

## Play surf

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY AMANDA WITHERELL

The perfection, and the problem, of the waves at Fanning Island is getting to them.

‘Are you going to play surf today?’ calls Beeto Areieta.

Brian and I are rolling down the potholed dirt road outside Beeto’s Fanning Island home – a traditional open-air kiekie with a thatched pandanus roof supported by coconut tree beams. We’re pedalling bicycles we ‘hired’ from two locals for three weeks. People can use coconuts to purchase foodstuffs at the store, and coveted items are worth more than cash on this remote atoll, so we paid by trading a casting rod and a Hawaiian sling we never use. Our surfboards bounce along behind us, lashed to an improvised caddy that makes the kids point and giggle and the adults stop and stare. One older woman mutters something that I interpret as “The i-Matang thinks of everything. If an i-Kiribati had that they’d load it up with coconuts.”

We are indeed on our way to ‘play surf’, and by the time we roll up to Whaler’s Right, a wave I want to ride eternally when I die, there’s a posse of spectators lingering in the shade at the beach’s edge and half a dozen little boys stripping to bare skin and snatching up scraps of plywood to bodysurf with in the soft shore combers. Eventually, a teenage boy paddles out into the lineup with us. That’s the sum

total of the competition for the kindest wave I’ve surfed in the South Pacific.

And that’s the busy wave. Fanning Left, off the main village on the opposite side of the lagoon pass, sees even fewer local surfers from the island’s population of about 3,000 i-Kiribati, most of whom were resettled there from overpopulated islands elsewhere in the republic.

The perfection of Fanning’s waves is well known among travelling surfers. The problem is getting to them, halfway between Tahiti and Hawaii. Probably the easiest and most reliable method is to sail there yourself, which says a lot about the other two options – flying Air Kiribati or booking a passenger berth aboard the Kwai, a 43-metre ketch-rigged steel ship that transports people and supplies to a few ports between Hawaii, the Line Islands, and the Cook Islands.

Months ago a keen Kiwi surfer sent his board via the Kwai, but he’s yet to actually arrive on the island, says Bruno deLala, who with his wife Tabeta runs the only guesthouse, A La Belle Etoile. An expat Frenchman who jumped ship from a yacht about 30 years ago, married a local and chanced upon a sweet plot of land, he’s accustomed to the



unexpected arrival of guests and maintains a cluster of artfully constructed traditional kiekies outfitted with Western-style comforts, such as mattresses and mosquito nets. A night's stay (AU\$40) includes three meals of French-inspired local cuisine.

When we arrived in April aboard our 41-foot yacht, Bruno was hosting several stranded guests from the capital, Tarawa, as Air Kiribati's only plane had been grounded on the island for two weeks. The pilot was waiting for a new propeller to arrive from Christmas Island on the Kwai, which was fortunately in the vicinity and had been specially chartered to solve the problem. Departing Fanning, it's possible your surfboard will be bumped off the plane in favour of local luggage – bananas and pumpkins packed as gifts for family members on Christmas, an island not as agriculturally advanced as Fanning.

It's best to bring a board you can leave behind if you believe, as we do, that kids should grow up surfing their local waves. Beeto Areieta, who has attended coaching clinics 2,000 miles away in Tarawa, has organised about 15 youths into a surf club. He runs skills clinics for the groms and makes sure they share the motley surf gear he's managed to accumulate, which includes snapped leashes lashed into working order with fishing line, a hodgepodge of fins, and a quiver of boards that ranges from trashed bits of foam to smashed-nose short boards and snapped longboards with their exposed stringers piercing the waves like narwhal horns.

'My dream is to have the surf competition for the Pacific Games on Fanning Island,' says the ambitious 30-year-old.

The world-class waves are there – the infrastructure is not. That may soon change with the development of two new surf lodges, one to be owned and operated by Beeto, who grew up watching i-Matangs surfing Whaler's Right. Beeto worked a three-year stint as crew aboard the Kwai and saw with his own eyes the high-rise hotels towering beside crowds of tourists surfing Waikiki. That's not his vision for Fanning. 'When I saw that, I thought, I want to go home,' he says. Expect his Fanning Surf Lodge to include traditional kiekie huts, hammocks slung within sight of the wave, and fresh fish dinners served beachside at sunset.

Surfers who have experienced Fanning's perfection might say don't leave your board behind or you'll be competing with too many locals for waves next time, but international surfers have been finding their way to Fanning for decades now and there's still just a handful of uncommitted kids who ride, and none with the skills to drop in on any pro's wave.

Nor the attitude. One day I was out with two teenage boys when Whaler's was peaking to both the right and left of the pickup spot. Whenever it came my way, instead of paddling over to scoop it from me, they'd yell, 'Girl! Girl! Girl!' making sure I knew it was my wave and then cheering hard when I caught it. ■

