound? Noah Johnson, otherwise occupied at Waimea.

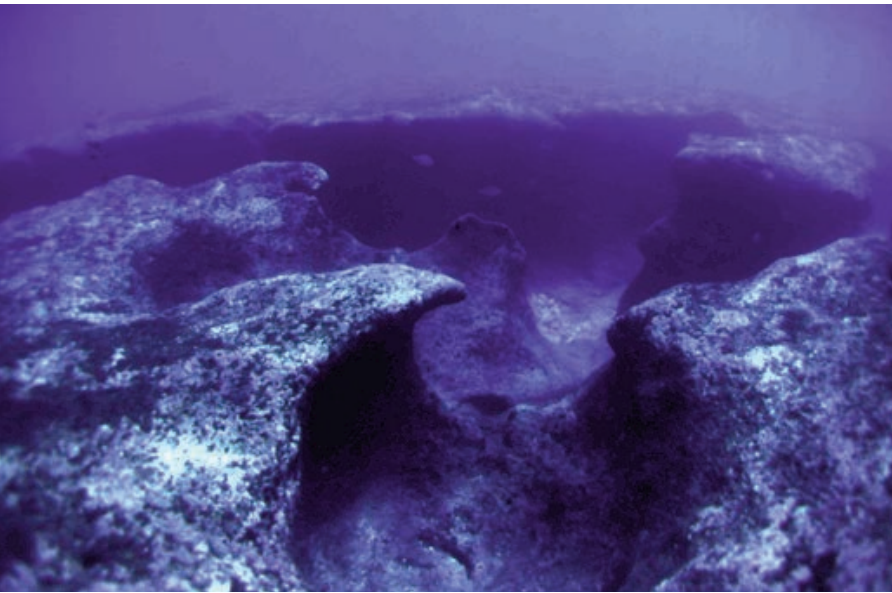
and I had also heard how people have drowned, died, or nearly died here, and how county lifeguards are instructed not to rescue people in trouble on the south side area called "The Death Zone."

Looking toward the sandy beach on this flat July day, I was trying to put these two images together—this calm, lapping lagoon being the same place where Dickie Cross drowned in 1942 while trying to get in through closed-out surf, and where Mark Foo, James Jones, Ken Bradshaw, Alec Cooke, and J.P. Patterson got caught inside a wave estimated to be 48' one December day in 1985.

Judging the location of the lineup by using the big square tower on Waimea Point as a landmark, Jeff threw the anchor in the "Regular Lineup," where the depth of water is 15 to 25'. I looked over the side, could see the bottom. Lovely! What on earth was it like on December 23, 1995, when Waimea delivered up a wave monster so horrendous that it sucked Donnie Solomon over the falls and drowned him?

Looking toward the beach, Jeff pointed out how the channel divides the bay almost exactly in half. Close to the beach on the right (southwest) side of the bay lies South Rock ("The Death Zone"), and farther out to sea from that, Flat Rock. On the left (northeast) side of the bay, Waimea Point, with its landmark tower, is fronted by an inside break called "Pinballs," and seaward of that, where we were anchored, the Regular Lineup. The Close Out Bay sets rise up from 30' of water across the entire bay—creating "The Unridden Realm," as Mark Foo named it during the giant day of January 15, 1985.

Dropping over the side at the Regular Lineup into about 20' of water, Jeff and I swam out into the channel and discovered a big "V" reef formation, the tops of the "V" aimed toward shore. One prong is a large gash in the reef (on the northeast side) and the other prong is a vertical ledge. We swam toward shore along the vertical ledge.



Like the rolling boulders at the Bay, the caves and overhangs of Pipeline have become a chapter in surfing's Great Book of Lore. And while the Waimea boulders haven't hurt anyone per se, the Pipe reef has left its mark on plenty of wave riders.

It was an easy dive—the coral ruts and ledges and holes in the ledge were providing peaceful homes for schools of wrasses, sergeant majors, and pointy-nosed lemon butterflyfishes. But deep down, I knew that in four or five months this tame-looking underwater formation would act as a great funnel to compress an oceanic mayhem into shore, and that these lovely fish homes would become treacherous obstacles notorious for grabbing leashes and holding surfers down.

Whereas Waimea was lava-rocky, Pipeline was basically a huge, flat smoky-gray basalt plateau, smoothed and scoured out by some 9,000 years of winter waves. Exploring Pipeline was easy stuff: Jeff and I simply walked out from his beachfront home and jumped in with mask, fins, and snorkel. We swam the reef from Pipeline through Backdoor to Rockpiles, swimming back and forth over the reef, zigzagging, up and down over a bottom that averaged 15 or 20'.

