

Mascaret 01

The dawn sun was still more than an hour distant. A thick blanket of cloud had insulated the land through the night and the air was mild. The nausea from too much liquer had blanked out the pain of doning a damp cold suit, and as I paddled downstream through the darkness my stomach felt heavy from the previous night's feasting. The fog was absent and I fixed my gaze on the dark shadow of the Wizard drifting ahead of me. My thoughts passed to the many people we had been introduced to the previous night. Amongst them were many of the pioneers of Mascaret surfing. Marco, a very amiable kyaker with an unending smile and large moustache, had ridden the wave throughout the eighties, along with Roger Marcel, believed to be the first to conquer St Pardon. Then, there was Jean-Pierre Lalle, the first surfer to ride the Mascaret at St Pardon, in 1990. I wondered, if these guys had been riding the wave for that long, how many other spots on the two rivers did they know? Perhaps waves that were just too secret to share? Or perhaps they had made the wave at St Pardon their speciality, their *Playground*, as Philippe would describe it.

As the sound of the Mascaret crept up on us again around the tight kink, I made out the dark figure of Fabrice gliding across the black walling shadow of the wave's face. In Philippe's absence, Silver Surfer had decided to keep his spirit alive by sampling one of his specialised Mascaret boards. With an additional three foot to Silver's usual Roger Cooper 9'1" malibu, positioning became a problem, and Silver experienced his first mouthful of Dordogne soup as he pearled forward into its murky depths, the board just bobbing back to the surface as the wave went passed. Wizard and I both played safe on the inside, and it was only with resolution that I popped to my feet and finally appreciated the sensation of surfing in darkness. The other dozen or so riders out that morning seemed to have disappeared into the blackness of the night, and with just Wizard on my bankside, I had a welcoming shoulder peeling out into the river beyond the bend. I crouched low, sliding across its glassy face, illusory phosphorescence gleaming back at me. I began to assimilate the wave's energy through sense and instinct, just gliding in the trim, alert for the cut back when the wave's energy dissipated in the occasional well. This was to be my only taste of the head wave's face all week, and I relished the moment and savoured the satisfaction. I slipped gradually back off the wave past Marker 12, as the Wizard, pushed on in his journey back to the jetty, his magic carpet making amends for the previous day.



An hour later, as the gleaming rays from the dawn sun penetrated the cloudy sky, we were invited to join the *Association de le Mascaret* for breakfast. Nestled under the canopies overlooking the rapidly rising Dordogne, we ate huge slices of ham and chunks of onion-coated beef, toasted on the



burning embers of drift wood from the river's banks. The *Association* had been formed to help increase awareness in the Mascaret and develop potential tourism. Also an excuse to drink red wine at seven o'clock in the morning!

Once again, we were welcomed into this gathering with open arms, and shared photographs and stories in a concoction of *FrenGLISH* as uncharacteristic showers pelted the roof of the canopy. In fact, the Frenchies have great faith in the reliability of associated good weather with the Mascaret. Yet, on our first evening we had paddled down stream against a force four wind, with chop lapping the nose of our boards. 'We have never had conditions like this!' Philippe had remarked. A rather well known Kiwi song immediately sprung to mind. Although our time with this hearty crew was short, their faces will remain with me for a long time. Bruno, Pierre, Daniel, Lionel and Kiki, all demonstrated the true passion of the Mascaret surfers and displayed a genuine fascination with our own homegrown bore. Isabelle, a very dedicated photographer, enlightened us to the incredible inland penetration of the Mascaret with photos captured another 30km upstream from St Pardon, near Branne. And then there was Henri, another of the early pioneering kyakers who had featured in several French news documentaries. We had met Henri's wife, Anne, the previous night and were saddened to hear they had in fact been around the Severn the previous month, yet been unable to contact us. With very selective conditions, Henri had very little success on the Severn bore, when, only a quarter mile upstream, we had been surfing a fantastic three foot wall!



As the Association members either dispersed to go to work, or to sleep off the morning intoxication, Silver phoned up Marco for a report on the ocean. My desire to surf was not good, as I tucked into a fresh bottle of rose with Coco, and discussed his local football team.

