



A sunset at the Rincon marks the end of a perfect day — or does it? When the surf is up, so are the crowds — with old-time "surf rats" competing with the healthy younger set (like Jeff Jasiorkowski, 21, and Dee Andra Pilkington, 16, right) for waves.



News-Press photos by STEVE MALONE



One group of surf rats has occupied the same spot on the beach for 14 years.

The Rincon

Where surfers rule world all their own

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Rincon del Mar — "Corner by the Sea" — is just that, a corner, a crazy world completely unattached from Santa Barbara, Summerland, and the rest of the planet.

You can easily view the Rincon as you approach Santa Barbara from the south on the Ventura Freeway. If you look out to sea as you approach Bates Road, you will inevitably see a swarm of surfers, floating around on their boards in the surf line, waiting for waves.

From the freeway, it may look like a typical California scene, but at the "Con," nothing is typical. If you're brave enough to wander onto the beach by accident or design, you can feel strangely misplaced — sort of like a New York stockbroker wandering into the middle of a Maori wedding.

Surfers have been admired, misunderstood, hated, put on film, idolized, denigrated, loved, feared, put down, put on pedestals. But one thing is for sure: they are different. An anthropologist would have a field day studying these riders of the waves, who talk a different language, follow a different code of ethics and undertake a sport that is more like an art of survival.

At the Rincon, there are obvious factions. In one corner of this big Corner, you'll see a rowdy looking, long-haired bunch with ever-present beers (sometimes bellies to match), sitting around in beat-up wetsuits and toting long, beat-up boards that look like they've been run over by their own cars.

These are the oldtimers, the "surf rats" who have occupied the same spot on the beach for 14 years — near the bottom of the dirt path that descends from the parking lot above. Many of the rats look like members of the original Animal House.

They are nice guys, however.

In another corner of the Rincon are surfers of a different sort — the chic, bright and colorful, short-haired young guys and girls with the leashed short boards and the latest in wetsuits. They are the picture of health, the reflection of the California sunshine vitality. The girls who don't surf sit on the beach, reading books while they wait for their boyfriends, and the boyfriends who don't surf watch the girls while they wait for their surfing girlfriends.

In this clean-cut group, there are those who hope for stardom and recognition. They enter the contests and willingly have their pictures taken. Many of them feel that the long-boarders are living in a time tunnel, that they are a threat because with their bigger boards they can sit out further, get more waves, and thereby crowd out the short boards.

California beautiful or Animal House rowdy, the two groups are as opposite as night and day — the yin and the yang of the Rincon.

On crowded days, everyone gets heckled, and since the Rincon is crowded at the slightest hint of wave action, everyone is target for ridicule on almost any day of the year.

The Rincon is one of the most popular surfing spots in the world because of its "perfect waves" — created by an ideal combination of coastal configuration and offshore reefs. Surfers come to the Rincon by the carloads to catch these perfect waves — from Northern California, San Diego, Europe, Mexico, South Africa and the San Fernando Valley.

Insiders don't like outsiders, just because there aren't enough waves to go around. It is a continual repeat of the old Malibu song that goes something like,

"my wave, my beach, my chick, my wax, go home."

An outsider may have trouble understanding this unsporting attitude, because most people grow up with the idea that to be a bad sport is to be a turkey. But then, talk to a girl whose board has been wrecked by some guy snaking her wave, or an old-timer whose leg was nearly severed by a runaway surfboard — and you begin to understand the go-home attitudes.

Many oldtimers have simply given up on the Rincon because of its crowds, but there are the die-hards who will never forsake the place. Some have gone to Hollister Ranch, but even at this out-of-the-way place, there are growing complaints of increased crowding. Like Mammoth Mountain on a weekend, the local situation, they say, is a bummer.

So, most surfers from around these parts hit the Rincon, since it's only 15 minutes down the freeway from town, and if the car doesn't get ripped off in the parking lot or the head bashed in by a runaway board, things can work out hunky-dory for an afternoon.

On a recent 4-foot day, a few surf rats stood around on the beach talking — or rather, they were hooting about some hot and heavy action that was taking place offshore.

Someone had wiped out and lost his board — which happened to be a long board untethered to the guy riding it. The thing rammed into an exposed metal

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piling, and the surf rats went wild, ridiculing the guy swimming in over the rocks.

