

IAN KIMMERLY

Wading, 2016
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 78 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

SHAYNE BENOWITZ

The Endless Summer

An inspired surfer finds herself in Costa Rica on location of the classic movie with surf legend Robert August

To get from the black sand beaches of Nicaragua's southern Pacific Coast to the little surf town of Tamarindo on the northern elbow of Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula, I hired a driver. Well, it was actually two drivers. And a coyote. Okay, the third guy wasn't technically a coyote. It's not like we were smuggling anything illegal across the border—just this unaccompanied gringa—although I'm pretty sure he passed off my luggage from my driver in Nicaragua to the driver waiting for me on the other side in Costa Rica without clearing customs.

This is one way to cross the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border.

I wasn't expecting such an elaborate relay when I made the arrangements, but that's how it went down. It was at the border—roughly midway through my four-hour, 130-mile-long sojourn between the two countries—that I couldn't help but think about a fisherman I knew in Key West whose friend's father had mysteriously disappeared in Costa Rica years ago. With my passport in the coyote's hands, my luggage in the trunk of a dusty, beat-up Toyota in Costa Rica, and my cash payment tendered in full to my Nicaraguan driver, long gone by now, I thought, Shayne, this is the part in the story when you disappear, too.

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The thing is, I didn't plan my surf trip to Tamarindo in search of Robert August, but I found him there. My week-long reservation at Witch's Rock Surf Camp was booked. My trip was already underway. Mike mentioned it, lounging at our villa on Playa Iguana back in Nicaragua a few days before my departure. "Yeah, Robert August lives over there," he said. "You'll probably meet him. He's got a board-shaping studio at Witch's Rock."

"Who's Robert August?" I asked.

And so he told me. Robert August is one of the two surfers from the original *Endless Summer* movie, made back in 1964 by Bruce Brown, also a surfer. The trio packed their boards and a Bolex 16-millimeter camera with a \$50,000 budget for a three-month surf odyssey, following summer around the world in search of the perfect wave. Their journey started in Africa, through Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, before traveling to Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti, and Hawaii, finally returning with the summer season to their homes in Southern California. It

I was a thirteen-year-old kid in Newport Beach, California, when The Endless Summer 2 was released thirty years later in June 1994. My dad took us to see it at an Edwards Cinema in Huntington Beach about ten miles up the Pacific Coast Highway.

was the first film to introduce the surfing counterculture to a mass audience and eventually grossed \$30 million. Critics lauded Brown “the Fellini of the foam,” “the Bergman of the boards” for his laconic wit and hypnotic visuals of waves rippling in remote, tropical locales that most people had only dreamed of.

I was a thirteen-year-old kid in Newport Beach, California, when *The Endless Summer 2* was released thirty years later in June 1994. My dad took us to see it at an Edwards Cinema in Huntington Beach about ten miles up the Pacific Coast Highway. The film opens with an aquamarine wave breaking over the camera and then we’re underwater as a lone surfer zips by on the other side, the ocean curling in a tube around him, his hand touching the face of the wave, a liquid trail cascading behind him. The camera comes up for air and so do we. The surfer pops up at the top of a wave and the music amps up, electric guitar riffs placing us squarely in the nineties. He slides down the face of the steep wave, water curling overhead.

He swerves and stays up, charging in front of a massive wall of crashing white water. The camera pans out and we see a whole lineup of surfers, bobbing on their boards at the crest of the wave as it curls toward them, waiting for the precise moment to drop in for their ride.

