

What does a 63 year old surfer do on Tavarua after the decree that lets anyone surf there? Is it worth going anymore for anyone but a very good surfer who can be competitive in the water? Are there still days where you can surf with a handful of people in the water? What has really changed and how to describe it can best be expressed with a brief description of my two weeks there in 2011 from July 2 through July 16.

The first day I got there, there was some swell, but the winds were not very good for most of the surrounding breaks. I mention the surrounding breaks because we now have access to all of the breaks in the area including Swimming Pools, Namotu Lefts, and Wilkes Reef. Towards the end of the day my friend, Peter, and I noticed that the wind was favorable at Tavi Rights and the tide was perfect (medium to high tide). While others were at some of the other breaks in the area, we dashed out to the Rights and surfed it by ourselves for an hour at waist to chest high. It was not particularly great, but it was fun.

The next day, due to winds and conditions, we went to Wilkes Reef. Wilkes is a right that breaks along a reef a little past Namotu. I had never seen the spot so I had no idea what to expect. When we arrived it was glassy, waist to head high, and empty. I surfed it with the 7 people from our boat for an hour and a half. We had so much fun that we went back and surfed again in the late afternoon for the last hour of the day. When we arrived this time, there was a boat from Numotu; but everyone was nice and cheerful and we had a great time with only 14 surfers in the water.

Due to stormy weather I took the next day off, but on the following day we went to Cloudbreak and found 2 boats in the water. It was waist high on the inside to slightly overhead up the point and the wind was not a factor. While we surfed with between 20 and 30 people, everyone in the water was considerate and the crowd was really spread out. I surfed up the point with 2 or 3 other people so the crowd was never a factor and we had a blast.

I have noticed that other boats at Cloudbreak tend to leave by mid afternoon so typically the last

Tavarua boat of the day is a good time to surf as there are often no other boats, which means no other surfers in the water. That also means that many of the surfers on Tavarua are out for the last hours of surfing so there can still be 20+ people in the water. On the next day two other guests and I decided to go out on the 2nd to last boat of the day. To our surprise and delight there were no other boats in the water and the surf was chest high to overhead with very favorable wind conditions. The three of us with the lifeguard surfed for almost 2 hours and we all agreed that we would all remember this special session for a long time. We were all grinning from ear to ear on the boat ride back to Tavarua.

The next day our village visit to Nabila took longer than we expected so I did not surf. My body really needed the rest anyway. When we returned to Tavarua, we began hearing about this 100-year swell that was supposed to hit the following Monday or Tuesday. We heard that this swell was really being hyped by Sean Collins on Surflife. We were told that Kelley Slater would be coming to Tavarua with Mark Healy, Ian Walsh, and a whole camera crew. Sean Collins was coming as well to film for Surflife. Other pros would be arriving and staying all over Fiji for this epic swell. I had no idea what this meant or would look like at the time.

On the following day as the swell was picking up, I snuck out to Restaurants and surfed with two other people. Unfortunately the swell had not really hit Restaurants yet and the surf was only knee to occasionally chest high and sectioning. It was not a good call on my part so I paddled in after about an hour and jumped on the boat to Cloudbreak. The swell was already hitting Cloudbreak and it was head high to several feet overhead. There were already 2 boats there when we arrived. I jumped off our boat and decided to paddle up the point with Peter to avoid the 20+ people that were already in the water. That turned out to be a big mistake as it was the worst current that I ever remember paddling in at Cloudbreak. We immediately got swept way up the point and spent the next hour and forty-five minutes trying to stay in position. Every time you stopped paddling you lost all of the ground you had just made up. It was like paddling on a treadmill. Fortunately I was able to score one really amazing wave (thanks to

lifeguard Mike) that went more than 100 yards down the reef. It was definitely my best wave of the trip so far. Unfortunately I made the mistake of paddling back up, and before I knew it, I was too far up the point. I was able to get two other mediocre waves but what I will really remember is the intense paddling. I was worn out completely when it was time to leave. The crowd, of course, was never a factor because they were all paddling as well. By the time we left most of the others were already gone.

By the next day the swell had picked up a notch so I decided to surf at Restaurants. It was waist high to slightly overhead, and there were between 10 and 20 other surfers in the water when I paddled out. That is really about the maximum crowd that Restaurants will easily handle so I was able to get some really fun waves. I left when 2 boats arrived and the crowd almost doubled. I did not surf the following day to give my body a much-needed day off.

