

Mascaret 01

The road was long and very straight. My eyelids hung heavy and half shut as I maintained a distorted focus on the tarmac ahead. Through the corner of my vision I caught the blurred sign: Niort 68km. We were driving the E03 toll road, it was just after midday and the anticipation of our adventure weighed heavy in my thoughts. Tired as I was from hectic last minute preparations the previous day, insomnia had dominated my journey. The penetrable brightness of the restaurant lights through closed eyelids, the reverberating monotony of the engine's hum and anxiety for the success of our trip had kept me awake throughout the six hour ferry crossing from Plymouth to Cherbourg. Our guide Philippe was delayed in America, and we were heading for a small quaint river port in the heart of the Bordeaux vineyards, where very few people understood english. Our attempted french had a lot to answer for!



Three hours later, we were sitting on the banks of the Dordogne river, the warm sun radiating a relaxed mood. Things had not only gone to plan, they had gone better than planned! My premeditated visions of St Pardon, a small river port extending north of Vayres town, had been completely erroneous. The port was simply beautiful, a three-dimensional canvas world, that hung silent and motionless against a backdrop of wooded hills, vineyards and isolated chateaus. The river ran straight in both directions for several kilometres, and tall poplars, in shades of faded green at the turning of the season, lined its banks.



Next to the jetty stood the *Cafe du Port*, known locally as Chez Ani. Our instructions from Philippe had been to locate Ani who would sort out somewhere for us to camp. I wonder what the initial remarks of the local 'flys would have been as we stepped over the threshold into our first truly french encounter. We hung at the bar, adorned in our club T-shirts, confused, tired and clearly not French! Within seconds, a teacher and addicted bore rider from Nantes, Pierre, directed us in scattered english to the small back restaurant room, where Ani was to be found. Over the next ten minutes I began to realise the limitations of the communication barrier. We were introduced to a local pizza vendor, Christian, who promptly ushered us to a corner of his garden to pitch our tent. We were sheltered from the wind and potential thieves by a high hedgerow, and it was only a hundred yards walk to both the jetty and the restaurant. In fact it was perfect!



In recollection, Wizard recounted his first take off on the Mascaret as a truly memorable moment. But then, he did surf past the large crowd, gathered outside the restaurant, on his head! Paddling back from upstream at the time, I could hear the cheers ringing out above the roar of the wave breaking over the cobbled banks of the jetty. We all had some success on our first run at the wave. Fortunately, against the odds, Philippe had arrived with time to spare for our first evening attempt. He gladly led us a mile down river to the take-off spot, located by visible landmarks on the bank. I remember looking back, as I paddled downstream, to see a herd of rubber clad figures spread from the jetty right up to our own wake. There were surfers, canoeists and kayakers, numbering at least seventy. And this was only the start of the week, with a small coefficient! The Silver Surfer was the first to feel the full force of congestion, suffering a de-legging from a canoeist's nose. As the mascaret travels around a slight kink in the top bend, it pulls back towards the bank, drawing all the riders into a small space with it. There are also those ahead waiting and

hoping to find their own space on the wave. If you make it through this slow M25-style section, the wave breaks out into the river again with quite impressive suddenness, and a three foot shoulder. However, the open face is something you can look at, but can rarely reach, hemmed in a position between boats and surfboards. But the fun doesn't stop here! As the wave passes *marker 12* after about a kilometre of surfing, it hits a section of deeper water and backs off at the head. Yet remarkably, the waves behind rear up and scoop up any surfers ready to paddle into them. Wreaked with exhaustion from our arduous journey, and with my charge of Dextrose tablets dissipated, I failed to pick up any of these waves, and paddled back slowly in the following tide, with Philippe by my side discussing the plans for the rest of the week.

As for the Wizard, well following his display past the Port, he clocked up one of the longest rides of the week. It was probably only when he climbed up the bank, to be faced by a crowd of French spectators, that it dawned that this was not the Severn bore, his home for twenty years where he had never before missed a surfable tide. But these were not your angry local *Minster-ites* waving cursory gestures, but a crowd of wine loving, mascaret adoring, locals, that understood the significance of the wave and the surfers for bringing tourism (and money) to this otherwise small village.