The shallowness of this reef is tame, if not lame, to a diver, but it is the shallowness that makes Pipeline the "grandmother of all danger waves" to a surfer. There's no continental shelf around the Hawaiian Islands, so ocean swells generated in the North Pacific can speed untempered toward shore, a deep oceanic train that gathers strength in a steady flow of wind over thousands of miles and crashing into a fossilized coral reef 500 yards from Pipeline. Jeff described the "40 Fathom Ledge," where the swell hits a 240' wall and levels out onto a wide, shallow shelf only 30' deep. When the surf gets 30 to 40', "that is where it's breaking," Jeff said.

Closer to shore, the wave gets steep and sucks water up into itself, leaving about three feet of water in the trough. One misstep and you get "guillotined"—and you discover the meaning of being "planted by the Pipe." Not all of the Pipe reef can be characterized by scoured-out holes, either. About eight houses down the beach from the Johnson home, extending straight out from the beach at Backdoor, is a deep gash 30 to 35' deep with a sand bottom and rough coral ledges on either side, and with anvil-shaped lava outcroppings in the middle of the gash. These jagged edges of coral looked to be horrific leash catchers, treacherous underwater snags.

"Surfers have been crammed into holes and shoved underneath ledges by the turbulence," Matt Warshaw notes. "Disoriented, they lose track of which way is up. That's the Pipeline at its most terrifying."

Jeff and I made numerous breath-hold dives as we swam around the huge shallows, inspecting some of these deep gashes in the reef. Some were lined with white sand, others had round rocks rolling around inside, which Jeff said smooths out the holes. From one of these holes, Jeff picked up a snorkel and black surf hat that had soft coral growing on it. He also picked up lots of golf balls. "Probably ours," he said.

Somewhere in this area—"right under the area we take off on an eight-foot day," Jeff said—is the "Money Hole," where bodysurfer Mark Cunningham collects piles of fins, pairs them up, and sells them at swap meets.

Nearly every day of the week I snorkeled Pipeline, the visibility in the water was miserably cloudy, as it usually is during the summer months. In September, the sand washes out, the water becomes clear—and this is when Mark Cunningham goes out and collects his loot from the "Money Hole," which includes the engagement ring he gave his wife.

Compared to Pipeline, "Jaws" is an underwater Grand Canyon, deep and blue, all the way from the lineup almost to shore. Add to this deep blueness some truly somber shades of gray—it was already raining by the time our 24' "mosquito" boat *Kaku* pulled up to anchor off Opana Point on the north coast of Maui—"Peahi," the locals call this place, Hawaiian for "Jaws." As we jockeyed around to check depths of water and land markings, I looked over the rail and could barely make out the bottom. A dark day makes nice blue water seem deeper—abyssal, even.

"Definitely shark territory," Jeff said.

