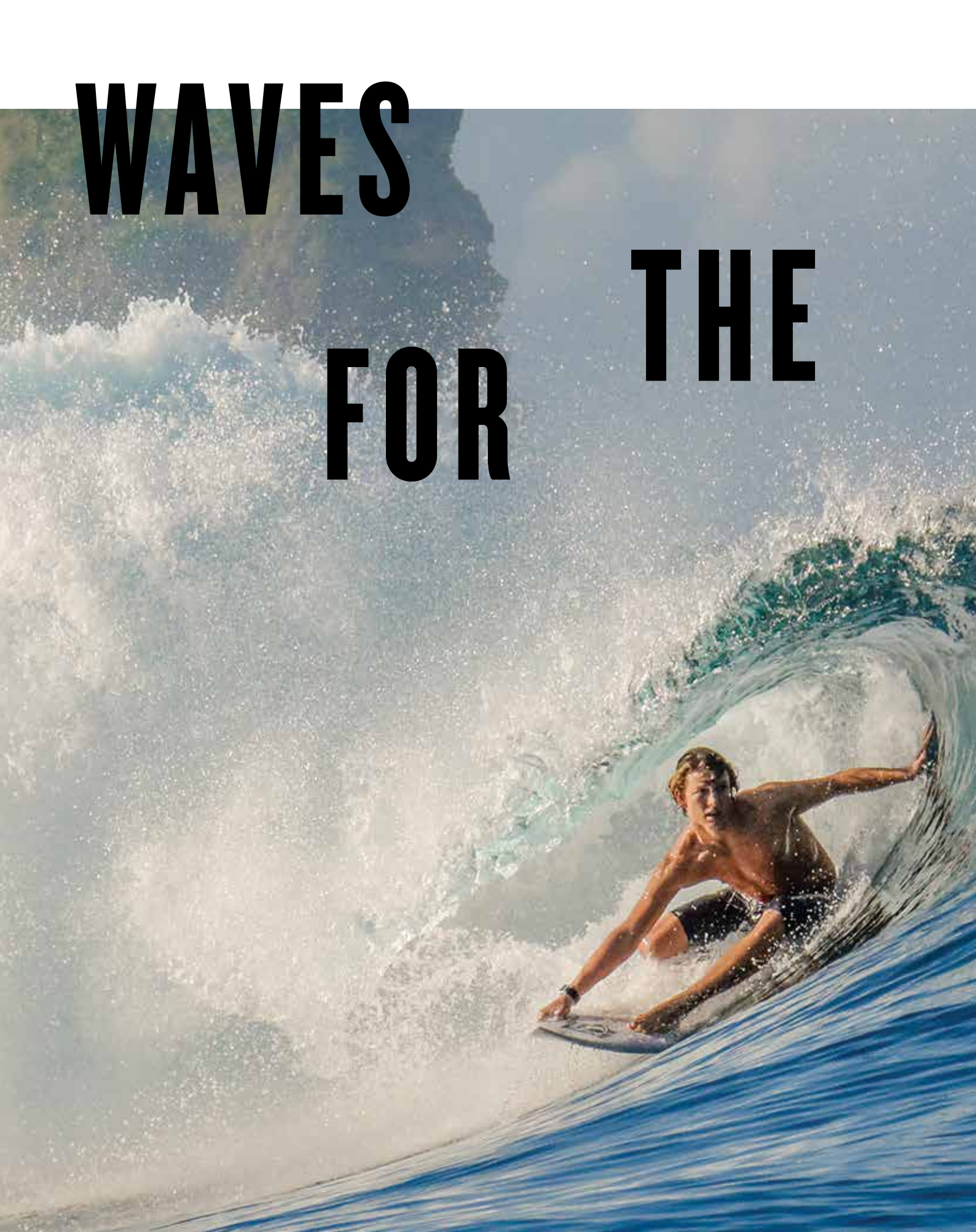


WAVES

FOR THE



WEALTHY



Middle-aged male surfing addicts are prepared to pay top dollar for the best waves in the world. Danae Mercer travels to Indonesia to meet the men who inhabit the world of high-end surfing

Robert Hooten squints towards the horizon. He is unimpressed.

The toned, tanned surf fanatic is waiting for waves - the best waves. Hooten used to be okay with six-foot swells. But today the 65-year-old thrill seeker has no time for six-footers. He wants what they call double or triple overhead waves. "It's what I live for every day," he smiles.

Unable to paddle because of shoulder injuries picked up while snowboarding and surfing, Hooten has to be towed by a jet ski to reach the monster surf. "My game has gone up," he says. "I want the 20-foot waves, as big as they can get. I like the most shallow, dangerous reefs, the ones that require the most technical skills."

Hooten is waiting for waves at Kandui Villas on Indonesia's Mentawai islands - a magnet for surfers who want the big stuff. Thirty years ago, when he was 35, after making a few million from agriculture and real estate, he "kind of retired", bought a boat and sailed around the world. He dabbled for a

while in the stock market just for the rush of mastering the trade. "Now I get that thrill from surfing," he grins.

Today, possessing the body of a 20-year-old weightlifter, Hooten lives in a surfer's paradise - albeit a rather wealthy one. His home is a two-floor luxury Indonesian hut called an *uma* at Kandui Villas. His meals are three-course catered feasts of salads and fish. Every day, he wakes to talk of the waves, surrounded by surfers in this high-end island paradise.

Kandui Villas, like Nihiwatu in Sumba, and the Four Seasons Jimbaran Bay in Bali, caters to a very select but growing group of surfers: those who want the best waves money can buy.

