

Surfing at Stinson Beach, CA

I had one of the experiences of my lifetime while surfing on the California coast at a place called Stinson Beach. This is a very small township on the way to Point Reyes National Seashore. The beach is many miles long with waves that rise up to huge walls of water in an eyeblink. There is something unusual about the sandy bottom that helps create this effect. As a result you don't see them forming way off into the distance like at Ocean Beach in San Francisco. An unusual set of conditions arise from this. The water is flat and a few moments later there is a wall rising up as high as 12 feet. This is dangerous and can actually be scary. Water is really heavy and can bash you around and keep you down straining for a breath. Stinson is not considered a particularly good place for surfing and body boarding due to the tendency of the wave to fold over and crash all at once along its entire length. A good rideable wave peels across like a zipper creating a shoulder of water that can propel a lucky rider across at high speeds. Without that peeling action a rider is left with nowhere to go but straight down the face with whitewater breaking on each side of them. Whitewater riding is fun enough but if you ride it too far in then you have to work real hard to get out again beyond the impact zone.

This magic day, however, Stinson was a place where the wave gods were playing.

It started out as a grey day with medium size surf with decent shoulders. The wind was from offshore heading into the water thereby sending plumes of spray into the air with each crashing wave. My friend Mikey and I were having fun but hoping for some bigger sets to come through. Waves often travel in sets of somewhere between 4 and 7 waves per set. This normally allows for a window of time where a surfer can sprint out through the impact zone before a new set comes roaring in. Stinson Beach often has no sets at all - rather a continuous walling up of water every five or ten seconds making it difficult to break out beyond the power zone. But it was a magic day and the sets were rolling in nicely. Mikey took a break on the beach after an hour and I followed. After chatting with some friends who were watching I decided to go in for another go and tried to cajole him into following me. Surfing is a somewhat solitary activity but it is safer and a lot more fun to have a friend to rave at out there about what's going on. He decided to go in again. From the moment we entered the water we were transported into a dynamic and wild watery wilderness unlike anything I have ever experienced. The sets started rolling in bigger and bigger. The wind picked up and the spray off the lip of the wave was ejecting up 15 or 20 feet. I caught a big one and after a short ride it closed out in front of me so I dived back into the wave trying to punch through to the other side. Tumbling around I popped up to see Mikey about 25 yards to the right just catching the lip on a wall of water at least 12 feet high with an 8-9 footer right in front of him. It was an unusual double wave leaving him in a moving trough like a king perched above the landscape. I started yelling but the sound of the wind and the water just sucked it up. I started paddling hard so I wouldn't get caught inside and get battered by the next oncoming crusher- just reaching the bottom of the huge momma when i was lifted like an elevator right up to the top and popping over the crest. The wave was moving so fast it left nothing underneath me but the surface of the water five or six feet down. I had timed it so perfectly that I was airborne for a second or two - finally slamming down with a thwack-me and the boogie board glued together as we

hit the surface. Just after I hit and began to stroke again the back splash of the spray coming off the top of the wave began swirling around my head creating blanket of dense droplets. The spray kept coming and swirling around my head until I noticed a patch of light on the water. A sliver of sun had just broken through the grey overcast clouds and was creating a dancing silver swatch of water that was beautiful beyond words. Towards the back of this vector of silvery water I noticed another huge swell beginning to rise up into a classic majestic shape. Time did not exist. I was embedded in a wilderness of such beauty there was no thought. In a flash the spray was gone, I rolled over the swell, the light went back into the clouds and I looked to the right and there was Mikey slowly paddling over towards me. He was playing it cool.