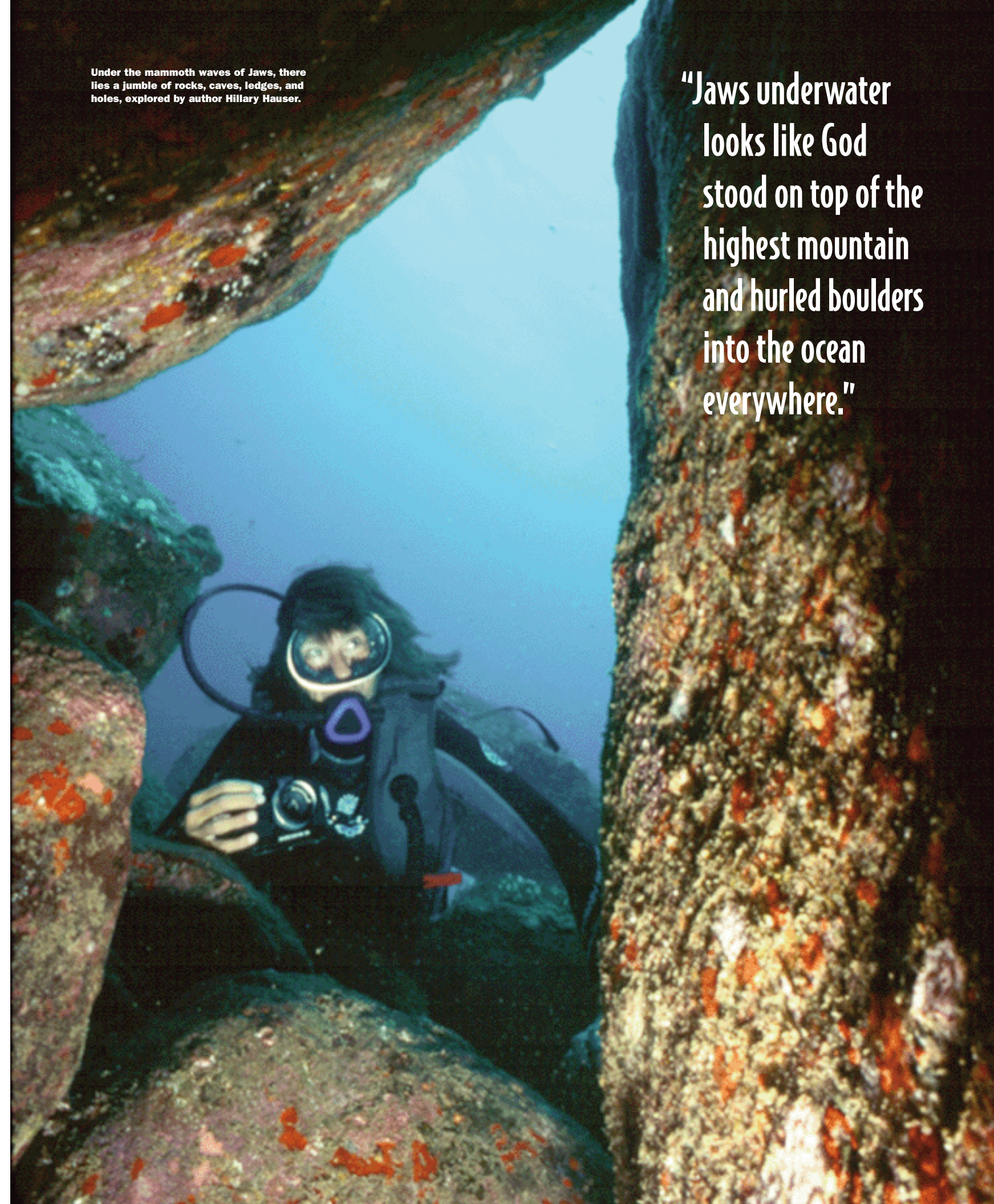
"Thank you," I said.

Over the side we went, four of us: Jeff, his longtime surfing-canoeing pal Mike Spalding, me—and, thank God, Mike had brought along his friend Ed Robinson, an ace underwater photographer who runs a dive business on Maui. Fortunately, Ed had lights.

Jaws underwater looks like God stood on top of the highest nearby mountain and hurled big round boulders into the ocean everywhere—big individual boulders covered with sargasso-like seaweed. Ed, Jeff, and I swam toward Opana Point, poking our heads into the ledges and caves formed by these boulders, and we came to a series of vertical ridges, straight up and down, that

Under the mammoth waves of Jaws, there lies a jumble of rocks, caves, ledges, and holes, explored by author Hillary Hauser.

