

the new waves

GO DOWN EAST, DUDE: MAINE IS THE NEW MALIBU.
PORTER FOX GOES ON A SURFIN' SAFARI.

Photographs by NINO MUÑOZ





Rider on the storm
Long-board
like Andrew Thomps
braved the way
at Higgins Beach
the wake
Hurricane Ma



Maine is the last place you'd expect to find surfers.

Something about arctic water, L.L. Bean and lobster rolls doesn't exactly jive with Gidget nose-riding Malibu.

Tom Tanner has known this since 1987. An urchin diver-turned-house painter, Tanner, who is 40, has burned through seven cars chasing hurricane swells from Cape Hatteras, N.C., to Nova Scotia. Besides 40-degree water and rocky breaks, he says, Maine provides its own special challenge: finding waves. Opportunities are sudden and short, he says, sometimes lasting less than a day. And with shifts in tide and wind, you must be at exactly the right beach at exactly the right time, or you'll miss the waves altogether. This explains why he starts and ends his day listening to a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather radio.

On a warm September afternoon at his Portland home, Tanner and I start our surf safari reading Surfline.com forecasts. Tanner is calculating whether Hurricane Maria will deliver a swell. Above his laminated oak desk hangs an oil painting of a wave curling at the surfing mecca of Lanaikea Beach, Hawaii, where Tanner lived in 1995. Beside that are Volumes 4 through 14 of *The Surfer's Journal*.

Perhaps the only upside of global warming, he explains as he interprets a brightly colored wave amplitude map, is the spike in Atlantic hurricanes that has occurred over the last 10 years. That, combined with warmer, more flexible wet suits — meaning Maine's chilly waters can be surfed all year — has helped make the state a veritable surf destination. Our plan is to explore the 150-mile stretch between Portland and Winter Harbor, which, as Tanner explains as he looks up from his screen, is about to be hammered with a four-foot swell from Hurricane Maria.

At Higgins Beach, Portland's de facto long-board site and a 15-minute drive from his 1850's house, Tanner takes the first wave of the tour. He paddles hard and fast as the lip rears up behind him, then pops to his feet and drops down the five-foot face. In front of him are rows of miniature Victorian and Cape Cod houses overlooking a mile-long alabaster beach. To the north, the Spurwink River runs

past a sprawling farm and several small fishing shacks. To the south is a rocky point where Winslow Homer built a studio. The air temperature is pushing 80. The ocean is an uncharacteristically warm 64. Two college girls in bikinis and University of Maine T-shirts frolic in the white water with foam boards. A half-dozen guys and a few girls on long boards chitchat as they wait for the next set. If it weren't for a bucktoothed fisherman yelling "Git it!" every time a wave rolled in, you might even think you'd landed somewhere off the Southern California coast.

DURING THE FIRST WEEK, WE CHASE HURRICANE MARIA across the sandy beaches and relatively warm water around Portland. The day we visit Old Orchard Beach, Maine's most popular and most developed beach, leather-clad bikers sip bloody marys on the kitschy pier while a long-boarder rides past the pylons. Later that afternoon, we head south to the rockier Wells Beach, where peaky and long beach breaks peel right and left. On to the more crowded Ogunquit River mouth the next day. There, glassy waves curl from the outlet toward a three-mile swath of sand. A few days later we surf more swells off the sandbars and rocks at Popham Beach, the site of New England's first mainland colony in 1607.

On the last frontier of lower-48 surfing, though, it is on the farthest frontier that I want to be. So as the final waves of Hurricane Maria die down, I drive three hours Down East (north on the coast) along the thickly forested coast of northern Maine. Rock replaces sand the farther north I trek, and the ocean reflects a deeper, bluer hue. The coastline grows rougher still toward the end of the drive, sporting islands with names like Tumbledown Dick, the Lecherous Priest and Murder and Bury. It is a landscape indicative of the edge of something big, one that has inspired writers and artists like E. B. White, Philip Booth, Robert Lowell, Edward Hopper and Geoffrey Wolff.

The surfing here will be as much about adventuring as riding waves. Most of the breaks are boat-access only, and the water is 20 degrees



colder than in Portland. The breaks are above rocky ledges and jagged points. The consequences of tearing a wet suit are potentially deadly. But by the look of the steady sets rolling in from the Gulf of Maine, it will be worth the risk.