On Monday, July 11 the new swell began to slowly arrive. Restaurants was shoulder high to about 4 feet overhead and very good. I paddled out between breakfast and lunch. There were between 10 and 20 folks out and I had a great session.

When I finally came in for my late lunch, I discovered that the pros had arrived on Tavarua. I ended up having lunch with Sean Collins and he told me all about Surfline and how it came to be. He is actually a very nice and personable guy. I told him that, for a long period of time, I did not like him because I thought he was responsible for overcrowding in the surf. I told him that my opinion changed when I retired. There is nothing like starting my day by looking at the surf in Santa Cruz while sitting in my jammies in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The other pros including Kelley Slater showed up on Monday as well. Due to the assortment of people on the island, Paula and I had been staying at Jon Roseman's house. We learned the Kelley Slater would be staying there as well. Although he was very busy and mostly kept to himself, he was friendly and interesting. I had several conversations with him throughout the week.

This following day was the most fun I have had in the surf in a long time and I did not even catch a wave or get off the boat. They were calling for the 100-year swell and while that did not appear, it was still huge and glassy most of the day. We took a boat out to Cloudbreak to watch the show. It was by far the biggest surf that I have ever seen in person. I took lots of photos on my 7.1 megapixel Cannon PowerShot Digital Elph. They are far from professional but they do show what it was like. It was very difficult with my little camera to center the image.





There were 15 to 20 boats in the flotilla watching and photographing the action and every person in each boat had his/her eyes glued on the 10 or so pros who were paddling into the gargantuan waves.





Notice the guy paddling over the wave on the upper right.

Reef Macintosh got the best wave in the 3 hours that we were watching. I saw Kelley get 4 or 5 good solid waves and Mark Healy got some great ones too. Jon Roseman was out and he got a couple. I was told that Bruce Irons, Garret MacNamara, and many others were out as well. We were 50 yards from the action in the channel just on the shoulder of the breaking waves. It was absolutely spectacular and I took a bunch of pictures to document it. In the morning many of the surfers were towing in; but by the time that we arrived, everyone was paddling in. The biggest waves were easily 30 feet on the face. Kaeo, the manager at Tavarua, said that there were some waves that day that had 40 foot faces. I saw the biggest barrels that I have ever seen. It was a once in a lifetime experience. At one point the Tavarua photographers boat with Kelly in it slid by our boat and Kelley said: "It is really good, you guys ought to come out." haha I snapped his photo at he was saying that.



The video session that night was amazing. We all sat around the bar in the restaurant with Kelley, Mark Healy, Ian Walsh, the photographers, the videographers, the boatman, the lifeguards, the owners, the island guests, and the Fijians and watched the video taken by the professionals that day. It was better than any surf movie to hear the live commentary as well as the hoots and hollers of the pros and others in attendance. The footage was amazing and the quality was second to none.

The following morning I took a boat out to Cloudbreak and spent one hour watching the pros tow in. The conditions, which favored towing in, were not as good as yesterday. There were a few guys paddling in but they were not getting many waves. The best wave was an amazing barrel by Mark Healy who was towing in. It was really fun and amazing but not as consistent or as big as yesterday.





That night we had another amazing video session with the same cast of characters. Twice Kelly had the videographer stop the video so he could take a photo of the action on the screen and text it to a friend. At one point after an amazing wave by Mark Healy, Kelley said that that ride was one of the best waves he had ever seen ridden. That is truly a compliment.

The surf stayed fairly big for the rest of the week. I surfed Restaurants twice when Team Red Bull with cameras and all was out. I did not get one wave either session. After all, they were working while I was only there for pleasure! While it was very frustrating, I did see some truly amazing waves. I did surf Swimming Pools twice. Both times it was described by Lono, a Tavi lifeguard, as “mutant” Swimming Pools. It was ledging and almost like a slab, but I did get a few really fun rides that will live in my memory. I also took a real pounding.... and we are only talking about Swimming Pools.

While I will never forget the fun of hanging with pros and watching the best surfers in the world surf huge waves during the second week, I really had more fun the first week. After all I went to Tavarua to be a participant not a spectator. The first week the surf was not big or epic and sometimes there were funky winds; but I surfed waves that were still far better and less crowded than a good day in Santa Cruz. A mediocre day at Tavarua is probably better than a good day at your home break. I definitely plan on going again next year, and mediocre surf would be just fine!

So, to sum up, what does a 63 year old surfer do on Tavarua after the waves have been opened up? He has a blast!