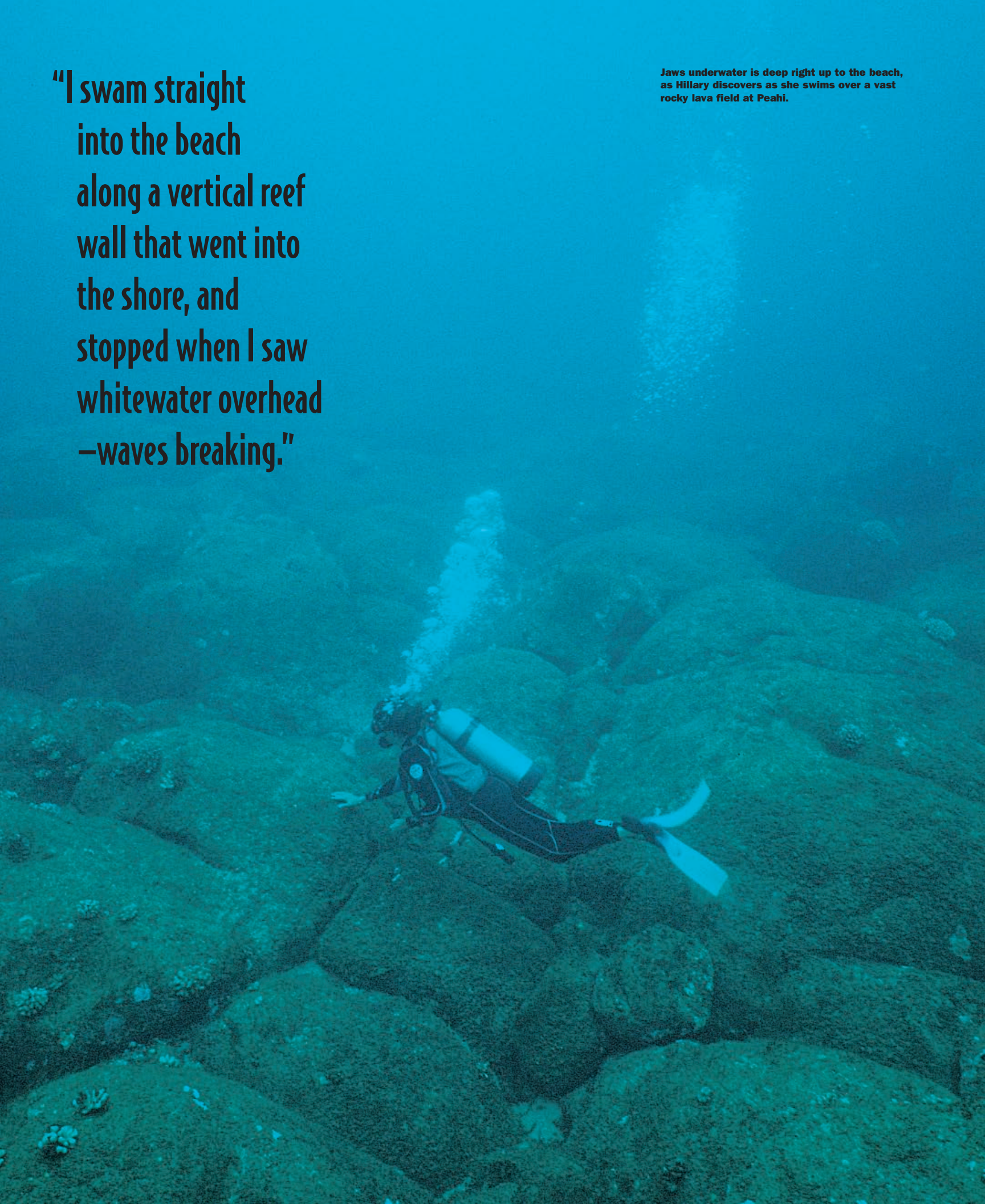
"Jaws underwater looks like God stood on top of the highest mountain and hurled boulders into the ocean everywhere."



ED ROBINSON

"I swam straight into the beach along a vertical reef wall that went into the shore, and stopped when I saw whitewater overhead—waves breaking."

Jaws underwater is deep right up to the beach, as Hillary discovers as she swims over a vast rocky lava field at Peahi.



rose from the bottom at 50' to within 25' of the surface. Mike Spalding swam out into deeper water, toward the lineup, and discovered that where the waves stand up at Jaws there is a huge rectangular-shaped tabletop reef outcropping aimed toward the beach.

Deep inside the caves and holes and ledges, Ed, Jeff, and I saw deep red, big-eyed squirrelfish hiding out from daylight. The fishes that were out in the open, predominantly tangs and wrasses, all seemed skittery, like they were prepared for sudden violence from either big waves or big predators.

I swam straight into the beach along a vertical reef wall that went all the way into the beach, and stopped when I could see whitewater overhead—waves breaking. Yet, I was still in 25' of water, next to the beach. The owner of the *Kaku*, Jeff's old friend Sandy Stein, summed it up this way, "There's no place for that water to go but up." Stein, who lives on Maui, often watches the action of Jaws from the top of the 200' cliff facing the break. "There's no beach, and no room," he said, "and that wave comes in fast!"

Gerry Lopez puts Jaws into this perspective: "Immediately behind you, I mean just hissing at your heels, is the biggest, most intense, fire-breathing dragon bearing down on you."

Late in the afternoon, when Jeff and I returned to Sandy's house at Spreckelsville, Sandy's energetic and funny wife, Alice, told us she had heard on the news that a windsurfer outside Kahului Harbor had been attacked by a tiger shark. The Kahului Harbor, where we had launched *Kaku*, is also on the north shore of Maui, not far from Jaws, and not all that far from where we were diving. Nothing serious, however, Alice said, a couple of stitches and the guy was okay.