As the Mascaret pushed on its course another 30km upriver, the crowd of spectators rapidly dispersed, and we prepared for our first evening of camaraderie against the bar of Chez Ani. First, we presented Philippe with his personalised official tour tee-shirt with the slogan *I Luv Jetskiers* across the front. Once on, I don't think Philippe removed his new acquisition for the next few days. But then neither did we, until they were stained too black for further use! The continental lager rushed rapidly to my weary head, as we viewed the first of several showings of the *Bored!* section of UK2K, showing the Severn Bore in all it's glory. Following a quick call to the Severn crew to see what we had been missing back home, we took a trip into Bordeaux, where Philippe treated us to some quality French cuisine and fine wine, on the banks of the Garonne. The establishment was extremely plush, with a handful of beautiful *renard* delivering

us our every request. Noticing the Silver Surfer slacked out in his sandals, I couldn't help but think we were under dressed. But then i observed Philippe still brandishing his new sarcastic slogan in full majesty. So I accepted the inviting ambience of the somber lighting, and nestled down to a delectable three course meal.

It was after four hours sleep, standing in the bitter cold of a clear night, that we got to experience the particular dedication of the local Mascaret surfers. The tide was due around 5:45am, the temperature was a frigid seven degrees, and a thick fog lingered over the river's surface. Other than the experience of surfing blind, the advantage of these early morning tides is a total absence of crowds. Not that that makes it safe! Without Philippe and Bruno Boue's guidance we would never have located the take-off. At one stage we appeared to have lost the Silver Surfer, until he paddled against the current, from downstream, towards us having gone too far - the Frenchies mistook him for the mascaret for a brief moment! The dense moisture filled air made it almost impossible to see beyond about ten metres. The water was as accomodating as a tepid bath, and, as I waited, I sunk deep into its soothing depths to avoid the brisk air.

The sound of the mascaret crept up on us suddenly out of the early morning silence. It did not feel very large, and I had to work my shoulders to get a forward trajectory. But then, as I lunged to my feet, I felt that unnerving sensation of poor balance, and, before I could correct my mistake, I was toppled from the wave. As I fell, the only thoughts in my head were the long paddle back alone in the dark. Salvation came in the soft voice of the Wizard, who had failed to pick up the wave at all on his magic carpet! Ahead of us we saw the flash of Philippe's head torch grow fainter and fainter. When we reached the jetty, a very jubilant Silver Surfer was waving around his somewhat dinged mal. He had ridden the 1km stretch, until out of the darkness he was stopped dead by an unsuspecting tree trunk. He was stoked though, and a bit of duck tape soon remedied any leakage problems.

Shortly after we were standing around a warm cup of coffee brewed up by Pierre, and planning the morning trip to La Porge beach, to catch a small groundswell before the afternoon sea breeze kicked in. The 160km long Aquitaine coastline is a piece of undisturbed natural beauty. The long sandy beach stretches from Cap Ferret in the south to Pointe de Grave at the mouth of the Gironde estuary. The beach is backed by huge sand dunes that have engulfed the land. Beyond these, huge wood plantations of pine hold back the advance of the sands in the onshore winds.

As we drove along the narrow road, the early morning sun etched hues of orange and red through the trees, and waves of mist swirled just above the ground. With not another car to be seen, you can almost slip back into an earlier age of surfing. Civilization is sparse except for the occasional route to a nudist colony bisecting the road. The surf was good, although the water was colder than I had anticipated. A mushy local swell caused havoc inside, but far out back,

every twenty minutes an overhead set would sweep through, delivering take-offs faster than I had experienced around the coast of Wales. The Wizard knocked it on the head early, wishing he had bought his magic carpet rather than the 9'1 mal, Philippe left for work, I took time out for some postcards, and Silver surfed until he could paddle no more!



The evening mascaret topped off *Black Tuesday* for Wiz, as he was toppled in the foray, while Silver and I clocked the No 12 marker again. We also finally met Fabrice Colas, the man we had first made contact with several years ago regarding the mascaret. Washing the evening away with more lager, we decided to sample Ani's cuisine. Fabrice joined us and for a tenner each we had a delicious three course meal, with ham and steak. Wizard, suffering from excess exposure to meat, was rather taken aback when his *pomme de terre* arrived as couscous! Supping more fine Bordeaux wine, Fabrice explained his absence at St Pardon. He had been working on several secret spots on the Garonne river to the south, and had made arrangements for us to attempt a Severn style chase the next evening.

What a surprise as we stepped back to the bar after the meal, but to see the Champions League football on the widescreen, Manchester United at the helm. So, I figured it was time to work on some french, and sampled several liquers with Silver, while I began to formulate a new language with the barman, Coco. Over the next couple of nights, through hand gestures, facial expressions and general gruffing, we made successful communication and even designed a new language, Frenglish! United decided not to win until the last minute, and so we crawled into our sleeping bags in the knowledge that four hours later, we would be back in the river again. My head raced with excitement from the pictures Fabrice had painted in my head depicting the secret spots. Wednesday would be a good day!...

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