

10 Gnarliest Luxury Surfing Spots

Adam McCulloch



Surf's upscale!

When master Hawaiian surfboard shaper John Carper first started surfing 50 years ago, people referred to surfers as beach bums and slackers, and no one thought they'd get a job -- let alone spend their hard-earned cash on five-star resorts. "If you wanted to get fancy you had a tent," said Carper.

Fast-forward half a century: Surfing is now a \$10 billion industry worldwide, and everyone's riding a wave of success. But it's not just about finding an amazing hollow tube any more. The sport has also been a boon for hoteliers with luxury accommodation located close to great breaks. And some have gone so far as to open

their own surf resorts in far flung locales offering good food, luxurious beds and private waves. What more could a surfer ask for?

To find out about surfing's new luxury status, just ask Derek O'Neill, CEO of Billabong, the Australian-based surf clothing brand. He's been surfing for 32 years, and as a youngster he competed in the Australian titles, when surfing and money didn't go together at all. "I think I spent more in contest entry fees than I ever won back," he said.

But these days, Billabong hosts three major championship world surfing events with prize money in the order of \$300,000 apiece. Factor in endorsements, and some pro surfers are awash with cash. "Kelly Slater was the first million dollar man," said Adam Borello, international director of marketing for T&C Surf Designs in Hawaii. "But since then there have been many more, like Dane Reynolds, Andy Irons and Joel Parkinson." Inspired by these pro surfers, cashed-up executives are swapping the board room for a long board, hitting the surf on weekends as an antidote to their stressful lives. Hans Keeling is the perfect example: After an Ivy League education, he became a corporate lawyer, but said, "I was amazed to find that more and more of my friends, whether they were hedge fund managers or lawyers or architects, started to take up surfing. It almost became a status symbol." Now he operates a surf tourism company called Nexus Surf in Brazil. "I've seen people closing business deals while sitting in the line up waiting for a wave."

It follows, then, that when it comes to hitting the sack after a day catching waves, this new breed of surfers is more likely to be swaddled in Egyptian cotton than a sandy sleeping bag. Spas, plasma screen TVs, expansive suites, over-water bungalows and butler service are just some of the amenities that now exist in the five-star resorts close to great breaks.

For our list of the 10 best luxury surfing destinations we consulted a panel of experts, all surfers with a head for business and a taste for the good life, and asked them to reveal their favorite five-star breaks.

Some of their favorite destinations were simple to guess (like Hawaii), but others weren't. Dane Sharp, International

Media Manager of Rip Curl — the Australian surf apparel giant — chose a remote location in Oaxaca, Mexico with powerful barrels. When Rip Curl held an event there in 2006, “only three of the guys on the world tour even had been there before,” he said.

Not surprisingly, tropical islands feature heavily on our list. “Islands are always good because if the wind is blowing out one break you can head to the other side,” said Sharp. Other conditions our panelists loved were warm water, long rides and well-shaped waves. Long boarders sought out tumbling breaks like Watego’s Bay in Australia, and tube-riders preferred Mexico or Indonesia.

Surfers seeking luxury are still serious about their sport, and many will go to extreme lengths to find that perfect break -- it’s just that luxury now takes on a slightly different meaning. “It can be frustrating and depressing if you travel half way round the world and find that the break is crowded,” said Adam Borello. For surfers like him, it’s a fine balance between great food, premium accommodation and the ultimate luxury: an uncrowded wave. “I know some guys who hire a helicopter to take them to the back side of Molakai,” said John Carper, master shaper of board manufacturer JC Hawaii. “It’s really good surf but super hard to get in, even by boat.”

It turns out that a modern-day surf safari is less about Kombi vans and sleeping under the stars; rather, it’s likely to include a charter boat with a helicopter on the deck, a modernist villa in Brazil or your own private reef break in Fiji. And on these kinds of surf holidays, there’s finally more to do for the non-surfer than just mind the wetsuits: We’re talking great fishing, scuba diving, cultural pursuits and partying with supermodels.

It’s time to hang five -- five stars, that is.

10 Gnarliest Luxury Surfing Spots

Florianópolis, Brazil

Recommended by Hans Keeling

Why surf here:

Florianópolis’s sandy breaks are perfect for beginners and intermediate surfers, but don’t be fooled by this Brazilian island’s gentle nature: It also hosts South America’s only WCT Pro Surfing event at Joa Quima. “For the best breaks, head to the western side of the island,” said Hans Keeling.

Where to stay:

As a self-confessed surf adventurer, Keeling liked the culture of this Brazilian island paradise so much he moved here in 2004. “It’s the Brazilian equivalent of the Hamptons,” he said. He accommodates his clients in the island’s exclusive private beach houses directly in front of the best breaks on Praia Mole and Galheta beaches. There’s also Ponta dos Ganchos, which in 2006 became Florianópolis’ first Relais & Châteaux property. There’s also the stellar nightlife. “Last year we took our surfing clients to a bar called Paiko and Gisele Bundchen was there,” said Keeling.