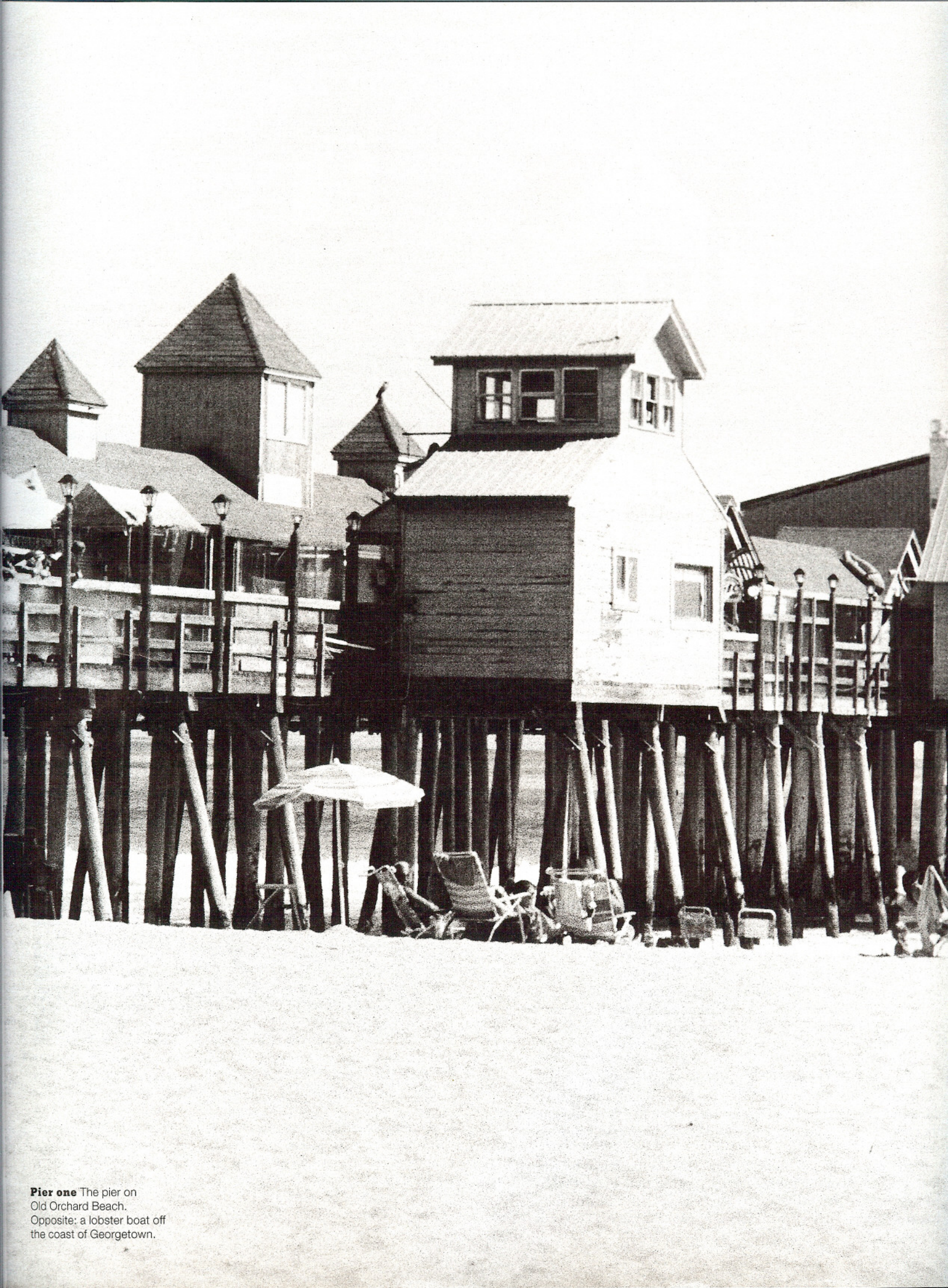
THE RUSH OF SURFING TERRA INCOGNITA HAS BEEN WELL documented in films like Bruce Brown's seminal 1966 work, "The Endless Summer." I grew up in Maine but learned to surf in California and Mexico. After two years of battling crowded beaches, the thought of having a wave to myself held a powerful allure, strong enough for me to drag my board back three years ago and begin exploring. For Tanner, the draw was simply exploring the ocean he grew up on. He worked on it. He played on it. He painted it. When he was urchin diving and surfing in the 1990's, he was in the water an average of 80 hours a week.

Twice in the last few years it almost killed him — once when his dry suit burst open, and the other when his fin pierced his abdomen during a winter surf session. The days he remembers best, though, are the ones when glassy, 10-foot swells roll in and there isn't another surfer in sight.

A house-painting job holds Tanner up in Portland, and he arrives four days behind me on the northern leg of our tour. He unfolds himself from an old Volvo wagon stacked with three boards and a bag of wet suits. He says that Hurricane Ophelia was cranking out



Going coastal From far left: surf's up; a private island home in Sheepscot Bay; the Porthole Restaurant in Portland; a modern lighthouse in Sheepscot Bay; a surfer calls it a day at Higgins Beach, Portland's de facto long-board hangout.



Pier one The pier on Old Orchard Beach. Opposite: a lobster boat off the coast of Georgetown.

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85-mile-an-hour winds and wreaking havoc on the coast of North Carolina. In 12 hours, he says, the waves here will build to five feet.

The next morning, the sky is dark and filled with moisture. We load a powerboat with dry bags, a thermos of coffee, the compulsory sixer of Budweiser. Then we follow a hand-held G.P.S. through pea-soup fog to a long wave peeling into a rocky, unnamed beach.

Every Maine tale needs a memorable ending, and a fisherman gives us just that as we ride perfect wave after perfect wave. About a quarter mile away, a lobster boat veers out of the channel and sets a course directly at us. It keeps on at full throttle until, 10 feet from where I am sitting on my board, it makes a sharp turn and stops. The fisherman driving the boat then leans over the gunwale and asks where I'm from. I say I grew up right across the bay, and I ask where he's from. He scowls and says he's from a little farther across the bay. Then he nods, drops anchor, throws on a wet suit, pulls his five-foot surfboard from the cabin and dives over the rail to join us. ■

Surf Shops Liquid Dreams, in Ogunquit, is Maine's largest surf shop, known for its equipment, lessons and local knowledge (207-641-2545; www.liquiddreamssurf.com).

Where to Stay The quaint but modern Portland Harbor Hotel is less than an hour from most beaches (from \$229; 207-775-9090; www.portlandharborhotel.com). The Holiday Inn is a less expensive alternative with underground parking for your boards (from \$135; 800-345-5050; www.innbythebay.com).

Where to Eat The Porthole Restaurant serves gourmet food on a pier overlooking the Portland waterfront (207-780-6533). The Five Islands Lobster Company in Georgetown has what just may be the best lobster rolls on the coast (207-371-2990; www.fiveislandslobster.com).

Forecasts To find wave forecasts and regional surf information, go to www.surfline.com or www.nesurf.com. PORTER FOX

