

# WHALEBONE

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## [FEATURE] EXPLORING THE ENDLESS WAVE

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Just before Memorial Day 2017, legendary waterman Chuck Patterson(<https://www.instagram.com/chuckpatterson/?hl=en>) flew in from Namibia's Skeleton Coast—after surfing the world's longest left in Chicama, Peru—to join forces with Russ Scully(<https://www.instagram.com/russscully/>) of Burlington, VT's WND&WVS Surf Shop(<https://www.wndnwvs.com/>). The duo pulled into the unlikely surf destination of Galveston, Texas in full stoke mode, sporting shortboards, paddleboards and two to three foot foils, to pioneer a few variations of this burgeoning sport, in a setting made famous by *Step Into Liquid*.

From appearing in that classic 1999 film, to holding the current record of riding a single wave for seven miles, it's clear that Captain James Fulbright([https://www.instagram.com/surf\\_bored/](https://www.instagram.com/surf_bored/)) is our man for this trip. This guy is a character and the real deal. He garnered a reputation as a terrible fisherman during the 90s, but only because he wasn't actually fishing—he was surfing tanker waves instead—and he had that bay all to himself for years.

*Captain Fulbright. Photo: Erik Schwab*

As we approach, he emerges as a young Johnny Weissmuller (he jokingly asked me to describe him as such) out of his shop, aptly named Strictly Hardcore Surf

Specialties(<http://www.surfspecialties.com/>) and located just off the beach at the corner of R and 37th. This Texan Tarzan has been in the surf business and shaping boards (at least 5,000) in this spot for the last 31 years. He has also been *the* man taking people out tanker surfing since the 90's, and went official in 2008 with Tanker Surf Charters(<http://www.tankersurfcharters.com>). He lives next door to his shop, with his spitfire wife, Deb, and their Cojack puppy, Telly Savalas.

Captain James' energy, enthusiasm and knowledge base instantly bring us to know that we have nothing to dread. Yes, he's a total cowboy with a sea pirate soul, but we came to play. And so it begins. He reads us a long list of do's and don'ts and mentions a few dangers like boating accidents, bull sharks and flesh-eating bacteria, but we slip nonetheless into a calm, feeling solid that James will guide us safely on his sleigh, into this highly unusual adventure.

## What Up, Galveston?

Russ and Chuck build their foils and leave their boards in his shop for an easy last minute lashing to his 23 foot center console skiff at dawn. We then momentarily contemplate hitting the air swings at Pleasure Pier—the amusement park that juts out precariously on a boardwalk over the Gulf—but choose instead to simply stare down the waves of the recently refurbished beach just beyond the 17-foot seawall. There, we pray for good wind.

Then we head off to the Strand historic district in search of food with the latest addition to our tribe, Montauk-based photographer, Erik Schwab(<https://www.instagram.com/saltyvisionz/>). He came to capture the trip and surf weird waves with finesse.

What we find in Galveston is an island that is more than just cruise ships and oil tankers. It has a neat history—complete with hauntings—and super cool architecture like Victorian homes in bright primary colors, mostly post Great Storm of 1900.

This town has a quaintly under-appreciated feel to it and a beachy vibe, with palm trees swaying in salty humidity, along with plenty of Gulf Coast oysters, freshly caught fish and Texas BBQ. We wash it all down with Shiner Bock beer at the Black Pearl Oyster House on our first night, while checking Galveston Bay wind buoy readings and delving into a discussion of the art of foiling—feel, finesse and fine tuning.

I fall asleep that night thinking of Galveston's greatest attribute, and the reason we all came. Nowhere else in the world has this perfect topographical trifecta of a long straight bay, sweet shoals flanking it like Rincon reefs, topped off with a steady stream of container ships and oil tanker traffic creating the perfect "tanker surfing" storm.

The 5am wake up call the next morning by Captain James contains a few key words: "small craft advisory," "expected tornado touchdowns" and "victory at sea." So our perfectly crafted plan evaporates like morning dew.

But without missing a beat, our adventurous crew group texts an audible, with heads still heavy on pillows: let's head inland—to NLand—to surf. It was an easy switch, as we were all eager to check out Doug Coor's passion project since its May 13th re-opening (after an unfortunate tear in the lining closed the park for 7 months shortly after its initial opening in October 2016).

## Freshwater Waves in Austin

We pull out of Galveston between sheets of sideways rain, and drive three hours to find fairer skies in Austin. We check out the park and get right to it, tackling the "reef wave" in a 3pm surf session we'd booked that morning. The surf etiquette learning curve was steep and quick, comprised mostly of a "take turns" rule, enforced by lifeguards straddling surfboards in the water beside us.

The first thing you find out is how close you need to sidle up to the metal fence that runs below the central pier, as that is the line up for the reef wave. The pier halves the lagoon into an east and a west, while housing the Wavegarden hydrofoil, which looks like a giant snowplow, as it pushes the water back and forth, creating a perfect wave every two and a half minutes. This timing allows for a fantastic 30 second ride, with enough time to paddle back into position afterward to catch the next wave.

*Perfection. Photo: Erik Schwab*

The hydrofoil hum quickly becomes Pavlovian in its effect on every surfer within earshot. We hear it start, and as we do so, turn like little surf dogs toward the wave and salivate, our collective hearts beating faster. It's not much different, I notice, than what happens out in the open ocean when a small dark ripple appears on the horizon, holding the promise of a big set.

After two back-to-back sessions, we relax on the pier with none other than Doug Coors

himself. He is humble and unassuming and just plain awesome, and in turn we are all humbled and honored to get such a long and enjoyable audience with him. We cover topics ranging from refraction and water evaporation to marketing strategies and the onsite brewery he's building. It's hard not to feel good while the perfect mix of reggae and Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird" wash over us, while the waves crash, recede, repeat.