Sharks were uppermost on my mind when it came to Maverick's. My ex-husband, a sea urchin diver (and former abalone diver), gave me a not-so-reassuring piece of advice when he heard of my plans to dive there: "Go straight down, and do *not* hang on the surface."

He gave me the name of a boat guy in Half Moon Bay to call, who'd taken many surfers and surf photographers out to the Maverick's lineup; the very same guy who had picked up Mark Foo's body on the fateful day of December 23, 1994. I called this boat driver, and he said he'd be happy take me out to the lineup, and furthermore he wanted to dive it with me. He'd been there before.

"It's a neat looking bottom," he said. "It's like the surface of the moon, craters burned into the bottom by waves, it's gray and brown—gloomy, scary, ominous."

Mike Kitahara, another urchin diver from Albion, which is north of San Francisco, also knew these waters well, and he wanted to go along for the dive. I got hold of a pro underwater photographer in Santa Barbara, James Forte, who had, incidentally, filmed great white sharks in Australia the year before, and he was game, too. Kitahara began watching the weather buoy like a hawk, signaling me often about wind, swell, and other meteorological matters. If you want some underwater visibility at Maverick's, you start looking for a letup in the pea-soup murk beginning about June. You look for no wind,

and just the smallest amount of south or southeast swell to clear the water. By the time September rolls around, you don't want to be thinking about diving because that's when the white sharks come in.

When it looked like the wind was coming down, and a slight southwest swell began to push in clean water, I'd start



The oceanic equivalent of Sears' Tower, Jaws tricks the eye with its symmetrical, two-way beauty. Downstairs, you see where it gets its grunt—a vast, imposing reef network that slams the brakes on winter swells.

calling everybody, and found that the boat driver was hugely impossible to get hold of.

Finally, on a day in June 2000, the pieces came together and the boat driver said, "Come now."

I immediately called James, who agreed to meet us in Half Moon Bay with his camera gear. Kitahara began the drive from his home in Albion, and I threw all my dive gear into the car and headed out of Santa Barbara. Somewhere around Gaviota my cell phone rang in the car; it was the boat driver saying, "Turn around, the wind has picked up and it's getting nasty."

As it turned out, the very day we were supposed to dive at Maverick's, a 46' fishing boat, a Chinese longliner, sank off San Francisco in 12' seas. Four fishermen were aboard, and two of them drowned.

The rest of the summer dished up continued rotten wind and swell, and for good measure, on September 29 of that year, a Santa Barbara surfer named Peck Euwer was paddling out from the Half Moon Bay harbor and somewhere near the rocks was attacked by a great white shark. He miraculously didn't get a scratch but his board was badly mangled. This news didn't cheer us up much.

Then in December, Kitahara e-mailed me the front page of the *Santa Rosa Press-Democrat*: our boat driver had been caught running an abalone-poaching racket. Fish and Game officials had been watching him for a couple of years diving at night with scuba, and caught him with about \$10,000 worth of

abalone. He was booked into Sonoma County Jail and eventually sentenced to three years in prison. (Now I understood why I could never get him on the phone at night—he was busy!)

The next summer went the same way. We had the photographer, but didn't have the weather. Had the weather, didn't have a boat. Had the boat, didn't have the photographer. Or the white sharks had arrived. Usually it was the weather, Maverick's is ruled by probably the most fickle ocean conditions in the world, and in all the diving expeditions I've organized or been a part of, Maverick's was the worst to assemble, bar none.

Kitahara showed up in Santa Barbara during this time, and we met at a local fishermens bar and commiserated. Looking up at the memorial plaque over the bar to our mutual friend, Jim Robinson, an urchin diver killed by a white shark at San Miguel Island in 1996, we both had the same thoughts. Knowing Maverick's waters well, Kitahara reflected, "There is a shark there; you can feel it go by. We think it's the same one."

Now I was freaked. I asked Kitahara to bring me a cage, or maybe even one of those plastic cone-viewing things that tourists use in tropical waters to look over the side of a boat. I made him buy me another drink for even mentioning such a thing.

