

YESTERDAY, TOMORROW

NAKURU KURU

Words ROBERTO CROCI

“Let us run if we must, even the sands do that. But let us keep our hearts young and our eyes open, that nothing worth our while, shall escape us.” It opens with these beautiful words of John Ritter, the trailer for *Nakuru Kuru*, a documentary that reveals the passion for surfing and the love for the ocean of a pioneer, a man who has personally experienced, during his travels in the early ‘70s, the last unspoiled paradises of the Pacific: Hawaii, the chain of volcanic islands Samoa, Tonga and Fiji. After a life between

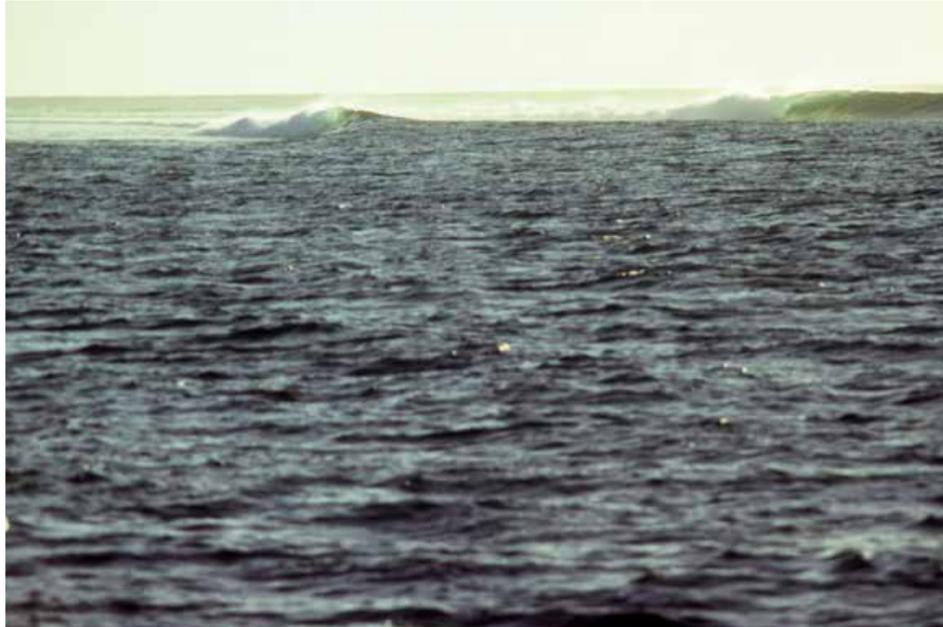


oceans, John does not stop wanting to be close to his waves and these days you can easily find him on a Hawaiian outrigger canoe in Hood River, Oregon, where he lives with his wife Kathryn.

Gentleman, sailor, lone wolf, environmentalist, explorer, John has spent his entire life in constant search for water, in the eternal need to ‘get wet’. He discovered, off the islands of Tavarua and Namotu, one of the most legendary waves in the world, Cloudbreak, his Moby Dick.

“I forgot about everything else, I stayed there SEVERAL weeks and ten days later, a mile off these waves, I discovered CLOUDBREAK, a gigantic wave of impressive force in the middle of nowhere. It was SCARY, I found myself in the MIDDLE of the Ocean, only me and the wave.”





Fiji, a pristine paradise, in the 70s. *Bottom:* one of the first known photos ever taken of Cloudbreak, shot from John's dinghy.
© John Ritter



Now, 40 years later John's passion for the ocean inspires director Steve Engman and producer Jay Henningfeld, pioneers in the field of virtual reality content production, and passionate surfers and environmentalists, to conceive *Nakuru Kuru* (the Fijian name for Cloudbreak), a three-part series, which will be filmed in Samoa, Tonga and Fiji in VR, retracing the journey of John and bringing him, for the first time, back to Cloudbreak.

