

The Garoupa family house, on the south coast of São Miguel in the archipelago of the Azores, sits at the top of a street so narrow that the boys lounging on their stoops have to pull in their legs when cars zoom by. The house—or at least the portion of it that has withstood periodic seismic activity—is 500 years old. “The kitchen chimney—that’s the oldest part,” Carlos Garoupa de Medeiros tells me over an espresso at a beachside café near Playa Populo. “That house has been there since before Captain Cook sailed the California coast.”

Garoupa Senior turns 80 this year. He was the first surfer on this island, the largest of the Azorean. He had a local carpenter shape a hollow, wooden, Tom Blake–style finless board after seeing surfers ride waves in magazines sent to him from family in California. He found his stoke for the first time in the shorebreak nearby at Vila Franca.

E N D L E S S
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BIG-WAVE EXPLORATION WITH THE
FIRST FAMILY OF AZOREAN SURF

BY ZACHARY SLOBIG

PHOTOS BY RICARDO BRAVO

“When I found my balance, I felt like a bird, like a seagull,” he tells me with his arms aloft and his eyes gleaming. He says he was eager to share that magic feeling, but found few takers. “My cousins and family and friends all said, ‘You’re crazy.’ I told them, ‘You have to try it. Come with me to the sea and forget your troubles on land.’”

This archipelago in the middle of the Atlantic is spread out over 906 square miles, with nine islands and countless islets. Measured from their base on the ocean floor to their peaks, the volcanic Azores are some of the tallest mountains in the world. All that craggy bathymetry creates plenty of wave potential, but despite a few visits by the ASP World Qualifying Tour and the booming popularity of surfing on the Portuguese mainland, the Azores remain what Huck Finn might call “the territory”—a wilderness where real discoveries can still be made.



Most of the 250,000 people who call the Azores home live on São Miguel, and culturally, Garoupa Senior tells me, Azoreans live with their backs to the ocean. The sea here has long been something to be feared. “Notice how the front doors to houses never face the sea,” he says. The fraught legacy of fishing and whaling here—Melville praised Azorean seamen in *Moby Dick*—has not encouraged a recreational approach to the ocean. Surfing arrived very late, and still there aren’t nearly the numbers one might expect from such a wave-rich zone. Then there are the vagaries of Mother Nature. The weather in the Azores turns quickly, as do conditions and swell. It’s not an easy score.

Aside from a cavernous wood-burning oven in the kitchen, the stone-walled Garoupa ancestral family home has no heat and never seems to dry out. It mostly sits empty, but this week the hallway is stacked with big-wave guns, tow boards, and rescue sleds, and that kitchen hearth hosts early-morning huddles of four Portuguese-speaking surfers who have come to scour the island looking for massive unriden waves. The Garoupa house is the only one around with a front door that faces the sea.

João de Macedo leads this big-wave exploration. He has coached the Portuguese national surf team but is based in San Francisco these days, where he is a standout on the biggest days at Ocean Beach. He has also charged Mavericks for nearly a decade. He wears a padded flotation vest even in small surf due to a broken rib that has never really healed—an injury he suffered while riding Finisterre, a then-unknown monster, with Eric Rebiere off the coast of northern Spain three years ago. De Macedo’s boyish laugh and massive smile should not be mistaken for softness; he’s the guy you want in the water with you in the heaviest conditions.

Brazilian-French Rebiere left the WCT a few years back to chase big waves full time. He arrived with nagging shoulder pain from a recent jiu-jitsu bout, but is clearly elated to be reunited with his exploration partner. Apart from competing at a beachbreak on the south side of São Miguel during a WQS stop years ago, where he broke his foot in the first heat and headed straight to the hospital, he’s never been to the Azores. He’s the self-appointed cook and the first to rise daily.

Former Portuguese women’s national champ Joana Andrade arrived next with the biggest coffin

of boards of the group—several of which she shaped herself under her brand, 4 Girlz. A little more than a month ago, she rode the biggest wave of her life at Peniche and secured a nomination in the 2014 season’s XXL awards. Her accomplishments loom large, but she’s a tiny, coiled bundle of energy.

Rounding out the group is 17-year-old Diogo “Garoupinha” Garoupa de Medeiros—the most promising surfer on the island and the grandson of Carlos Garoupa. De Macedo and Garoupinha met last year while working to halt the construction of a marina at Rabo de Peixe, a hardscrabble fishing town on the north coast. That marina has nearly deleted what used to be a premier wave on the island. It’s where Garoupinha rode the best waves of his life—a perfect A-frame that could hold up to 15-foot rights where the tip of the largest pier now juts into the blue. The cranes at Rabo de Peixe moving around huge

The big game in this hunt is Dollabarar, a seamount and reef in open water about a four-hour boat ride to the south that’s never been surfed. It’s quite possibly the Atlantic’s Cortes Bank. Tales of big waves there have trickled back to the islands from wide-eyed fishermen for years.