I was in thrall. In a way, watching *The Endless Summer 2* wasn’t any different from watching the surfers at the Huntington Beach Pier a few miles up the beach or standing transfixed before the TV screens at Huntington Surf & Sport that played footage of big-wave riders and surfing competitions. In the summertime, my family spent every weekend on the beach at Corona del Mar. I wasn’t a surfer, but the Pacific Ocean was mine, too. I was a boogie boarder and a bodysurfer. I knew the power of those waves, the adrenaline rush of swimming hard to dive beneath the crest before it crashed, the relief of getting past the breakers, floating on my back as the gentle giants lifted and lowered my body like a roller coaster, the only roller coaster I liked, before timing it out just right and choosing the perfect wave to ride back to shore. I knew the panic and disorientation of getting pummeled by those waves, plunged into the washing machine, holding your breath longer than you thought humanly possible until the ocean mercifully released you, oftentimes only to find another wave ready to pummel you again.

That was my beach, my golden sand, the sea kelp that washed ashore that you could pop with your heel, the tiny sand crabs that burrowed beneath the surface when the tide went out and that we dug up and watched wriggle in a pool of wet sand in our hands before tossing them back, the drip sandcastles, the paddleball tournaments, the hole my father dug with a shovel, wearing Reef sandals to protect his feet and a Speedo for maximum tan, we’d crawl inside the hole at the end of the day and he’d refill it up to our necks, caked in sand, sand everywhere, rinsing off at the public showers, fistfuls of sand, always, in the bottom of my bathing suit, loading up the car, my sister, my brother, my best friend, Lauren, all piled inside, sitting in the jump seat in the back of my mother’s Volvo station wagon, our cold, wet bodies heating up inside the steel-and-glass box that had naturally warmed in the sun sitting in that beach parking lot all day long, driving to Del Taco for an extravagant post-beach dinner of fast-food Mexican and then maybe, if it was a really good day,

catching a movie at Fashion Island, hair still wet, still salty and sandy even after the shower.

I’d never seen a movie like *The Endless Summer 2*. There was no plot, no dialogue, just Brown’s wry narration, a soundtrack of twangy guitar melodies, and a couple of cute surfer dudes, perpetually stoked, surfing and exploring the world. One had sun-bleached hair, the other tall, dark, and handsome, their white smiles beamed in contrast to their suntanned, taut bodies. They looked like my summer swim team coaches, who were older, who went to the high school, who lived in my neighborhood and played on the water polo team, whom Lauren and I had hopeless prepubescent crushes on. They looked like my fantasy of future boyfriends.

It was a few months before my family would move to landlocked Montgomery, Alabama, when I sat in that darkened theater in Huntington Beach, watching rhapsodically as Wingnut and Pat O’Connell “followed the surf and summer around the world.” They started in my backyard in California and flew to Costa Rica, France, South Africa, Fiji, Australia, and Bali. I’d barely ventured outside of Orange County at that point. “That was the best wave I ever caught in my life!” Pat would exclaim after every session, a goofy perma-smile plastered on his face, radiating unadulterated joy.

The mourning had already begun. One of the biggest tragedies of our move to Alabama was that I would be living in a place where the beach was considered a vacation, not a lifestyle. There was nothing I wanted more than an endless summer.

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There are people who say that Tamarindo is overdeveloped, that it’s not the unspoiled dream that Costa Rica once was. That we now need a new Costa Rica, some other corner of the developing world’s rainforest canopy and deserted beaches to discover and colonize for our pleasures before the masses are hip to its paradisaical charms. Perhaps that’s what I was doing with my friends in Nicaragua a week earlier. We were the first guests in a newly built, palatial five-bedroom villa in a nascent development designed specifically for American surfers, directly on the break, complete with maid service, a cook, and an overnight guard bundled into the package. Divided among ten people, we

each paid less than a hundred bucks a night for the week. If you were to plunk that palace down in Malibu or South Beach, I can’t even fathom the cost.

Robert August and *The Endless Summer 2* have a lot to do with Tamarindo’s development and the discovery of its now legendary offshore surf breaks, Witch’s Rock and Ollie’s Point. It was at the 1989 Surf Expo in Orlando, an annual trade show for the surf and surf apparel industry, when a developer tipped August off to the surf in Tamarindo, telling him that a group of fishermen from Florida by way of the Panama Canal had discovered that the waves were great. This developer wanted August to visit and do some filming to get the word out about the surf in Tamarindo. Costa Rica’s department of tourism eventually funded August and twenty of his buddies from California, Australia, and Hawaii, including his son and Wingnut (who would soon become the tall, dark, and handsome longboarder in *Endless Summer 2*), to fly down and check out the waves.