"Yes, I am a sea-lover, a sea addict, I live and breath the sea. I grew up sailing and surfing in Southern California, precisely at Belmont Shore, the ocean was never far away for me. When I was 7 or 8, my dad and I worked together on making a little wagon for me to put my longboard on and attach to the back of my bike so I could ride my board to the beach. During summer my dad would take me to surfer's heaven, the tiny city of Huntington Beach, which at the time we called Tin Can Beach because of the too many soda cans left on the sand by tourists and illegal campers. It was a wild beach, often deserted, while today it's a California Mecca for surfing. He would drop me off on Saturday and Sunday with other friends and always make sure there were other people because nobody was there, nobody was surfing. And right there, surfing became a passion for me, and continues to be so. Where did I learn to sail? My dad would take me to the Long Beach Yacht Club and every chance I got to jump onboard any boats, I would do it. My first trip was to Catalina Island, roughly 6 hours from Long Beach, aboard my friend's boat. I learned a lot from cruising, from people, I learned how to do the passage, I taught myself how to navigate. Then I would go to Hawaii, and take boats

from one port to the next one. This is how I learned to transfer boats, and as soon as I had some downtime, I would go surfing. My first surf trip were into Baja California, where a friend of mine had a hut on beach: I went from Ensenada all the way down to Cabo, and at the time there was no paved road after that, that trip took me a 1 month and half. For me is the journey that counts, still is. The waves are important, but always a bonus, I wanted to ride them, but more than that were the people, they were something complementary to the human experience, something to share with those I met on the road or by sea. I met a lot of people in my life who didn't have much but they were willing to share it with me. The perfect wave? The perfect wave is always the next one, the one you have not rode yet, every time is a new adventure. Surf changed my life, made me happy. And it still does."

At the end of the 60's John finds himself in Europe, surfing wherever the sea would allow him to do so: in England, in Biarritz in France; in the Basque area and even in Sicily, in the town of Cefalù. From there he came back to the States, went to Santa Barbara to study, always sailing and surfing along the California coast: Ventura, Point Conception, Morro Bay... till he decided it was time to explore the Pacific.

"My very first real boat was a trimaran, a cruising boat, a 37 feet Jim Brown design, very famous multihull sailboat designer, a prototype of the SeaRunner, which is still popular nowadays. I bought it in the 70's, during my first trip in the Pacific, on the island of Upolu, in the Samoa. It was worth it 15 grand, I know I could not afford it, but since the owner could not keep it,

he sold it to me for only \$ 8,000 dollars. Yes, she needed some repairs but I was a great with fiberglass (laughs) and I fixed her with next to nothing. I called her *Mahia*, which is a peninsula in New Zealand that has the best surf. After that I sailed away immediately... before he could change his mind."

Sailing the Samoan chain, the Tonga and Vava'u group, and the Fiji Islands John becomes an expert sailor and an excellent surfer. Then he goes back to Samoa, where he stops in Tutuila. "One of the most amazing places I ever visited, I taught elementary school in this little bay, I rode my dinghy to the shore from the boat and the kids would come and pull it up onto the beach... At the beginning they didn't want a white person to teach their kids. But then I was welcome, and they trusted me, they knew I cared about their kids. If you anchor in their bay you have to bring gifts to the chief, so I would bring fish that I caught, or corned beef, or spam, he really loved that! Also hard to get was their permission to go surfing on Sundays. In Tonga and Samoa Sunday is their day of worship, is very strict, and you cannot go fishing, you cannot do any work, everything is done Saturday, all the cooking is done during the night so when you wake up in the morning all the fires are under the sand ready when they come from church."

And it is during this time that, in the middle of a passage, John discovers Cloudbreak. "I was heading to an Island that was past Tavarua, there is a passage between Tavarua and Namotu, so I was going through there and passing off the reef in Tavarua and I see the backside of these waves, I was wow... amazed on how high they were. So I end up dropping the jib and sail-



ing around the reef, looking for a safe place to anchor the boat... I've done this dozens of times, but sometimes is not deep enough to ride. So I paddle out to check out if it was surfable, and not only was surfable but was incredible. I forgot about everything else, I stayed there several weeks... and 10 days later, a mile off these waves I discovered Cloudbreak, a gigantic wave of impressive force in the middle of nowhere. It was scary, I found myself in the middle of the Ocean, me and the wave, if something would have happened, you couldn't have called anybody to help you. What was different in Tavarua comparing to other places was that there was nothing there except coconut palms, no villages. It was all by myself, I loved when local people would come and we traded fish for coconuts, or water so I didn't have to go back to Nadi and get provisions. I would give them some tupperware, they loved these things and used them to keep things dry."