Later, he wrote me, "After leaving the bar, I felt a little bad about the shark stuff—the lighthearted discussion. I still get the cold creeps when I think about Jimmy, and pretty much get face to face with the fact that fate doles out the short straw to somebody every day. I think it's just an escape mechanism—the laughter and joking stuff—that most of us divers go through to keep it at arm's length in our daily lives. Essentially, most of us who have been through the shark adventures compare it to being on a battlefield with a bullet whizzing by: If it misses by an inch; it might as well be a mile."

My ex-husband put it this way: "If you don't see them; they're not there."

Jean-Michel Cousteau told me, "Don't even think about diving there!"

During the weeks and months that followed, I thought a lot about the white shark element of Maverick's. And I came to the conclusion that Maverick's, being one of earth's most intense power points, would naturally have great white sharks as part of its stygian mix of potent vibe and natural violence.

In any case, all the warnings, advice, stories, and brouhaha faded and I regained my resolve to dive Maverick's during the summer of 2002. I told Kitahara it was do or die, or do and die, depending on how things turned out. Kitahara sent me the Internet link to National Data Buoy Center station number 46012—Half Moon Bay—so I could start monitoring the ocean conditions myself. Seriously versed in the voodoo nature of Maverick's by this time, I couldn't believe my eyes when I first logged on to the site and read, "Potential Explosion Hazard Exists for this Buoy."

The wind and swell started coming down steadily in mid-July, and D-Day looked like it was going to arrive just when Kitahara had a conflict and couldn't make it. But he gave me the names and numbers of some new boat drivers and ordered me to go, because the chance might not come again for the

rest of the summer. I called every single one of the boat drivers, vowing to make the deal with the first one who called me back, and I called James Forte, the photographer who hadn't heard from me in a couple of years, and was glad to hear he was still game and that he was spontaneous; he agreed to leave immediately.

Pete McLaughlin, whose boat is called *What*, called me first. He was thick into building his house in Pacifica, but, well, he'd do it. And he'd bring Matt Ambrose, one of the locals who regularly surfs Maverick's when it's huge.

"Matt was diving today," Pete said. "It's clear."

Now we all went into high gear, and I knew that the clear water Matt Ambrose had seen this day might well be gone tomorrow because "Mav's" is so fickle. Nevertheless, James and I jammed up the freeway from Santa Barbara nearly non-stop, got to Half Moon Bay at 3 a.m., and the following morning we met Pete McLaughlin and Matt Ambrose in the Pillar Point Harbor parking lot.

Pete, wearing a blue baseball cap with a *WHAT* insignia mirrored together vertically to look like a tiki, greeted us in quiet and friendly fashion, which I appreciated since I had no idea what I was getting into with anybody at this point. Pete is a regular presence in the water, piloting the *What* in and out of raging surf for surfers as well as photographers, and he had most recently provided the boat work for Eric Nelson and Curt Meyer for their epic, hair-raising surf film, *100 Ft. Wednesday*.

Matt Ambrose was hot to dive the mysterious reef he'd been surfing for so many years. Described as one of the "most respected locals" and known for smooth style in out-of-control surf (featured in the Maverick's video, *Know Fear*), Ambrose is a low-key regular nice guy who said he wasn't getting much sleep at night because of the recent baby, son Jack, born to him and his wife, Leigh Ann.

It was a gorgeous, sunny, hot day in Half Moon Bay; in fact, it was roasting. So while the guys launched the *What*, I peeled off my coat, threw it in my car—a big mistake—and we all headed out of the Pillar Point Harbor.

A few minutes later, we were in fog so dense we couldn't see land. We couldn't see the harbor, we couldn't see the breakwater, and we could barely see the Air Force Tracking Station on top of Pillar Point. We could only see the treacherous chain of rocks called the "Boneyard," which separates the Pillar Point lagoon from the surf break.

We motored around on the *What* to let the fog burn off and to figure out where to dive the lineup, and also to have Matt explain things about the place. As I was listening to him, the thought crossed my mind that Maverick's really is voodoo territory as some have said, I mean, we were a measly half a mile away from a hot, sunny day, and traveling around in our private arctic icebox.

Matt said he discovered Maverick's in 1989, when he was 18 years old. "I walked out, looked at it, and thought, 'Wow!' It was breaking 20'."

For him a "solid season" consists of about a half-dozen 20' waves, and he is talking about true 20' waves that have 40' faces.

"All I want to do is catch a couple," Matt said. "Take off in the bowl, a ride on the shoulder; that's good."

Matt said there are about 50 surfable days in the year at Maverick's—and that the place has "all the elements"—dirty water, cold water, cold weather, and sharks."