× The jagged volcanic coastline hides an untold number of waves.



concrete chunks for the coastal-armoring project are a clear indication that there aren’t enough surfers here to mount any significant political pressure.

De Macedo and an impressive group of Portuguese environmental scientists, economists, and planners are completing an ambitious interdisciplinary study, “The Value of Waves and Ocean Cultures”, by the end of 2014 that aims to establish the value of Portugal’s key surf zones—including the Azores. The research group—which includes de Macedo’s father, the nation’s former chief minister of finance—took the 2010 Mavericks “surfonomics” study as a model, but this study will go beyond determining wave price tags and include widely collected qualitative data that spans communities beyond wave riders.

Garoupinha wants to surf big waves, and he knows there’s plenty of potential right here in his

backyard; he’s been hearing stories from his grandfather for years about the nooks and crannies and outer reefs of São Miguel. As a young boy, Garoupinha’s father, with a jury-rigged dinghy and a castoff oar, would often paddle off on adventures to a little volcanic islet about half a mile offshore. He went on to become a champion open-ocean kayaker, setting interisland solo-crossing records. “I have the saltwater in my veins,” Garoupinha tells me with a halting stammer. He got his hands on a Jet Ski recently and lit out with a friend, only to see the machine battered against the rocks during a heavy swell. He’s hungry to be tested by the sea, but he needs mentorship. He needs a team.

On an island this small (it takes 20 minutes to drive from the south shore to the north) and with so few surfers, it was inevitable that de Macedo and Garoupinha would meet. Still, it seems somehow

a stroke of luck. De Macedo has been coming to the Azores to surf since he was Garoupinha’s age, when he and three buddies saved enough to hop a plane to one of the western islands. But this isn’t just another surf trip. It’s the beginning of a multi-year plan to construct a solid foundation for big-wave surf exploration in the Azores. It’s a mission heavily laced with national pride—particularly in light of the attention that Garrett McNamara has helped bring to Nazaré on the Portuguese mainland. The Azores—like Madeira, its wave-rich cousin to the southeast—is an autonomous region governed by Portugal, something like the U.S.’s relationship with Puerto Rico. De Macedo and his crew have been working for two years to have an all-Portuguese-speaking team demonstrate the wave-riding potential around these lumps of land in the middle of the Atlantic.

× (Clockwise from bottom) Because of its striking landscape, and location in the Atlantic, some believe Azorean isles were the inspiration for Plato's fictitious island of Atlantis. × Part of the Azores first surf family, Diogo Garoupa de Medeiros is eager to pioneer the islands' big-wave breaks. × Eric Rebiere, enjoying the playful side of the Azores.



× (Clockwise from top left) The lush island interior. × João de Macedo, post-surf euphoria. × De Macedo, teaching de Medeiros by example.



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The team spends the first several days dealing with logistics, getting the skis in order, and tracking a swell to come later in the week that they hope will ignite several promising slabs and outer reefs in the north. They surf tiny, clean waves on the south side of the island. The water there is the deep, clear blue of a David Hockney swimming pool. Rebiere skips a couple sessions, opting to jog on the beach. Maps are drawn by hand on the backs of receipts. Grandpa talks up a reef off of Pico Island. De Macedo is intrigued. There's talk of hopping a flight to Terceira Island, some 90 miles northwest, to check spots. We ogle a lot of setups

local skipper and others, he thinks the reef might actually work on a big south swell—and those won't be arriving for months. "It turns out also that it's technically illegal for us to be out there without naval permission," he says.

The Garoupas have some contacts in the navy, though. Of course they do. Grandpa Garoupa as a young man directed the refueling operations in the main port at Ponta Delgada. He also worked for a time as a meteorologist in the military airports. "I was the friend of admirals!" he boasts. There's talk of Grandpa pulling strings to commission a huge naval vessel to transport the team. I hear Dollabarat in countless Portuguese conversations over several days; it's becoming the white whale of this discovery mission.

Later that day, while the team gasses up the skis, the Mavericks contest is called to run. Rebiere

talked a generous Danilo Couto into swapping out for a proper gun while they both sat in the channel watching the show. He caught a few and the place got under his skin. Mavs fed a hunger in de Macedo that began 15 years ago on a perfect 20-foot day at Madeira. Perhaps some part of this Azores mission is de Macedo redirecting his attention from Mavs, gambling on the unknown. Maybe the score will somehow be bigger. "We gotta follow our own path," he says more than once.

