

Mascaret 01

Fabrice was certainly a man in a hurry! As I dropped the car into second to accelerate out of the tight corner I could feel Silver apprehensively looking over my shoulder watching the rev counter push dangerously close to the red band. In negotiating the crowds on leaving St Pardon, I had already put a scratch across the paint work as I got too close to a barrier. But Silver did not seem too phased. After another lemon on Philippe's monster mal at the top of the St Pardon straight, he was anxious to arrive on time at the secret spot and have more success with his own board. Several times we nearly lost sight of Fabrice, slowed by a country driver, but finally pulled up at our destination, my head working in overtime after the exhilaration of my raleigh experience. The surf wagon had breached seventy along some of the long straights, and I was highly relieved there had been no unsuspecting police cars hidden in a driveway, as can be expected along the Severn's own A48 race.

There is not a lot of description I can give of what later became known as Spot X, on the Garonne river, for fear of giving away this secret location. Indeed, a secret it should remain, for the local Mascaret riders who dedicated much effort in their succesful search. the Garonne river is considerably narrower than the Dordogne, stretching only about fifty metres wide once it has traversed it's way past several islands, and through the suburbs of Bordeaux. The banks of the river rise steeply as much as twenty feet, and the scattered trees and shrubs that line the fringes have an angular bend indicating the incessant pressure exerted on them by the incoming tide. Thick mud runs down the banks, and large boulders jut out dangerously into the river. We later learnt that there are numerous locations between Arcins Island, below the A630 ringroad bridge, and Cadillac where the Mascaret breaks with impressive bravado.



It was only several minutes after our arrival at Spot X that I appreciated what was meant by this. As I clung to a tree half way down the bank, I focused in on the approaching wave with my free hand, as it crept up the far bank in typical Severn fashion. Wirey branches blocked my clear view of the building wave against the near bank, where the surfers were waiting. But, as the Mascaret exploded with a tumultuous bellow, I knew that something special was happening beyond the obstructive undergrowth. Through the viewfinder, I made out Fabrice taking off on an open face. The wave barreled rapidly out into midstream, where a solid four foot shoulder opened up, allowing Fabrice to demonstrate his sea surfing experience.

The wave was more like home, with a quality rivalling anything I had ever seen on the Severn, even our very own Jaws! And, in harsh contrast to the grossly overpopulated St Pardon, this was almost totally a one man show. Wizard had experienced the four foot barrel at first hand as it quite literally swallowed him up and spat him out the back. Silver survived the initial avalanche of water, and soon appeared through the view finder, creeping up the inside, slowly working his way to the shoulder, where Fabrice was putting in a multitude of turns on the near perfect glass.

Within an instant, the two surfers had passed by and were again obstructed by the vegetated banks, as they rolled on upriver for another several hundred yards. As I helped Wizard clamber up the bank, he seemed undeterred by his absence on the wave, and we were both stoked with excitement for another attempt at this phenomenal wave the next morning. We were indebted to Fabrice for bringing us down here from the closed community of St Pardon to witness the variability of the Mascaret. We said our *au revoirs*, and, as the red glow of the dyeing sun sunk over the western horizon, we headed back along the windy country lanes for another evening of feasting at Chez Ani's.



Ten hours later we were once again racing down the country lanes in the direction of the Garonne river. This time under our own steam, with Fabrice's maps and a brief reminder from Bruno embedded in my memory. Silver, looking particularly worse for wear, was at the helm. Sunlight was only just starting to penetrate the dense fog that weaved through the treelined vineyards. It had been Pierre's party at Ani's the previous night. We had again eaten copious amounts of meat, supped wine, talked bores, and ended up in front of the widescreen watching Lilles in the Champions League, as I conversed further with Coco. Lack of sleep had finally overcome us, we had failed to wake in time for the St Pardon dawn patrol, and so, resorted to racing straight on to Spot X where we hoped to meet up with Bruno and, distance record holder, Pascal.



The fog hung densely over the river, as we stood shivering in apprehension of the encroaching wave. Finally, I saw the source of the previous nights excitement, as, through the grayness, a small undular swell, injected with energy from the following wave, walled up to a solid five feet and bared with unforgettable hollowness out from the bank. All I could do was let out a unpenetrable hoot, as I turned, clung to my rails, and was scooped up by the frothing soup in midstream. Pascal had taken the shoulder drop, but was soon intervened by Silver who

had stealthily snuck to the outside, while Wizard and I played safe ensuring we conquered this river's Mascaret. Bruno faced the full force of the wave as he was spun out on the inside towards the bank, and the rest of us rode it until it died out a quarter of a mile upstream, narrowly avoiding some unwanted debris.

Back in St Pardon, the fog lifted, revealing a glorious autumnal day, as hot as any we had experienced all summer in England. Unfortunately, Silver had been overcome by food poisoning and spent the day in the tent. Wizard and I meanwhile leisurely feasted on giant *pain au chocolat* as we relaxed by the banks of the Dordogne. Entertainment came with a quick repair job on Wizard's brand new gas cooker, which had been inadvertently run over by Pascal on departing Spot X! Then, Pierre pointed out a rather unusual looking object protruding from the gradually falling river by the jetty. It was the aerial of a car which had been abandoned that morning by joyriders before the tide came in. The *gendarme* arrived several times with additional reinforcements to survey the car, and once completely exposed, it took the best part of the afternoon for them to remove it.



As we said our farewells to Pierre, who was returning to his hometown of Nantes, we were invited to join the boat captain, Marco, and his missus, the delectable Florence, on an afternoon boatride down the Dordogne, to the port of Ambes just south of the Gironde estuary. A gesture we could simply not refuse. As I paraded around the boat filming every piece of apparel, Wizard was quickly put to work assisting Marco in hoisting up the anchor. The Dordogne really is majestic as it gradually widens out towards the estuary on its slowly meandering course. The only interruption to the tree lined banks is the occasional abandoned shack at the perimeter, or a grand mansion nestled back far enough to avoid flooding. We observed numerous points of slack water where a potential Mascaret may break over shallow sandbanks, but at well over a quarter of a mile wide, the tides energy would be widely dispersed, and it made sense that most Mascaret riders had stuck it out at St Pardon rather than looking further afield.

Our voyage took us under the massive freeway bridge that traverses the river. The same bridge we had travelled over three days earlier, as we had caught our first glimpse of the river. Reminiscing, I couldn't believe what we had achieved in such a short space of time. The high water mark on the huge stanchions was over twenty foot above the river and I wondered at whether extreme tides would breach way over the banks.

Parked up at Ambes, supping herbal tea, we could make out in the distance the small river port of Bourg, which overlooks the confluence of the two rivers, at the point the incoming tide is separated into two Mascarets following their own unique courses. I was busy filming the raised anchor from the free floating jetty, that rises up and down on large steel girders, when I was disturbed by an innocuous grinding that suddenly became quite intense. It was the incoming tide, and, with a dramatic onrush of water, the river had suddenly changed it's direction, and was flowing upstream from whence we had come. The eagle-eyed Wizard pointed out several small undular swells half a mile away against the opposite bank. It was a thrill to see the reversal of the flow, and we felt privileged to have experienced something that very few Mascaret surfers had probably ever witnessed. But then our thoughts turned to a more pressing concern, as we observed Marco and Florence leisurely sprawled out on the foredeck soaking up the early evening sun.

How were we going to make it back to St Pardon in time for our last evening Mascaret?

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