Around this time, Bruce Brown and his son Dana were scouting locations for *The Endless Summer 2*. They decided to start the odyssey in Tamarindo with August, then forty-eight, passing the baton to the two young surfers, Robert “Wingnut” Weaver, twenty-six, a longboarder from Santa Cruz, California, and Patrick O’Connell, twenty, from Dana Point, California, who embodied the new high-performance style of surfing on lightweight shortboards. In the film, the three bop around Tamarindo, surfing Witch’s Rock, Ollie’s Point, and Playa Negra with Brown’s singular voiceovers extolling the languid utopia of the place: “The surf was gangbusters! It was a great spot with no one around, offshore winds, eighty-four-degree water, and the nearest parking meter is eight hundred miles away.”

We watch the trio paddle across caiman-filled estuaries and hike through jungles with howler monkeys (complete with a gonzo close-up of a monkey’s nutsack) just to reach the surf. August tries to demonstrate that “Costa Rica girls like older, refined men” like him, and when he walks down the beach to hit on one, he’s promptly hit in the face with her crocheted bag. They go salsa dancing, attend a bullfight, drink Imperial beer and *guaro* (made of “sugarcane and nitroglycerine”) with the locals.

The movie would inspire a generation of Southern California surfers to seek out Tamarindo and Costa Rica’s

surf breaks, a relatively accessible and inexpensive destination that some would reach by car, driving 3,500 miles on their own surf odyssey through Central America. One of these starry-eyed surfer dudes was Joe Walsh, a San Diego native who drove a school bus to Tamarindo in 2001 after finishing college. He eventually created Witch's Rock Surf Camp, the humble surf motel on Playa Tamarindo that I was checking into for a week of surf lessons.

It was June 2014, almost exactly twenty years to the date after I saw *The Endless Summer 2* at that movie theater in Huntington Beach, and somehow here I was on location in Tamarindo, unwittingly living out my own endless summer fantasies. Sure, the dusty little town is full of beach bars and burrito joints, and if it resembles San Diego, it's because many of the businesses are owned by SoCal expats. Still, all the directions you need to get anywhere are "down the road" or "up the hill" and you'd be hard-pressed to complain about that mile-long golden crescent beach cradled by mountains to the north and lush green hills that roll inland as far as the eye can see.

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After our move to Montgomery, after college in Athens, Georgia, after three years teaching middle school in New York City, I made my way back to the water. Perhaps it was instinctual, the way sea turtle hatchlings know where the ocean is on their fledgling march from their mother's nest down the beach to the sea. I hatched my escape plan and ran away to Key West, that tiny island at the end of Florida's archipelago, 150 miles from the mainland and about as close to the Caribbean as you can get without actually leaving the country. In fact, Key West is famously closer to Cuba (90 miles) than it is to Miami.

For five years, I created a life that revolved around the ocean and I was surrounded by a band of cute, taut, tan watermen, just like Wingnut and Pat. I considered all of them my boyfriends, no matter the nature of our relationship. We were Wendy and the Lost Boys. Instead of surfing, we spent our days on boats, taking tourists snorkeling, parasailing, and sunset sailing. On our days off, we went wakeboarding, paddleboarding, offshore-sandbar hopping, anything so long as we were in the water. With 260 days of sunshine, average temperatures hovering around eighty degrees, and water temperatures that rarely dipped below seventy-five

(most of the year it was bathtub warm), Key West, as Brown would say, was truly a land of endless summer.