We check one spot twice in the lead-up to the swell expected to hit the north shore of São Miguel. A couple miles west of a little hilltop town called Maia, we can see something feathering off an outer reef. It's lined up with a tall headland, but no one is entirely sure how to access it. As far as anyone knows, only one person has surfed it: Ze Seabra, an underground legend from the mainland. He wasn't

interested in serving it up on a platter for this group, though he did offer a consolation. "There's something out that way," he confirmed.

We caravan the windy roads through bright-green cattle pastures divided into neat rectangles by the lava-rock walls you see everywhere here. A sign marked "Praia Viola" leads us down a steep grade past a little white clapboard house with blue trim fronted by a porch where two old men sit chatting and gazing out to sea. A couple of streams feed out of the hills into a cascade that runs underneath the ruins of an old stone foundation just above a rocky path down to the water.

Swells in this part of the Atlantic haven't traveled anywhere near the fetch of those of the big-wave spots in the Pacific, but the storms are just as strong. Things turn on and off quickly. Weather and swell here are volatile. To score a spot like this requires patience and acute observation.

× Armed to the teeth with big-wave guns, the crew prepares to take on one of the Azores' many daunting outer reefs.



on São Miguel. We drive in many circles. It's all a bit dizzying. People start to get a little antsy. The first swell ends up being far smaller than expected and comes with a fair amount of onshore wind.

The big game in this hunt is Dollabarat, a seamount and reef in open water about a four-hour boat ride south of us that's never been surfed. It's quite possibly the Atlantic's Cortes Bank. Tales of big waves there have trickled back to the islands from wide-eyed fishermen for years. Grandpa Garoupa dived out there as part of early Jacques Cousteau missions. "You can see the waves from miles and miles away," he tells us. De Macedo, though, can't be sure what the ideal swell direction is there. In fact, no one can be sure.

De Macedo concludes that the upcoming swells won't be big enough to warrant the boat trip to Dollabarat. After further conversations with a

is thumbing his smartphone. "Wow, Mavs is on for Friday!" he says in English. He reads silently for a minute, then aloud: "After the first set, Mark Healey went back to the boat and got his vest. Imagine how big it must be there." He groans. "We should be in the water somewhere right now." Rebiere, of course, isn't even in the same ocean. Such is the existential angst of the thoroughly modern swell-chaser.

The Mavericks organizers invited 24 surfers along with six alternates back in July. In addition, they put de Macedo on what they call their "watch list" of those who "are pushing their skill level at Mavericks and in hot pursuit of an invitation to the contest. These surfers are highly respected and will be eligible for consideration for the next contest season."

De Macedo has never made it beyond the watch list in the eight seasons he's charged out there. He paddled out for the first time on a 6'6", which he

Off a rock pile about a quarter mile out, a set is mushing right, maybe head high, and running a short way left as well. The tide is high and there's not much swell in the water. This spot isn't yet showing its hand, but there's a jolt of hope. Swells in this part of the Atlantic haven't traveled anywhere near the fetch of those of the big-wave spots in the Pacific, but the storms are just as strong. Things turn on and off quickly. Weather and swell here are volatile. To score a spot like this requires patience and acute observation.

The team trains two consecutive days with the skis at a spot just west of a popular beachbreak while waiting for the swell. There's a headland where it wedges into a nice left. De Macedo and Rebiere whip each other into a bunch of these fat, churny lefts, snapping a few turns and tucking into improbable little barrels. One of the skis belongs to Marco de

× (Top) With years of Mavericks experience under his belt, de Macedo knows how to handle a bomb on his backhand. × (Bottom) Eric Rebiere, bon appétit.



Medeiros, a local firefighter who doesn't surf but is passionate about water safety and excited to learn how to pilot for tow-ins. Initially he's paired with Garoupinha. There's a lot of launching off the lip and botched releases. The fluorescent-yellow accents of Garoupinha's suit make him easy to track. Andrade gets pulled into a few as well, mostly holding the line, not trying anything too fancy.

Garoupinha tells me that his father used to watch Grandpa Garoupa surfing in waves that seemed huge to a child's mind—on a wooden board with no leash, all by himself. "He'd go out and charge and have these massive wipeouts," Garoupinha says. "My father would watch and be really worried. It wasn't that he was a badass, but he was kind of crazy. In my family, everyone's crazy."

Just as his grandfather had hoped to lure his friends into the waves so many decades before,

Garoupinha talks wistfully of turning the tables—coaxing his gramps back out into the beachbreak at Praia do Populo. "Although he's 80 years old, he's like a young guy," he says. "I feel he can still surf some waves, but you have to put a board in front of him and say, 'Let's go. Let's go to the sea.' For sure he would come with me."

