



the **Gospel**
according to
surf

Photos and text by Paul Galipeau

When a community fears the government will “kill the fishery”, one Danish town is looking to surfing as a way to save its economy. ▶



■ Hvide Sande locals, Peter Fischer and Gabi Ott, with Jule, their new puppy, met over 20 years ago when Peter was working in a circus riding a 3 metre unicycle and juggling fire.



■ In Hvide Sande, surfers and fishers must share the waters.

One must wonder what draws people to a windy Danish fishing village on the decline. As boats have been slowly leaving coastal Denmark over the last 40 years, more recently, with a growing local surf scene complemented its steady tourism industry, Hvide Sande is learning that surfing can offer another water-based economic boost.

Disciples of the sea

“Many fishermen can’t swim,” says Gabi Ott, Hvide Sande resident and 1998 women’s world windsurfing champion. “They aren’t connected to the water in the same way that surfers are. They’re surrounded by it but taught to be afraid.” Despite this fear, Mads Sand, another Hvide Sand local, draws some parallels between surfers and fishers: “We share a respect for the ocean and how it can be both beautiful and dangerous.”

Known for its high waves and even higher winds, Hvide Sande offers surfers chances to take part in several of the sport’s disciplines. While many people here have roots in windsurfing, kitesurfing has been growing in popularity and as paddle surfing was once seen as impossible to do in the area, it too is getting more attention.

Sand, one of the few dedicated paddle surfers in the area, regularly

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◀ Kites in air, two friends chat before hitting the waves again.

shares his house with surfers from other countries. “Surfing is totally growing in Denmark. I had an American guy stay with me for two weeks during the summer and he couldn’t help but compare how things are here to what surfing was like in the 70s over there. A few years ago, we wouldn’t have thought it was possible for someone to ride a short board in Hvide Sande. We didn’t think we could control the wave with it but now, that’s nearly all people ride”

Where fishing often requires serious adjustments to one’s personal life to accommodate a life of hard work, surfing demands a sort of inverse dedication. Living only a few blocks from the beach, another local, Rune Sørensen, is known to be one of the most weather savvy surfers around. “You can’t choose when the waves come. You need the conditions to be right and sometimes you can’t let your job get in the way of that.” Sørensen works as a carpenter’s apprentice in Hvide Sande and has an informal agreement where on some days, when surf conditions are good, he can leave work early if he stays later another time that week.

Currently recovering from a surf-related back injury, Sand works at an after-school program for kids which gives him time to surf during the day



■ Rune Sørensen, who moved to Hvide Sande in 2000 to work in a surf shop rides the day's last waves.

Kitesurfing in 25 m/s winds is never a one man job. A kitesurfer's friend faces the November gust to lend a hand. ▶

and more free time during the summer. Ott, along with her husband Peter Fischer, run a surf shop 70km south, in Blåvand from Easter to Halloween. "It's usually just the two of us working," says Ott, "so on a day where the surf is good, we usually take turns going out to surf while the other stays to run the shop."

"It's hard for people here to be friends with us ... there is a cost to everything but we're very happy with how our life is."

It's a surfer's life for me

One thing about surfers is that they love to travel. Ott and Fischer take things to another level though. "Our shop is open mostly for tourists so it doesn't make sense for us to stay open during the winter," says Fischer. "During the months that we do work, we work more hours than most people do in a whole year but when we stop, we go to South Africa. We've been going there every winter since 1989."



Having once tried to settle down in Sylt, Germany, they realized that dividing their time between Denmark and South Africa was the only way for them to live happily.

It hasn't always been easy though. "It's hard for people here to be friends with us knowing that we have little time to socialize. We really have more friends in Cape Town than in Denmark," Ott confesses, sitting next to Fischer, who adds, "Of course, there is a cost to everything but we're very happy with how our life is."

Sharing the experience of another local surfer, Ott reminds that many people in Hvide Sande are deeply religious which lends to a sort of lifestyle that doesn't mesh well with surfing. "One guy I know here grew up with the church and only started surfing after having two children. He has a third child now but only talks about wanting to travel the world and surf. Unfortunately, this isn't easy to do with a family."

A slow understanding

Surfing causes conflict elsewhere in Denmark. In Klitmøller, 150km north of Hvide Sande, it is reported that there were serious fights between fishers and surfers. "It's much smaller there than in Hvide Sande," says Sørensen. "Here, there's other stuff going on but in Klitmøller, it's only fishing and surfing. You can guess that fishing has been going on a lot longer too." Klitmøller is known as one of the best surf spots in Europe and attracts people from many countries. "A lot of surfers will probably have an easier time finding Klitmøller on a map than Copenhagen," says Ott. With such a high tourist population, it is said that many locals see surf culture as one that brings trouble to the town.

There might not be a total understanding but the situation appears to be improving. Surf tourism is starting to attract families to Hvide Sande and, recognizing the economic opportunity this provides, the city is starting to invest more into it. Fischer has even met fishermen at the supermarket who have told him they saw him surf from their boat. That it looked cool. "I think they're starting to get it."

As the sport becomes more widely accepted along the coast, Danish surfers are optimistic about what's in store for the future. Ott says that while fewer and fewer people are windsurfing, kite and paddle surfing is becoming more accessible. "There's a guy that moved here who's working on the first ever Danish paddle surfing video," says Sand. "We can also expect more people traveling to Denmark, more contests and more attention on TV ... Surfing is like a religion and who knows? Maybe it will completely take over Hvide Sande." □



■ "A paddle surfer catches maybe one in ten waves, a windsurfer probably gets six of them. But with kitesurfing, it's possible to catch about nine of them." - Peter Fischer, one-time kitesurfing skeptic



■ Mads Sand lives with his girlfriend and his dog Bamse. Surfing has taken him to England, France, Portugal, Italy, Barbados, Venezuela, Dominican Republic, Bali & Australia.