"Must be from the Valley!" one of them shouted.

"Deep in the heart of RESEDA," said another.

A parallel to this situation might be a runaway ski barreling down a hill toward a crowd waiting in a lift line — not too cool.

Then, just as the lost board was retrieved from the beach, the surf rats saw two guys catching a wave at the same time. One guy pushed the other one, who wiped out badly.

"Look at that snake!" says one of the surf rats. "A real PYTHON."

Snakes are the guys that horn in on a wave — and someone else's ride — when they should pull back.

Here, another perspective can be drawn by comparing the situation with skiing. Imagine that you're at the top of the Cornice at Mammoth Mountain. You take off, and someone whose level of skiing dictates that he should not be up there slides down out of control and hits you. He takes you with him, stabbing you with his skis at the same time.

Then, consider that the mountain is moving and that all the skiers who want to ski the Cornice have to shoot out from the top at the same time. Not only does there have to be coordination with oneself, but also coordination with the other guys trying to do the same thing. In a matter of seconds, each skier has to figure out who started first, and then weigh that against the fact that he has waited for this moment for a long time — in the cold.

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When the surf's up, its riders are out en masse at the Rincon.

News-Press photo by STEVE MALONE

Working the waves

Rincon: the action spot

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You want that ride badly, but there is someone else who wants it just as badly.

Wipeouts are no fun, but it's especially insulting if an awful one occurs just because some other guy didn't watch his manners.

Really bad wipeouts are called "toads" — which stands for Take Off And Die Syndrome. In surfing publications, there will sometimes be a series of pictures of a guy taking off on a monster wave — with each successive picture revealing the utter mistake of making that decision. To accentuate the significance of such an error in judgment, the magazine will put a little green toad in the corner of the wipeout pictures.

Toads necessary

But toads are necessary in surfing. If you don't try for the biggest, most exhilarating rides, what's it all for? Like the rest of life, one has to be willing to jump into the toads to experience the high points.

The younger surfers generally try the scarier stunts — or so the older surfers say. Every surfer in his youth apparently goes through the phase of looking everywhere for 10-foot waves, travelling hither and yon to find the Thrill-of-a-Lifetime Pipeline.

There are tricksters, too. Locals talk about a guy in Hawaii with the expert timing, who jumps off a cliff with his board onto the top of a wave which then carries him off.

Presumably, this guy will, as time goes on, become more satisfied with a calmer approach to the whole thing.

The really young surfers are called "gremmies" (gremlins), and depending upon their surf style, can also be called "gyros."

Gyros are distinguished by the fact that they go through a lot of upper-body gyrations after they catch a wave. The old style of surfing is smooth, the upper body

staying quiet while the feet work the board.

At the Rincon, gyros and gremmies traditionally work the waves closer to shore while the mid-lifers are somewhere further out.

Dedicated surfers are not those people who jockey their surfing hours around their work. Instead, they jockey their work around their surfing hours. They chart their work schedules for each week by the satellite weather pictures in the Monday edition of their local newspapers, and they get pretty good at reading cloud patterns and wind action.

Some of them veer off into full-time careers when it can no longer be avoided, rationalizing their entry into the business life by telling themselves that with the money they can surf Fiji or Baja.

Keep afloat

Those who choose not to leave their sport for any length of time keep financially afloat by taking jobs as waiters, carpenters, painters — anything that's freelance and unconfining — and they keep going to the Rincon.

Generally, surfers are not drop-outs.

There is a big difference between the surfers of today from those of the late '50s and early '60s, when the sport swept the beaches of Santa Barbara. Back then, to be a surfer was almost to turn one's back on society, adopt radical drug use and defy traditional values. Back then, parents worried excessively and non-effectively about their children taking up the sport. Today's parent just uses the surfboard as leverage when the grades go down, and the surfing kid gets his board back when the grades are back up.

The surf rats at the Rincon, it turns out, are not really rats at all — just people who have lived out their love of the sport since they were little kids. They have become vociferous about those who don't follow the rules of the road — those who make surfing dangerous for others.

But otherwise, they are appreciative of the sea and the sunsets, the natural beauty of the places they practice their art, and, for the most part, they are kind and considerate to each other — even to gee-whiz journalists who don't understand half of what is going on.