

CAPTAIN DALY'S REDOUBT

Highly decorated surf explorer **Martin Daly** has just finished polishing the gelcoat on his Marshall Islands lodge. As far-flung tropical idylls go, it doesn't look half bad...

Words by
PHIL JARRATT
Photos by
DAMEA DORSEY



YOU'VE HEARD THE STORIES. The one about the ebullient Aussie salvage diver surfing perfect reef waves all by himself, in a boilersuit to protect his skin from sun and coral. The one about him cutting his boat in half to make more cabins, agreeing to take a few friends on an undercover mission to his secret spots, and how a posse of the world's leading surfers—Tom Carroll, Martin Potter, Ross Clarke Jones among them—showed up at the dock with their quivers. How he kept his marked charts locked away, even after the secrets were out. How he cheerfully told Bob McKnight and other Quiksilver honchos that they were going to pay him a shitload of money to sail around the world looking for surf, and then they did.

That's all just for starters. The myths and legends surrounding Martin Daly would fill a book. It would be a page-turner, and most of it would be true. Once voted the 18th most powerful man in surfing by some absurd poll in a surf magazine, the big salt-and-pepper-headed skipper is truly larger than life. And yet, in character if not in stature, he is also much smaller than one would expect—an almost delicate soul who thinks and cares deeply, wears his heart on his sleeve, and wounds easily. More than a decade on, he is still smarting from the executive decision that brought his landmark Quiksilver Crossing to a premature end. And more recently, he has been stung by opposition to his claim of having discovered the wreckage of pioneer aviatrix Amelia Earhart's doomed plane.

That is the enigma of the man I first encountered twenty-something years ago, and who I went on to share a handful of adventures with in far-flung parts of the world. I remember being somewhat awestruck as I clambered aboard the *Indies Trader* in Padang Harbor, and was offered a vice-like shake with one big hand and an icy lager with the other. The man, like the boat, seemed workman-like—worn around the edges, but above all else warmly welcoming. Working together on the Crossing in Europe a few years later, we had our moments, but the former is the view I still hold of Daly, and of his wonderful vessel.

When I first met him, he was at the peak of his powers. Already famous as the man who had discovered more A-plus surf breaks than anyone alive, he and Bruce Raymond had received preliminary approval to launch the Crossing on a 12-month voyage of discovery. It would last six years. But at the end of that remarkable adventure (not to mention corporate triumph), Daly found himself disappointed with the way life was panning out. One door had closed and another, while still open, was chock-a-block with charter boats. His beloved Mentawai Islands had become a tropical Disneyland, and he had to share part of the blame.

In search of renewal, he did what he had always done—set sail for the blue horizon. He found his Nirvana in the most unlikely of places: an uninhabited series of atolls once used for U.S. nuclear bomb testing, a dot in the mid Pacific whose one center of population is a strip of crumbling Quonset huts and a graveyard for rusting pickups. Daly licked his lips, pressed some influential flesh, and began a decade-long campaign to set himself up as the Marshall Islands' only tourist operator—conducting surf, kite surf, and dive expeditions from a deep-water jetty in front of an impressive waterfront lodge.

Now 61, the not-so-old man of the sea divides his time between Beran Island and a season of charters in the Mentawai, which is where I caught up with him for a crackly satellite phone chat while he enjoyed a sunset beer on the bridge.



PHIL JARRATT *Can you describe your lifestyle these days?*

MARTIN DAYLY Sure. We've still got our place in Perth, and now we have the place in the Marshalls. We spend five months there, and I'm still doing the season in Sumatra, so I just keep getting dragged from one beautiful place to the next. My son Walker just spent his school holidays and 18th birthday here with me in Padang. Took him out for a beer with all the old characters—Albert Taylor, Ken Colledge, Eric Van Druten, and the rest.

PJ *He looks like he's surfing well. Pulling into a few?*

MD Yes, he's doing well. If I could keep him on the boat for a year, he'd probably be a lot better surfer than me. He's already paddling into stuff that I'm paddling over. My daughter Alexandra is in her third year studying genetics at university in Western Australia. She's the brainy one. The whole family gets together as soon as school is out in December. Been doing that for 11 years now. Real quality family time—surfing, diving, fishing, hanging out.