What about the sharks? I asked him. Aren't surfers a little worried about them when they're paddling around out here?

"When the swell's big, they don't exist," Matt answered. "They don't like turbulence. On the calm, glassy days, the fish are here, the sharks are here, everyone's here."

This news makes me very glad we've been waiting all this time for a calm, glassy day to make this dive.

How many calm days are there at Maverick's? I asked Matt. "About half a day a year," he said.

About a mile-and-a-half west of Pillar Point, the ocean presses through an underwater valley, then rises up about 200 yards outside the surf zone at Maverick's. The waves begin to crest in about 20-30' of water—on a nautical chart, the takeoff area, or lineup, at Maverick's is identified as "Outer breaker"—and from here the ocean pushes through to do the rest. Matt explained the setup: the Outside Bowl in 50' of water, the Main Bowl and inside section, 18', the Pit, and the Cauldron, a blowhole area described by Evan Slater as "extra nasty."

Aboard the *What*, we watched the fathometer spew out bottom pictures—dips and ledges, shallow descending to deep. "It's shallow, then there are holes," Matt said, "it's not flat out here." We putted along the "Boneyard" rocks, notorious for snaggly-tooth outcroppings that snag leashes and hold surfers down. Matt told us how Mushroom Rock marks the "end of the ride," then, pointing to Sail Rock, he said, "If you get there, it's pretty much over."

"What's over?" I asked.

"Life."

Many big-wave surfers have experienced the terror of being flushed through these rocks, and entangled on them by leashes they can't easily get out of. But the winner of this "Scary Rocks" department may be the "Father of Maverick's" himself, Jeff Clark, who started surfing this place alone in the '70s, and who kept it to himself for 20 years, until 1990 (there are many big-wave riders who can't believe he surfed this treacherous place by himself). In 1992, Clark was washed into the Boneyard with a broken board still attached to him by a leash with no quick-release. Conditions were as rough as they get.

"I couldn't reach the Velcro strap," Clark said. "I got beaten and drilled and trapped and sucked underwater." And funneled through the Boneyard. He was finally able to climb onto one of the bigger rocks, and then proceeded to take a ferocious beating from a nonstop ocean. As wave after wave buried him in whitewater, he clung like an abalone to the knife-sharp barnacled surface of the rock and going through his mind was, "This is going to be pretty sketchy, a lot of things have to happen right for me to get out of this one."

Clark said quick-release leashes didn't exist at this point, and Matt Ambrose said surfers who don't use them today at Maverick's are "suicidal."

"It's crazy!" he said. Actually, Matt doesn't use a quick-release leash himself. Instead, he uses a "skinny" leash that will break with any amount of tension.

Among the Maverick's locals, Matt said there has been a lot of speculation about Mark Foo's drowning here, but only one thing is certain—the mystique of Maverick's went through



The supersurface environment at Maverick's is no less gristly than that found below the waterline. The Boneyard, Mushroom Rock, and Sail Rock add to the Mav's mystique, and have caused their share of elevated blood pressure.

the roof after the tragedy. "Here was one of the world's strongest big-wave riders," Matt reflected, "the ocean disposed of him, and kept on going like business is business."

Aboard the *What* we were getting antsy to dive, especially me because I was already freezing. Mercifully, a slight wind picked up and started to clear the fog, which would give us some light down below, but there was no telling what the wind was doing to visibility in the water. We watched the Fathometer alternate between 20 and 40' in the bowl area, and, finally, when we saw a prominent ledge on the screen, we asked Pete to stop the boat and we started organizing our gear.

As we organized, Pete threw out a fishing line. I looked at James and we were both thinking the same thing—chum—and just then Matt described shooting in this place a "big old lingcod" that started bleeding all over the boat deck and how he "got into that boat fast."

I eyed a big stand of bull kelp and asked Pete to pull the boat close to it. I wanted to dive down the middle of this kelp "tree" so that I would at least have the illusion of some sort of covering. It was July, not shark season, but I told the guys I didn't know that great white sharks were able to read calendars. The three of us, James, Matt, and I, agreed we would go over the side at the same time, then swim immediately to the bottom, no fooling around on the surface.

Over the side we went. The water was green. The visibility was 10'. We briefly fooled around on the surface, so that when we went down we wouldn't get lost from each other before we even started.

“...this reef at Maverick’s was the most tangled assortment of rock ledges, canyons, gullies, holes, caves, and funnels I’ve ever seen.”