But the shallow waters meant there was no surf. My boyfriends were spearfishermen, kiteboarders, divers. We'd surf the storm surge from hurricanes and tropical storms at the tiny beach at the end of Duval Street or take one of our boats offshore to a break at the reef. Like the Florida fishermen who'd discovered Tamarindo's Ollie's Point and Witch's Rock, some of the guys were surfers, too, and they traveled for the surf. As a displaced Southern Californian born on one of the world's best surf breaks, I listened as my guys waxed poetic about surfing adventures in Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Peru, the Outer Banks, Fiji, South Africa.

So I got out there. I took lessons in San Diego and Santa Cruz with my best girlfriend on a two-week road trip up the Pacific Coast Highway in a red Mustang convertible. I visited Costa Rica for the first time in Esterillos Este, a truly remote swath of the Central Pacific Coast. It knocked me out with its preternatural, unspoiled beauty. I'd never seen a beach like that before. Every evening at sunset I walked alone on the wide, empty black sand beaches, slapping my bare feet in the warm waters of the littoral zone. I watched the sky turn purple as a bruise and I thought, This is the Pacific Ocean, this is the ocean of my childhood.

* * *

After Mike told me about Robert August and Witch's Rock, I rewatched the original *Endless Summer* movie, lying in the queen-size bed of my little oceanfront room at surf camp, freshly showered after my cross-country trek, a walk down Playa Tamarindo, a soak in the hotel's pool and hot tub, and dinner of fish tacos and Imperial beer, eyeing the other travelers, whom I'd get to know over the course of the week. Tomorrow I would surf, but tonight, I traveled back in time with Robert August, Mike Hynson, and Bruce Brown, just as I'd done twenty years earlier after seeing *The Endless Summer 2*. My family had rented the original movie from Blockbuster and we watched it sprawled out on the shag carpet of our living room floor in our little condo in Newport Beach, perched on the bluffs of the Back Bay.

I probably hadn't seen either movie since then and I was struck by just how pioneering their odyssey was. It was audacious to travel around the world in 1964, when commercial aviation was still in its infancy, when there was

so much wild coastline untouched by tourism and development. They were truly explorers. The movie is just as much a travel documentary about the wonderful disorientation of being far away from home and the universal humanity that emerges when engaging with foreign cultures as it is about surfing.

Not four hours after touching down in Dakar, Senegal, August and Hynson are in the water at an island a quarter of a mile offshore, surf peeling from both sides of a point, "surf that no one had ever ridden before and, as far as we know, no surfer had ever even seen before," Brown narrates. "It was just like riding waves back in the USA, except you aren't. You're in Africa." He's almost dumbstruck. "I don't know what it was, but it was really hard to accept." As August and Hynson "get the place wired," paddling out, surfing, acclimating to the idiosyncrasies of this new spot without another soul in sight, Brown says, "They rode those waves knowing they were the first to ever do it and knowing the nearest surfer was four thousand miles away." Later, after they find the perfect wave ("a small wave with perfect shape . . . the kind of wave that makes you talk to yourself") at Cape St. Francis in South Africa, as Brown's narration veers into frothy sentimentality, as August and Hynson surf into nirvana, the film cuts to a lion yawning in the shade who says, "Oh, big deal."

* * *

Surfing is a sport of incremental precision. These micro-movements are practically invisible to the naked eye when you're watching the pros fluidly glide and whip across a wave. They make it look easy. But if you're an amateur, if you're a beginner like me, executing each step properly and in order is do or die. There's no skipping ahead or you're in the wash before you even know what hit you.

First, you have to establish your prone body's equilibrium on the board. If you're too far left or too far right when you pop up, your feet will land off center and your ride is over before it even started. If you're too far forward, your nose will dive into the wave and you're toast. Too far back, you probably won't catch the wave at all.

Then there's the paddling: long, fluid, controlled strokes, but still fast and hard, never flailing, keeping your eyes on the horizon. You will go wherever your eyes go, so don't look down or—splash—you're in the wash. Your spine,

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your spine needs to arch up to lift your body up and not curl down, sinking your body and your momentum under the wave. If you're a yogi, think cobra pose and don't stop thinking cobra pose.