Wizards desire was even less, and, parked up at La Porge once again, he settled down into the passenger seat to the soothing words of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, to recoup a bit of lost sleep. Silver and I meanwhile fought our way through a howling onshore front that had reared up from the horizon within minutes of us touching sand. The shifting peaks fortunately gave us an undisturbed path out back, but the unpredictability imposed by the wind gave the long-period sets a menacing front. To my mind, weary from sleep deprivation, excess food and early beverages, this did not feel welcoming. As Silver whopped for me to take a one-half overhead section rearing up vertical, I hesitated...

Stroking hard to break through its feathering lip to safety the other side, I was sucked back over the falls with immobilising force, and hurled deep down into the oceans depths. Churned under the water, I knew I was being dragged into the impact zone for the rest of the set, and on resurfacing I quickly acquired my board and took the next foaming wall into shore. This was like a four foot onshore swell at Llangennith but with the power of a six foot swell. These waves had travelled many thousands of miles across the Atlantic, hitting shallow shelves only during their last 150km, and hence unleashing their full energy on the Aquitaine coastline. I was tired, I was weak, it was not for me! As I strolled back over the dunes an hour later with the camcorder to film Silver, clear sky and warm sun had replaced the earlier tempest, although the surf was still suffering from the low tide sandbanks. Silver was still chargin' though, determined to surf until he dropped!



As the evening Mascaret approached, I announced that I would be filming the wave instead of surfing, and hence was instantly nominated team rally driver for the post St Pardon chase to catch a wave on the Garonne. Team twat caps were issued so I could identify Wiz and Silver on the wave, and I set up the camera on one of the fishing jettys with an excellent view upstream, as a multitude of wave riders drifted past me. The coefficient reached its maximum on this tide, and it certainly brought the crowds out. The banks alone were lined with at least five hundred people, and with easily a hundred people in the water, Philippe decided to ride the wave far around the bend where he was undisturbed. It was a beautiful sunny evening, as the warm air had swept in behind the front, and the sun reflected off the water, radiating bright greens and yellows from the tree-lined banks. It was a long way downstream, and even through the viewfinder it was impossible to make out Wiz, Silver or any of our new French colleagues.



The signal that the Mascaret was coming was distinct, as dozens of black shadows darted out from the bank with great urgency to pick their spot on the wave. As the soup broke out into the river beyond the kink, it scooped up surfers, canoeists and kayakers, sometimes clearly tossing them around, and where the largest crowds had gathered, boards flew into the air, and boats spun around out of control. The more experienced surfers had positioned themselves away from this foray, towards the bank, in anticipation of the dyeing wave beyond marker 12.

It was an incredible spectacle to watch, as the black wall of surfers travelled towards St Pardon, while others waited ahead of them, looking for any slight gap that gave an opening to get onto the wave.

It also gave me the opportunity to see how the wave performed beyond marker 12, since previously I had failed to breach this point. One by one, the line of surfers began to drop down prone, drift off the wave and start paddling for the secondary wall. What had been a calm clear river only an hour previously, was now a scattered mess of water users, dispersed along the two kilometre course, paddling back after their partial success.



A few surfers caught waves trailing back to about the eighth, but only for short distances, as they were forced to manouevre around other bodies in front of them. It was really chaos, and I could understand the local's apprehension at giving too much away about other breaks on the Dordogne. As my heart raced with excitement at finally capturing this great tidal bore on film for my own research purposes, I glimpsed in the corner of the viewfinder one man still standing on the second wave, joined only by a few canoeists. I zoomed in, and immediately made out

the red and yellow of the Wizard's twat cap. Just as he had succeeded on our first evening in St Pardon, the Wizard was again the last man standing. He caught sight of me concealed amongst a crowd of French spectators, gave a wave, and prepared for his speciality.

The crowd surrounding me went delirious with rapture as Wizard went sailing past on his head. The wave had really disipated into an undulation, but the Wizard's carpet locked in and likewise did his balance as he remained in this pose for over fifty metres. Watching the footage back afterwards, it was pretty incredible to see that Wizard was infact the second man standing, way back around the top kink, yet through all the mayhem that ensued during the Mascaret's passage, here he was, two kilometres downstream, on his head and still going!



There was no time for me to see what happened next, as I now had an important duty - to struggle my way through the dispersing crowds of spectactors in our surf wagon, to locate Fabrice, pick up the guys, and head off on our road chase to the Garonne. We had about 40 minutes to reach our destination, and over 35km off French country lane to traverse. It was going to be close!...

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