"I personally know 15 billionaire surfers, really serious billionaire surfers," says Claude Graves, the incredibly laid back founder of the luxury Nihiwatu Resorts. "They'll pay anything, anywhere." We're eating plates of papaya and pineapple at a bar overlooking the ocean. A

set of crutches lean on the barstool beside him. “Slopes,” he says when I ask.

As a kid, Graves’ heroes were the great explorers, people who went into the wild trekking, exploring, dying. His love for surfing started in New Jersey when he was eight. It got in his blood, he says, and he couldn’t give it up. “It’s exciting. It’s the one place you can go to shut down from school or marital or business problems. When you’re out on the water on your own, and you’re riding waves, you’re in a pure environment.”

Long before surfing took on a luxury sheen, Graves was dragging his wife Petra to some “pretty basic” surf places. He sensed an opportunity. “There are thousands of very wealthy surfers scattered all over the world,” he continues, “and they’re all looking for the same thing: somewhere they can surf where their families are taken care of.”

Unable to find the perfect place, Graves decided he’d make it himself. “I was 39, I’d sold a business in Africa, I was retired, and didn’t have anything to do. I was just hanging out and skiing.”

Slowly, Nihiwatu was born. Today it’s all airy villa rooms and candlelit meals eaten with toes in the



Above right: Claude Graves
Below: Robert Hooten



PORTRAITS: SARAH FREEMAN

sand. Think honeymoon destination, surf haven and charity foundation (there's a strong fundraising arm) all in one. Nihiwatu has been more successful than Graves ever expected. "We sold the dream," he smiles. "Everyone has that dream deep down inside, even if they don't know it."

HELI-SURFING

"Heli-surfing?" laughs the bemused world champion surfer Sebastian Zietz. "What's that?"

Zietz is chuckling at the Four Seasons Jimbaran Bay in Bali. Not specifically a surfing destination in its own right, the luxury ocean-front hotel has partnered with elite surf company TropicSurf to offer heli-surfing.

I explain to him how surfers take a helicopter to the most remote waters. The champion surfer grins. "Well, yeah, that's definitely part of it, getting the waves. You can compare it to snowboarding, finding those mountains where no one's there. That's kind of the dream. It's just hard to do - not everyone can afford a helicopter."

Born in Kilauea, Hawaii, with four brothers and four sisters, Zietz started surfing young and was sponsored by Oakley by the time he was 16. "Anyone who surfs will probably tell you the same thing: from that first moment, if you get hooked, it's the best thing. It's just the speed, and you don't have to do anything. You paddle. You stand up. No two waves are the same, so every time you're up you get something different, ranging from knee-high to triple-overhead, from reefs to sand breaks. If aliens could see surfing, they'd trip out. It's just so different from any other sport."

Luxury surfing is a growing niche within the larger sport, Zietz agrees. But it's not just that the surfers themselves have more money - these days, surfing in general has a higher cash flow. "It's seen as a cool thing, especially in California," he explains. "All the cool people surf. In turn, everyone wants to buy surf brand clothing and stuff. There are tons more surfers and the surf brands have profited from it."

Luxury boards range from Frescobol Carioca's AED 9,000 hand-crafted wooden numbers to LUX Surfboard's decidedly over-the-top \$180,660 24-carat gold option. These surfing explorers bring money to an area; a study from wave-keen Sydney University academic Sam Wills, which looked at 500 surf locations across 146 countries between 1992 and 2013, declared the discovery of the perfect wave can add 2.2 percentage points to local GDP.

The prize money in contests has also shot up. "It's doubled over the last five years," says Zietz. "At a surf contest for the world tour, last place wins \$10,000."

But why do you surf? Is it meditative? "Oh yeah. If something's bothering me, I go surfing." And adrenaline? "Definitely. When you're at the mercy of a wave and you can't control it, there's a risk versus reward. If it's super sketchy, it's like 'Oh no, I could get mangled on that reef, maybe die, maybe

drown.' But thanks to years of surfing you'll most likely pull in, get super barrelled and spat out. It's like you overcome your fear and get the huge payoff from riding the best waves. I love surfing," he says, "and I'll do it until the day I die."

Back on Mentawai, Hooten puts it another way: "Surfing is my only passion."

One more injury, Hooten knows, and he'll most likely never be able to surf again. More than that, he'll probably lose function of his arm. But he can't stop, and won't stop. "I don't have a plan B," he shrugs. "That's what scares me. I don't know where I go from here."

The ocean swells. Around us surfers are gathering their boards, ready to dive into the waves. Hooten smiles, his tanned face crunching around his eyes. "Hopefully I've got a few more years of good surfing left."



Above: Nihiwatu in Sumba, Indonesia
Below: Champion surfer Sebastian Zietz is bemused by costly heli surfing

Where to go

MALDIVES

Known more for honeymoons than high-adrenaline, pros say the Maldives provide great surfing. Addu atoll in the south remains relatively uncharted. There's half a dozen wave set-ups from beginner to pro. The Shangri-La Villingili Resort and Spa offers a chance to brave the waves in style. shangri-la.com

SRI LANKA

Try Sion Surf Camp (sionsurfcamp.com) or Anantara Peace Haven Tangalle for the high-end surfer which offers one-on-one lessons and video analysis (anantara.com).

INDONESIA

Surfers are spoiled for choice in Indonesia, ranging from easy waves in Bali to wide seas in the Mentawai islands. The Chillhouse in Bali's Cang-

gu area combines yoga, surfing and a beautiful crowd (thechillhouse.com). At Four Seasons Jimbaran Bay, TropicSurf provides lessons on the property's beach break. Nihiwatu, in Sumba, has privacy within luxury trap-pings, while Kandui Villas in Mentawai lets surfers brave a buffet of options (nihiwatu.com; kanduivillas.com).