PJ *I've been doing a bit of research on the Marshalls. I read a lot about the atomic testing and the lack of population. How do you go about finding and buying your own island or atoll?*

MD The Marshalls is one of the few places in the world that's depopulating. There was a bit of an explosion in births a few years ago, but because of their close relationship with the U.S., a lot of Marshallese live in the States. There's a big drain of young people all the time. The atoll we're on has probably lost 40 percent of its population since I've been there, simply because there's not much going on—which is delightful. I've been looking around the planet for years and not liking what's going on in many places, but this is one of the few places that's completely untouched. You go diving and all the coral is still there. You go fishing and actually catch fish. The water is incredibly clear and there are good waves. And, there's no one around.

PJ *Isn't it also a shark sanctuary?*

MD Yes, and I had a bit to do with that, along with my late friend Senator Tony deBrum. It's huge, almost two million square kilometers—about the size of Mexico—and it's a fact that the shark population has come back. It's quite noticeable how many more sharks there are.

Perhaps the most famous vessel in surfdom, the *Indies Trader* now rests "on the hard" when she isn't running day trips to outer islands. While Daly has his hands full building out his new land-based lodge, don't think for a moment that he's relinquishing life at the helm.

(Below) Daly's base of operations rests on the 45-acre Beran Island, home to the finest surf in the Marshalls. The structure is modern, well-furnished, and offers everything a traveler might want—including access to a fleet of skiffs and passage-making vessels for longer form exploration.

(Facing) There are lefts and rights on offer, and when they're at their best, Daly reckons they stand up to the inevitable Mentawai comparisons. The two points of separation are the wind (the Marshalls are a breezy roadstead) and the absolute lack of fellow surfers.

(Overleaf) Backbar at a gin mill in Majuro, the international point of entry for the Marshall Islands.



PJ *And what does that mean for surfers?*

MD Luckily the sharks don't have any real interest in us at all. In fact, you don't realize how many are around until someone spears a fish. When we're surfing, you never see them. I do quite a bit of diving there because there's so much to see. I don't dive much in the Mentawai any more because all you see is what's missing. It's quite depressing.

PJ *It's interesting that the coral is still alive. I've read a bit about how the atolls have been largely uninhabited since the 1950s, due to the high levels of radioactivity. Is that true?*

MD That's not entirely accurate. There was certainly a lot of testing on the western side of the archipelago in the late 1940s and 50s, around Bikini Atoll and Enewetak. That's about 400 miles away from where we are. But most of the islands are untouched. About 50,000 people live in the Marshalls, mostly in the two urban centers, particularly Majuro, which is full of dead cars and squalor. It also has some decent infrastructure the Americans have put in, like supermarkets and good roads. The outer islands, like ours, are sparsely populated, clean, and nice.

PJ *I know your place is pretty much off the grid, but how do you operate for supplies? Can you get what you need from Majuro?*

MD We go back and forth on the boat a couple of times a month and pick stuff up, and planes come in every couple of days so we can air freight stuff in and do the odd supply run. On Beran Island we catch a lot of fish. We have a vegetable garden, and our wind turbines and solar panels provide most of the power. We don't run generators unless there's no sun and no wind for a day or so. We've got all the creature comforts, including Internet. It's kind of bizarre, sitting in this beautiful place all alone watching movies on Netflix.

PJ *Do you ever get lonely?*

MD Never. There are people coming and going all the time. It's like a succession of mates, and now they're turning up every year with their wives and kids. Some of the guys have been coming surfing with me for 25 years or so.

PJ *Do you worry about global warming? You're only two meters or less above the sea.*

MD Well, I'm certainly a believer in climate change, and I suppose it's kind





(Top) The “shot heard ‘round the world:” Bikini Atoll nuclear test photo as seen on the wall in Majuro. (Bottom) One of the thousands of dive sites scattered around the chain.



(Facing) While scuba freaks have targeted the chain for decades, surfing is a relatively recent draw.

of lunacy to build your dream home on a sandbank in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But I figure if the island ever gets inundated, I’ll be left with a huge concrete building standing on the reef like in *Waterworld*.

