

# A SURFER'S PERSPECTIVE

## A LIST OF HALF MOON BAY SURF SPOTS



### **MONTARA**

Some have said it looks like Santander, Spain, but dip a toe in the water and one finds a cold, harsh reality. South of Devil's Slide, the first major break is Montara Beach, a sub-mile of open beach that faces directly into the Gulf of Alaska and takes a constant hammering from swell, wind, tide, fog and everything else the Pacific Ocean can throw. The good news is the south winds that accompany fog and/or rain in this region blow straight offshore at Montara, so on those summer days when San Francisco's beach-breaks are gray, blown-out and infinitely uninviting, Montara can be smooth and sweet.

During the winter, Montara is constantly shape-shifting and the bottom always in a state of flux from the swell and tide. On a big swell it can be as spectacular as closed-out Pipeline, and just as deadly. When the ocean mellows a bit, Montara ranges from deadly to excellent, depending on the bottom contour and swell direction. Often whales can be seen in the proverbial impact zone, perhaps enjoying nature's jacuzzi. Once you pass the six-foot shore-break, strong currents pull you out as you glide tens of feet from treacherous rocks. But don't wait too long before leaving the train, as missing the set can cause a surfer to paddle endlessly back to the take-off point or, fatigued, end up in 'dead man's land' of giant close-outs. Only one shark attack in 1990 and one unfortunate drowning in 1994. But in the immortal words of the Who, many surfers have left "shaking all over."



### **FLAT ROCK**

A secret spot off the coast lies a reef break known as Flat Rock, which lies on the edge of a steep underwater ravine that plays home to the proverbial 'Man in the Grey Suit' (our friend, the Great White shark). Getting to this spot takes more energy than climbing Montara Mountain - first there's the treacherous near free-falling drop down 100-foot sandstone cliffs, then the long reef-hopping hike through sea urchins and past large,

ornery pinnipeds (prey for the lurking predators), a short but vigorous paddle in shifting currents to a large, cumbersome rock that is both intimidating and refuge. Other surfers are rarely seen, as most feel the presence of Davy Jones, denizen of the deep. It is a badge to even make it this far! However, keep plenty of energy stored in your system, as the hike back to your car can be far worse on the body.

## ROSS' COVE

This is Mecca for all goofy footers. Located at the northern feet of Pillar Point (the western-most missile and satellite tracking station of the United States Air Force), Ross' cove offers unprecedented surfing on all but the largest of swells. On smaller days on a high tide, the left breaks along the point and moves outside as the swell increases in size. Maverick's is visible from the lineup, and surely seen by hundreds of surfers, which makes you wonder how Maverick's managed to stay so empty until 1990.



Even on big days, you can experience a dry-hair paddle out as a deep channel cuts through the middle of the cove. Once in the lineup, the atomic bomb-like currents can whisk you in either of three directions, none of which are good. Volkswagen-sized boulders underwater create mushroom eddy's that identify take-off points; they also are a reminder of the downside of getting caught inside, as your leash can easily catch one of these rocks and leave you helpless during a set. In 1996, Joel Roberts and a friend motored up to Ross' Cove in his boat The Deeper Blue. As his buddy paddled in, Roberts anchored the boat outside in the kelp. By the time he got to the lineup, his buddy and three other guys were gone. "I wondered where everyone had gone, and then I could barely hear people on the beach screaming, 'Come in!' I paddled in and those guys were all freaked out. My buddy has seen almost as many sharks as me, and he said he was buzzed by a legitimate 20-footer. Just a huge white shark. We hitchhiked back to the harbor and got another boat to pick up my boat in the kelp."



*photo credit Cassandra Cleave*

## MAVERICKS

Mind blowing. Explosive. Humbling. Gnarly. These are some of the adjectives used to describe the most famous big wave break on the continental United States. Mavericks offers an E-ticket ride for those who can put their bodies inside a 5-4 wetsuit and paddle the half-mile out to an ethereal reef spot just off Pillar Point. Discovered by famed surfer and shaper Jeff Clark and ridden solo over the ensuing decade, Mavericks is a fickle wave that only works with a proper northwest swell, with a long periodicity and large swell height, at high tide, and with no- or offshore-winds.

The wave needs caressing by nature and can go from good to bad in less than an hour. In 2007 one of the largest waves purportedly reached 100 feet, although it mostly breaks anywhere from 15 to 45 feet. Surfers need the largest of equipment to hunt big game, known colloquially as "guns." This is not a wave to tease but to simply ride straight and hard to safety, as it took the life of pro surfer Mark Foo in 1994, the same year famed Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia died. Gerard Butler experienced a life-threatening beating while starring in a movie about the wave. Most take the right, which has three separate bowls that collapse on the surfer but ultimately exits to safety; the steeper lefts lead into a pile of exposed boulders that make current politicians look like saints. Best if watched from the nearby cliffs.

## THE JETTY

This wave didn't exist until the one of the safest harbors on the west coast was created. It is well protected by northwest winds, loves to collect south swells, and is perhaps the most even-tempered wave throughout the year.



One can always find a wave at the Jetty, which has a characteristic "reverb" that gets its height and shape from classical physics – constructive wave interference resulting from a combination of a man-made jetty that is roughly at a right angle to the beach, crescendos while hitting the floor and creating an explosion both incredibly steep and often times hollow. It is an easy paddle out and well viewed from the peanut gallery off Highway 1. Longboarders, short-boarders, paddle boarders and boogie boarders all surf this spot. In the corner is an explosive take-off section about the length of a modest sized family room. Almost every local got their start here, and the crowd can be fun with acrobatic aerials,

lip-sprays, cutbacks, faders, and an occasional tube. Safe, sane, and secure – park across the street and enjoy the surf, being careful when crossing Highway 1.

## DUNES

Dunes beach is at the apex of the inner harbor that creates bucolic Half Moon Bay. On big days it is closed out and unsurfable. On smaller days you can have the beach to yourself. Dunes is actually part of a continuum of beaches stretching from The Jetty south to Kelly Beach, covering several miles with a sandy bottom. All one needs to do is walk until they find the right shape for their surfing style. Both lefts and right exists, although occasionally currents can be challenging with water moving several knots, making it difficult to stay in the take-off zone. Often times the marine life outweighs everything else – thousands of jelly's have been seen, schools of



photo credit Cassandra Cleave

porpoises, a multitude of pelicans, and occasional whales. The beach relaxes the mind, and should the surfing be unappealing, then soak in the rays while nestling in the seclusion of nearby beach-grass knolls, where the heat makes one feel as though they might be anywhere else but chilly northern California.