If you've made it this far, you're ready to pop up. You'll need to have established whether you're regular or goofy footed. Drag your front foot toward the nose of your board and spring your back foot up like a kickstand. The more you practice, the more fluid this movement will become. Now you're standing on the board in a wide crouch, knees bent, but not too low, torso strong and straight above your crouched legs, not tipped forward. Remember, don't look down to check your stance, eyes on the horizon, arms fanned out before you as you begin to understand the physics of balance.

If you're still standing, congratulations, you are riding a wave, baby, and no matter how short the ride or how wobbly you look up there, you're getting a taste, you feel it, you understand that stoke that has kept surfers paddling back out for generations, charging against the breaking white water, just to feel that feeling again.

Those are the steps I practiced every day for a week at Witch's Rock in the warm waters of Playa Tamarindo,

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where the waves peel toward the golden crescent shore in gentle, tidy sets. J. Luis was my zen master surf sensei instructor, a slight twenty-three-year-old Tamarindo native with big brown eyes and a mop of sun-bleached curls whose movements were almost serpentine, as if he could tweak each singular muscle in his body in succession, from his ankles to his neck, as he demonstrated how to maneuver a wave. In the water he gave simple, calm directives: “paddle to your left,” “get speed, get speed,” “pop up!”

I can still remember the rush of riding my first wave in Tamarindo—the feeling of my board dropping down the steep face and, holy shit, I’m still standing and my belly is doing somersaults and I’m flying and I feel invincible. I let out a holler. I felt like Pat. *That was the best wave I ever caught in my life!*

It was a sense of oneness with the ocean, this vast, mysterious element that could pulverize my tiny, human form if I wasn’t careful, because you’re never mastering the ocean; you’re simply communing with it. It’s respect, it’s permission. You have harnessed the energy of this wave that’s been rippling along the surface of the ocean, formed

by a tropical storm some hundreds of miles offshore, rolling across the earth, drawing energy from the moon, picking up momentum until it arrives here on this shore, in this shape to lift you with it.

Yes, I felt connected to the rotation of the earth, to Mother Ocean and her pulse, in a profound, full-bodied way, and I felt connected to a lineage of surfers who had always fascinated me, who are from where I am from. I was a surfer now. I could tell people this. Yes, I am strong and I can stand up. I can ride a wave.

* * *

On the last night of surf camp, Robert August gave his History of Surfing seminar. And there was that eighteen-year-old boy from Seal Beach, the same part of Orange County where my grandparents had lived, who, fifty years earlier, had surfed around the world, sporting a black suit and skinny tie with black Ray-Ban sunglasses, his dark hair slicked back into a stylish pompadour, carrying his surfboard under his arm to board an airplane from Los Angeles to Africa. Tonight, he stood in a rec room at Witch’s Rock Surf Camp before aspirant surfers seated in folding chairs and a projector. He was a few years older than my father and retained that springy, youthful buoyancy that comes with a lifetime dedicated to athletics. Long, lanky, lean, and easy in the joints—you had the feeling he could find the center of gravity at any point in his body: low in his hips, ideal for surfing; in his shoulders, if need be; his pointer finger or wrist for a gesticulative flourish; his right knee, left ankle. He’d spent a lifetime balancing on those boards. He wore a khaki polo shirt printed in palm fronds and a pair of thick-framed glasses, a throwback to that 1960s hipster in the film. His white teeth still gleamed through a tan face, leathered and lined now.

After his talk, spanning the ancient Hawaiians and their dugout canoes through the global culture today, I introduced myself, leading with my *Miami Herald* journalist credentials, even though I wasn’t on assignment, even though, in hindsight, I’m pretty sure he would have chatted with me anyway. I phrased my first question: “When was the first time—”

And he cut me off. “The first time? Well, it was pretty terrifying, I think, like everybody’s, pretty terrifying! Nobody ever forgets that. Oh my God!”