Voodoo territory of Mav’s, explored by veteran big-wave local Matt Ambrose.

Ten-foot visibility is supposed to be excellent for Maverick’s. But to give you an idea of what 10’ visibility means, other than difficult photographic conditions, a diver separated from his mates by 11’ faces the prospect of losing sight of them for the entire dive, and Maverick’s is not exactly a place you want to be swimming around alone.

James, Matt, and I headed together to the bottom. I was glad for the bull kelp, which gave some reference point, like an anchor line, to counteract the vertigo-inducing opaqueness of green water. I think we were all glad to hit the bottom at 50’, and looking ahead, we all saw the reef at the same time.

Of all the reefs I have dived all over the world, this reef at Maverick’s was the most tangled assortment of rock ledges, canyons, gullies, holes within holes, deep caves, and funnels I’ve ever seen. At the end of one of the long funnels, I could see light out the other end, and couldn’t help but think of the powerful suction action that must go through here when the ocean roars into the rocks. We swam along a perpendicular reef wall that had three or four deep ledges that stuck out like stadium tiers, each ledge so deep we could swim completely inside each shelf.

I swam along the bottom of a narrow canyon at 50’, and the bottom suddenly dropped away into a huge hole. Looking down into this hole, I saw another hole beneath that—some eerie thing that beckoned like the Nietzschean phrase: “When you look into the abyss, the abyss peers also into you.”

I looked up to see James taking pictures of Matt, who moved through the water with professional curiosity. A true “ocean man” all the way around, Matt took up scuba diving five years ago, has been free-diving his entire life, and accepts great white sharks as part of the scenery. So does Jeff Clark, who says that in the 35 years he’s spent in the water here, “they’ve probably looked at me more than once.”

I turned to have another look at my discovery, the hole within the hole, this entryway to the bottom of the earth, and just then my scuba tank fell out of its backpack.

Now, this is not a dangerous situation, just a nuisance. You can always breathe, and the usual remedy is you just take off your backpack underwater and re-rig the whole thing. But there wasn’t time for this; we had to keep moving through this 10’ visibility. So, I just carried the scuba tank around under my arm.

It was no big deal, but I couldn’t help but think of this being one more voodoo spell from Maverick’s, I mean, this has not happened to me since the solitary time it happened in the late 1960s. I kept swimming with the others this way, when suddenly the climax scene of the movie *Jaws* popped into my head—that goofy scene where Richard Dreyfuss tosses a scuba tank into the mouth of the great white shark, the shark chomps down on the tank, the tank explodes, and the shark is blown to smithereens.

I flooded my mask laughing at this thought. I’m ready! If a white shark comes near me, I have this thing in my hand and I’m ready!

Well, Matt, James, and I didn’t see the great white shark. What we did see was a reef that is tremendously alive with life.

The abalone-poaching boat driver had told me the Maverick’s reef was like the “surface of the moon,” but what we were looking at was exactly the opposite. There were enormous lingcod hiding in the cracks along the bottom of the reef. There were also fat and healthy rockfish everywhere, and we swam through giant schools of baby rockfish that bumped into our



Sean Rhodes' express ride down the shaft. What lies beneath? A gruesome topography better left out of mind if you have designs on surfing there.

masks. Stuck to every surface of the reef was some living thing, including huge clusters of bright magenta and pink club anemones, enormous lemon nudibranchs, palm kelp, and when the guys swam by, the action of their fins unloosed starfish that flew through the water like shooting stars. The three of us came up from this dive pretty amazed.

Jaws, Waimea, or Maverick’s—a number of people have asked me to make comparisons of their reefs, probably not unlike surfers are asked to compare the waves in these places: Which is the most dangerous? Which is the gnarliest? Which is the most ominous? I think Peter Mel said it best in the film, *100 Ft. Wednesday*, when asked to compare Jaws and Maverick’s. “One is a tiger and one is a lion,” Mel said. “They are both animals.”

Whichever it is, I look at the photos of the terrifying waves that come to these places and get the heebie-jeebies thinking about diving and swimming around beneath them. This is even though I know it was calm when I was there. I think this is due to the Power Point factor. Because Waimea, Jaws, and Maverick’s are among earth’s most hypnotic mixes of danger and beauty, both above and below the waterline. Their very names set off strong vibrations in our psyches, affecting us physically, spiritually, and mentally. They are the places where great gods rise from the depths, as the Babylonians say, and we humans can only stand in awe. ✦