After leaving the South Pacific, John goes back to Oregon where he gets his master's in environmental education, and that is when he meets his wife Kathryn, till the end of 1979 when he has to deliver another yacht to Tortola, in the Virgin Islands.

"I went there and I liked it and I applied to a teaching job in St. Croix. My wife joined me: Kathryn and I lived in the Caribbean for 20 years, our kids Sean & Jenna were born and raised on St. John. I bought a 27-footer and built a house. I thought I stopped teaching for a while and I was doing deliveries between Maine and BVI, Hinckley Yachts, Grenadines, St. Lucia. I was always sailing so I went back to a teaching job. And I found myself teaching the kids marine science, underwater ecology, the plastic problem; fishing the legal

size, how to recognize female lobsters full of eggs; the damages caused by plastics, and why mangroves are important and need to be saved, to be protected them from those who design harbors and marinas. We already had a pollution problem, just think of cruise ships that dumped tons of waste into the sea. If we will be able to save ourselves and our oceans... it will be because of our kids, our future generations, they are going to change the world, they are not going to sit back, just like the kids in Florida fought against guns laws and lobbies. They are the change."

"The idea for *Nakuru Kuru* was born three years ago, on a surf trip in Sayulita, Mexico – explains director Steve Engman – where during the trip I met Ritter's son, Sean. We became friends and later he asked me why not tell his father's story, kind of introducing him to the world, not so much for him discovering Cloudbreak, but for his passion for the Ocean and especially the ecological aspect of the project. We initially conceived it as a classic feature film," says Steve "where we would use VR to promote the film. Then we realized that, thanks to the evolution of the virtual reality media, it could have been innovative as John had been, 40 years earlier."

Nakuru Kuru recounts John's entire voyage leading up to Cloudbreak, with stops in Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. The film demonstrates tangible ways in which we can give back to the environment, inspiring viewers to action while bringing needed awareness and support to some positive initiatives.

The three chapters of *Nakuru Kuru*, 10-12 minutes each, tell a different place and part of the story. "Each episode includes a second reading in which we deal with a specific ecological prob-

lem," continues Jay Henningfeld, "with the idea of trying to solve some environmental emergencies of all the places visited by John." At Samoa, in the first chapter, the problem that emerges is that of ocean plastic, the proposed strategy is to help the elementary school of Matafao, where John taught, to restore a beach infested with waste. In the second chapter, Tonga is tackling the problem of overfishing and the documentary in this case intends to highlight the efforts to preserve the balance of marine life on the island. In Fiji, in the third chapter, it is shown how by removing invasive species it is possible to restore the coral reefs devastated by coral bleaching.

"With this film we want to raise public awareness of issues that affect everyone, not just those who love the ocean or go to play sports. We also have an incredible archive of slides taken by John that will increase the viewer's VR experience, completely immersing him in that world, largely lost."

John has spent a lifetime in and around the water and witnessed drastic environmental changes first hand. As our oceans continue to rapidly deteriorate, there is no better time to share a positive message of stewardship than now, and no one is more qualified than John to tell what happened in the last 40 years. "I'm hoping that this film can open eyes, from a scientific point of you we can reverse this changes, I hope to shed some light on this problem. Little things, can save us."

Nakuru Kuru project is still in need of fundraising, there's still a long way to go. As John says: "Our journey has just begun." Feel free to help.

Malama pono Roberto. Take Care. Lots of Aloha my friend. Lots of Aloha. ★

www.cloudbreakfilm.com

translation Roberto Croci



Cloudbreak from inside. © Stu Gibson