And I laughed, shocked, of course, that this near-seventy-year-old man, a surf legend who clearly lacked media training, was making a sex joke to start an interview with a female journalist half his age, holding a recorder to his face. If I hadn’t spent a period of my life shoulder to shoulder with lewd-talking watermen, I might have been offended. But I wasn’t. It was more like recognition. He was just one of the guys I used to work with on boats in Key West, our discourse never not percolating around sex. It was part of the anarchy of our whole lifestyle, bodies in swimsuits under the sun, making jokes and passes at one another that people who wore clothing for a living might find offensive. It was a motley crew, one that me and Robert August were members of, a crew born on the beaches of Southern California and dispersed to the coasts around the world.

He told me about buying his home in Tamarindo on his birthday shortly after his first visit with the tourism board, back in the early nineties. “I was kinda drunk,” he said, holding a cup of beer in his hand now, talking in the same loopy, aw-shucks, matter-of-fact cadence of Brown’s narrations. “And we end up at the top of this hill and I go, ‘This is nice. How much is this piece of property right here?’ And he goes, ‘Well, it’s pretty expensive with the view, and you’ve got the electricity and the water already and the road’s up here.’ And he goes, ‘God, it’ll cost you about twenty thousand dollars.’”

“Twenty thousand dollars? I’m from Huntington Beach. For a hundred thousand dollars you get a lot in Anaheim in the alley. You don’t get shit. I said, ‘I’ll take it.’”

In his home on that hill, August has hosted surf buddies for decades, including Wingnut, who’s remained a lifelong friend. He told me that three years earlier he’d adopted an eleven-year-old Costa Rican girl from her mother who couldn’t take care of her, and he enrolled her in a private international school in Tamarindo. They split their time between Costa Rica and Huntington Beach and they’d recently returned from surf trips in Australia and the Outer Banks. “I’m not a young man,” he told me. “My son’s forty-six. I’m a grandfather. Man, what are you doing? But she’s a pretty happy little girl.”

After filming *The Endless Summer*, when August returned to Seal Beach, he thought he’d go to college to become a dentist. “My grades were good, but my mind was

kinda wandering . . . about my whole life and the world and you know, [the trip] had opened up my brain,” he said.

It was his own dentist, who was also a surfer, who dissuaded him from the profession, nudging him toward shaping boards, likening drilling teeth to patching up a ding on a surfboard: “You mix up resin and a catalyst and stick it in there and you let it dry and then you sand it down and you polish it and they leave.” Except when people leave the dentist’s office they’re in a bad mood. His dentist asked him to think about the place where he was the happiest and then said, “I’m happiest when I’m in a surf shop.”

August approached Jacobs, one of the largest surfboard manufacturers in Southern California in the 1960s, which was sometimes referred to as the Notre-Dame cathedral of surf shops. At the time, *The Endless Summer* was in every movie theater in America. “I thought, I can probably get a job if I wanted one, and [Jacobs] said, ‘Anything you want—are you nuts?’” he recalled.

August has made a life out of surfing and shaping boards. “The shaping thing is like the creative part of the whole business. Somebody wants a board. You tell me what you want, how much do you weigh, how long have you been surfing, if you live in San Francisco and you’ve got a full suit . . . And I still enjoy it,” he said. “Once I started that, oh man, I love this shit. And I still like it. All the chicks dig shapers.”

“Do they?” I asked.

“No,” he said, without skipping a beat, looking down at his hands, his thick, nubby fingers. “They like surfers. They don’t want all this dust and shit.”

Shayne Benowitz is a travel writer and journalist whose stories have appeared in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Afar*, *New York Post*, *Miami Herald*, *The Telegraph* and *BOAT International*. A native of Newport Beach, California, she’s currently pursuing her MFA at Sarah Lawrence College and lives in New York City. Follow her on Instagram and Twitter @ShayneBenowitz.