PJ *How did you find Beran Island?*

MD The Quiksilver Crossing finally finished in Hawaii, which was disappointing for me because I wanted to keep going to the Marshalls, Kiribati, and New Caledonia, and then sail through Sydney Heads and park the *Trader* in the maritime museum. But it didn’t go that way, so I just took the boat to the Marshalls anyway. I arrived on Christmas Day, surfed 10-foot waves on New Year’s Day, and spent the next six months sailing around the archipelago looking for surf setups. It was quite frustrating actually, because there’s not surf everywhere, but I think what we found is as good as anywhere. Beran is quite remote and hard to get to, so hopefully it’ll stay unpopulated for a long time. And we’ve made it really comfortable. Every morning that I wake up there, I say, “How the hell did this happen!” From my bed, I’m looking at

blue water and a beautiful point break with no one on it.

PJ *Was it difficult to get hold of the land?*

MD I leased it. The Marshalls have a very U.S.-based legal system, so it’s a lot more secure than Indonesia or Thailand. But it took me quite a while to get to know everyone. I went through a lot of interviews before I convinced them I wasn’t a carpetbagger. I think it took about five years before I was allowed to lease the island, four years to build, and then they gave me an honorary Marshallese passport for my efforts.

PJ *What’s the culture like?*

MD They had quite a fierce history of attacking passing ships until they were colonized by different seafaring countries, including the Germans and the Japanese, and then the Americans. The people are a mix of Asian and Polynesian, with a lot of Western blood as well.

PJ *How do they feel about you as a surf tourism operator?*

MD I’m the only tourism operator in the country, period. I do diving charters to

Bikini Atoll, often with academics. There’s a group from Columbia University out there now. And there’s a lot of NGO stuff that goes on, too.

PJ *Tell me about the Amelia Earhart story? Was your theory of her fate accepted in the end?*

MD We gathered an overwhelming body of evidence that the story of her crash in the Marshalls was true, despite the fact that there are opposing forces that don’t want to believe it. There’s been some government interference. I don’t know why this story is so important to the Japanese and American governments, but it is. I’ve satisfied myself that what we found came from her plane. There were a couple of hundred eyewitnesses, so at the end of the day, I think the mystery is pretty much solved.

PJ *Are you still diving for more evidence?*

MD No. In fact, I found the stuff on the beach using a metal detector, not in the water. There was a lot of press about it at the time, a bit of a furor, but I just happened to be in the right place at the right time.



(Below) Our intrepid innkeeper wends his way down the line. Daly's an entrepreneur, but he's here for a reason. (Facing) The overall affect of the local biosphere is one of purity. While man has run up a list of atrocities over the decades—including atomic testing—most transgressions have been episodic as opposed to continual. The sea is transparent, the air immaculate.



PJ Going back to the beginnings of your Marshalls chapter, was it a great relief to focus on building a place on a remote island after all those years of being front and center, and doing all the planning, for the Quiksilver Crossing?

MD Well, it was an interesting time for the surf industry. Everything was rock and roll for a time there, and then it wasn't. I was

surprised, and a bit disappointed, that we didn't get to finish it properly. But, it was a remarkable experience. And although it hasn't got a name anymore, I'm still more or less doing the same thing—exploring for waves and finding them. I've done three months of it this year on my own dime, just looking for surf with a lot of success. I just keep putting dots on the map and

going to the places I haven't been yet. That's really what my overreaching passion is. It never gets old—coming around the corner and seeing a perfect lineup. It's interesting being in the Mentawai now, more than a quarter of a century later, and seeing the state of things. Some things haven't changed. Other things have changed a lot.

PJ Does that depress you a bit?

MD I'd be a really cranky old bastard if I hadn't discovered another place that I love—seeing what's happened in the Mentawai wouldn't have been so easy to accept. To do what I've done in my life, you have to be an optimist. The magic is still out here. You can wake up at an anchorage where there are no surf camps,

and a couple of breaks are going off—and it's just like it always was. Whenever it gets too busy, I just pick the anchor up and go somewhere else.

PJ So what's the plan?

MD The plan is to sail off into the sunset in the Marshalls. Hopefully, I'll keep getting a few waves for as long as I can.



Then I'll sit there in a rocking chair next to my wife and watch the surf peel by empty while I work on my shell collection and she knits pullovers for the grandkids. ●