That evening, the crew gathers down the road from the Garoupa house at the neighborhood *taberna*. They huddle around an iPhone, a bag of Ruffles, and a couple rounds of Sagres beers to watch the final heats of the Mavericks contest. There's a collective sympathetic moan in response to the tremendous wipeouts of Shawn Dollar and Ken "Skindog" Collins. Nods of approval all around for Grant "Twiggy" Baker when he wins. Garoupinha is glued to the tiny screen, studying each bumpy wave. Aside from this small crew of surfers, everyone in the

room is watching a soccer match on the TV mounted high on the wall.

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Monday morning on the south side of the island is sunny, glassy, and waist high. The swell should hit the north coast by midafternoon. The team spends the morning surfing tiny but fun Populo on the south coast—just down the way from the house where Garoupinha lives with his father. Rebiere jogs the beach. De Macedo paddles out on one of Andrade's boards and takes a ribbing for getting photographed on a reeling little left with the 4 Girlz logo displayed prominently.

× (Top) Portuguese national champ Joana Andrade, beach bound. × (Bottom) Roughly 850 miles off the coast of Portugal, the Azores are exposed to the Atlantic's biggest open-ocean swells.







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she says. “The noise it makes is just incredible.”

Garoupinha, meanwhile, is eyeing a set on the horizon and gets himself into position. He snags just one wave that afternoon at Viola, but it rivals anything else he’s seen on his island, and photographer Ricardo Bravo captures it. In a later frame in the sequence, Garoupinha looks back over his shoulder at the full force of the Atlantic exploding behind him. Back on land, he’s not boastful, just quietly pleased with himself. He’s a third-generation waterman from a fairly obscure spot on the globe, surfing waves of consequence in his own backyard with guys from the posters he tacks to his bedroom walls. It’s also a Friday and he’s not in school.

Rebiere and de Macedo both paddle back to shore wearing smiles. “This feeling of testing a new wave is common in Europe because there are not a lot of big-wave surfers,” Rebiere tells me later. “But I think this wave has the potential to be a world-class wave, and that feeling isn’t common.”

On the morning of my last day on São Miguel, I’m in the backseat with Garoupinha as we head north, back to Viola.

× (Clockwise from left) Rebiere, finding a focal point for the open-ocean swell. × Beauty isn’t found only along the coast of the Azores. × Despite the abundance of surf on the islands, surfboards are a rare sight for locals.

Garoupinha shows that he’s been surfing this spot his whole life, his effortless, confident carving making it look like the only place to be right now.

Lunch at the café across the street takes far longer than it should, given that the first real swell we’ve seen in many days has arrived. After a civilized round of *cafezinhos*—Europeans will be Europeans—we pile back into vehicles and head north, where we meet up with the coast road and turn east. Eventually we get a glimpse of Viola from afar. It looks promising indeed.

We wait for a set and see clean lines on approach. Viola finally shows us what it can do. It’s a massive, snarling left. Luis Villa de Brito, a Portuguese videographer, sets up his tripod and says it looks a bit like Mavericks in reverse. “I hope those sets keep filling in,” says Rebiere.

There’s a clamor of boards, vests tightening, and suits being zipped. Rebiere wastes no time and is the first one paddling through the inside

reef-protected channel and out toward the shoulder. “That’s the best feeling about this,” he says later. “Not knowing exactly where to go or where to sit, not knowing how to line anything up yet.” A set arrives and he paddles for the second wave, making the drop and going right, not the expected left. He feels it out and hops off the top of the shoulder before the whitewater forces him into the rocks.

He paddles into another couple before anyone else is in the lineup, now only going left, screaming down the face of the wave. De Macedo and Garoupinha are soon out in the lineup as well—Garoupinha sitting off to the side, watching the sets roll in as de Macedo and Rebiere trade off waves that begin to approach 35-foot faces. Andrade paddles into the lineup but she looks ill at ease, moving around a lot and sitting a little too far inside. She gets hung up by a set and paddles in. When she makes it to the top of the path, she’s spent, but still smiling. “It’s big out there and heavier than it looks,”

The swell has grown a bit, but the weather has turned by the time we’ve gotten to the north coast; we’re soon headed into thick mist, and clouds spill down the green hillsides. The rest of the team bumps along in a van in front of us loaded with guns and tow boards. Garoupinha looks out through the windshield toward the gray, churning Atlantic.

“I’ve learned a lot about big-wave surfing from these guys,” he tells me. “I thought it was easier, but as we say, *Devagar se vai ao longe*,” he says, using the Portuguese equivalent of “Slow and steady wins the race.” I ask if he’s gotten the travel bug to surf big waves. “Sure, I’d like to travel, and I know there are lots of big waves out there,” he says. His stutter momentarily vanishes. “But there’s a lot of big waves right here waiting to be discovered and surfed. There’s so much potential. I believe that someday I’ll see all these waves.” 🐉