

# Boys from Brazil stir up a surf war

Tensions between Hawaiian surfers and energetic newcomers from South America have reached boiling point on Oahu's **famous** beaches

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Neco Padaratz in action *AFP*

You only have to watch Edison de Paula carve his way across one of the spectacular waves that wallop Oahu's north shore each winter to realise that surfing isn't exactly what you might call a laid-back sport. When the swells hit 20 or 30 feet, one wrong move can send you straight to a watery grave. At Pipeline, a **break** famous for its perfect "tubes," there have been 70 deaths since the 1960s. At nearby Sunset Beach, a man went missing, presumed dead, only last week.

From time to time, surfers also encounter serious danger on dry land. Especially if – like de Paula – they were neither born nor raised in Hawaii, but instead grew up roughly 8,000 miles away on the **beaches** of Brazil.

The curse of "localism", a universal feature of the **surfing** world, has reached one of its occasional boiling points on the North Shore, a small but spectacular piece of ocean-front regarded as the sport's Mecca due to its ability to hold large, beautifully-formed waves.

Friction between territorial locals and outsiders is keenly felt at the **best** of times. But in recent winters, the arrival of tribes of energetic young surfers from Brazil has sparked something approaching a racial war.

De Paula has seen Brazilians beaten to a pulp by Hawaiians for both relatively minor misdemeanours, such as "disrespecting" the wrong person, and more dangerous breaches of etiquette, such as attempting to catch the wrong wave. In ensuing disputes, their cars have been vandalised, valuable surfboards snapped in two, and noses and teeth broken. "A Brazilian guy might have made a mistake in the water, or been too aggressive. He may not, strictly, have done anything wrong, but it doesn't matter: he will get punished," de Paula said.

"Some Hawaiians, if they see someone take a wave their friend wanted, they'll run him on to the beach and beat him down. Then they'll tell him to leave the North Shore and never come back. They mean it, too."

The wider surfing community first became aware of the tensions between Hawaiians and their Latin-American counterparts at the 2007 Pipeline Masters, a **professional** contest held annually, when Brazil's Neco Padaratz became

involved in a fight with North Shore regular Sunny Garcia. Fisticuffs began in the water. When they moved to dry land, scores of locals joined in. Order was restored when the police gave the Brazilians a safe escort from the beach.

No one knows exactly how many fights have broken out since. Police don't keep a record and the locals have lost count. But, as another big wave **season** gets underway, dozens of YouTube videos and scores of eye-witness accounts bear witness to a creeping xenophobia invading paradise.

"The problem Brazilians have is that our culture is very different to American culture," adds de Paula, who despite having now lived in Hawaii for two decades says he still has no chance of being accepted as a true "local". "By that, I mean Brazilians are naturally happy people. We express that in the way we behave and talk, and sometimes in the way we are aggressive in the **ocean**, and often it gets misinterpreted. Because we are naturally loud and expressive, that upsets some people."

Many Hawaiians, for their part, accuse over-eager Brazilians of habitually "dropping in," or stealing waves from other surfers who have right of way. People who do that risk causing a collision or a "wipeout" place others in peril, in what is potentially, a life-threatening environment.

Ken Bradshaw, an acclaimed North Shore resident who was for many years believed to have ridden the biggest wave ever surfed, told The Independent that Brazilians are as unpopular in Hawaii now as Australians were in the 1970s.

"Our problem with Brazilians is a bit like the issue we had in the 70s with Australians," he said. "They come here with an attitude. But it's not their home. They are a guest, coming into our house, but they don't show respect."

As the surf documentary, *Bustin' Down the Door* recalled, several Antipodean surfers of the era Bradshaw recalls were subjected to death threats.

Today, emotions run equally high. "I hate to sound racist, but the reality is that in any culture, groups who come in affect the security of people who are already

there," added Bradshaw. "The Brazilians here are like Asian immigrants to the mainland: they create little Chinatowns. By that, I mean that they surf together in packs, eight or 10 of them." Another problem is their "attitude," he says. "They want to dominate, want to be the most aggressive group in the water. They are self-absorbed, and the way they conduct themselves can seem offensive."

Behind the **big** talk and endless fights is a time-honoured fact: surfing is, and always will be, a straightforward struggle for the valuable piece of finite real estate that is a top-class wave.

The mechanics of the sport mean that each wave can usually only hold one person; and there can be 10 or even 15 minutes between a "set" of three or four rideable waves. That makes for a lot of competition when they come along. Meanwhile the exploding popularity of the sport brings ever-increasing numbers of surfers to top **breaks**, further ratcheting up the pressure.

On a good day at Pipeline, Sunset Beach, Waimea Bay and other top North Shore spots, it's not uncommon to see a hundred people jostling for position in a "take off zone" no bigger than a football pitch. The atmosphere during a big swell becomes even more **competitive** thanks to the presence of the world's top surf photographers. Surfers know that if a shot of them catching a large wave finds its way into print, sponsorship dollars may soon follow.

"Everyone comes here because this is considered a proving ground," said Rick Williams, a Sunset Beach surfer. "Guys come here from overseas expecting to go head to head with the local guys. The waves are very, very **big** and it's extremely macho and competitive."

Long-term population growth on Oahu has only increased the overcrowding, added Carol Phillips, a local surf instructor and pro bodyboarder, while economic development means that more and more Brazilians can these days afford to visit. "The North Shore is known as the seven-mile miracle because there's so much fabulous surf in such a short space," she says. "But more people live on the island than ever, and people who visit tend to come back year after

year. So it just keeps on getting more crowded." Demographic changes have also produced spiralling house prices, clogged roads, and a sense that the island culture is under threat.

Leading the pushback is The Wolfpak, a vigilante group formed roughly a decade ago by angry young locals which has recently been blamed for attacks on Brazilian surfers. Its leader is Kala Alexander, a pro surfer whose notoriety led to cameos in the film *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and the television series *Hawaii-5-O*.

Asked how he might deal with "foreigners" who annoy him in the **water**, Alexander said recently: "Maybe I'd paddle up to you, tell you to go in, or take off your leash [a cord used to attach a board to a surfer]. Later I'd find you, or a few of the other guys would, and you'd be taught a lesson."