Then, out of nowhere, the sun pops out. So instead of heading back to Galveston as planned, we jump back in the water to enjoy a sunset surf session. We have the park almost all to ourselves and that third hour of freshwater surfing is spent soaking up the golden hour glow and catching long, jubilant rides—myself on a longboard on the inside wave and Chuck and Russ scoring big on short boards on every reef wave, like golden carving Poseidons. Erik's perched on the pier taking epic photographs.

*Chuck getting comfortable in the pocket section. Photo: Erik Schwab*

An important advantage of this man-made wave was put sharply into focus: expert surfers are challenged as if it's a big wave day while intermediate surfers (such as myself) are giddy as if it's a smaller wave day, all while just riding different sections of the same wave. And the best part is that even without the ocean, the adrenaline rush is still there, as buoyant and poetic as ever.

We are the last ones to vacate the park. It's 8:30pm and we leave begrudgingly. We all feel energized and alive, being at the mercy of man and machine instead of Mother Nature. Apparently, we didn't need the salt to feel the stoke.

## The Ship Is The Storm

After our session score in Austin, we are sleep-deprived when we wake up the next morning in Galveston, but the weather has cleared enough to get the go ahead from Captain James. So we meet him in his shop at 5:30am to take advantage of the early morning tanker traffic. We are game, but we do need breakfast.

So, we pull into Dawn Donuts in the dark, to stock up on coffee and kaloches (jalepeno, sausage and cheese buns), while going over his boat rules and talking a lot about fetch. While passing the oil burning stacks of the Texas City refinery James quips "this is our version of the palm tree-lined beaches on the way to the surf spot."

*Morning prep. Photo: Erik Schwab*

He also explains the important formula for a catchable wave that includes the tanker ship's beam (width), the draft (weight), the speed (must be at least 10 knots), and the depth of the shoal (less than 6 feet). Then he adds that the 2-foot tide swing and the wind conditions also factor in.

It's cold and windy and we bundle up with furtive glances and head out in darkness, lowering the skiff into the shiny water (thanks BP) beside the refinery. I watch as its 200 HP engine and emblazoned "Surf Bored 3" lettering enter the water. We are about to embark on this tiny skiff with James at the helm, chasing waves all day, while skirting the coast guard and navigating that super shallow oyster reef he keeps referencing. The boat screams hustle and surf cowboy, and we all climb aboard with reverent abandon.

I silently vow, "You are not going to surf today, Lisa. No way, no how. This is pure insanity. Leave it to the experts. You have finally met your match. No flesh-eating bacteria or bull sharks or getting run over by a tanker for you today. Just stay in the boat and get home alive, and healthy."

So I watch and cheer as Russ and Chuck foil their hearts out on several chop-filled tanker waves that just go and go and go: endless waves. Russ describes it as a game of Whac-A-Mole trying to stay with the energy of the wave, while Chuck refers to the first wave as R&D, and tries to convey how it felt to lift up onto the foil in all that chop.

*Chuck and Russ on one of the bigger waves that came through. Photo: Erik Schwab*

A little fun fact: James named all the shoals here years ago, and the names stuck. Our favorite was "Mom's" since that is where we had our best rides of the day. James named it that because he spread his mom's ashes there, proof once again that this really is his backyard.

By their third ride, I start to loosen my grip on reality and on my resolve. Captain James is filled with such enthusiasm and experience in these waters and it washes all over us. He cheers from the skiff like a little kid at a birthday party, hooting and hollering when surfers nail it. His genuine stoke watching others catch and ride tanker waves is contagious. And so I warm to the idea of surfing that wave. Chuck is making it look like a walk in the park even when his board is elevated three feet above the water by hydrofoil, and Russ is not helping, and neither is Erik. They are all killing it. And their smiles reflect that.

And then Chuck shoots the pier. On foil. And I'm breathless just watching it.

*Chuck sending it on the foil. Photo: Erik Schwab*

We dive into the cooler for Little Deb's homemade tunafish sandwiches and fresh watermelon while listening to James' rad mix of tunes—everything from the Butthole Surfers to Steve Miller Band. It all mixes together and has the desired affect of adding positive energy and a can-do attitude. Then the clincher—the sun comes out. So our day that began as a cold, windy, cloudy day is now a mid-summer roaster—a boater's paradise.

And so I give it a go, on a 9' Walden...and catch a wave on my first try. I am exuberant. It is perfection. Russ and Chuck are beside me, foiling away on a paddleboard and a shortboard, respectively. And I feel as if I'm floating. I eventually lose the energy of the wave, unable to stay with the snaking whitewater, but somehow manage to catch the next one, right behind it, and with it I find total exhilaration.

The stakes are higher here though, and I experience that first hand when I miss the next wave and find myself stranded far from everyone and every wave. I choose to revel in the lonely feeling, much like Macaulay Culkin in Home Alone, as I embrace the peace and quiet and take in my surroundings—tankers to the left, refinery to the right, bull sharks beneath and bacteria all around. I bake in the strong Texan sun as I lie on my board all alone in Galveston Bay and think *how on Earth did I get here?*

But James and his skiff finally come back, emerging as a speck in the distance, with Chuck, Russ and Erik all ear to ear smiles. And as they pull me out of the water, all I want is another shot at a three-mile long wave. I climb aboard thinking *what about that big inbound red freighter up ahead in the distance? It looks heavy enough, and fast enough to throw a big wake...*

James then eagerly exalts, "Hey, look over there, look at that MoFo!" as he points out another tanker to us, one that has the promise to throw off a perfect wave. And all four of us turn like little surf dogs toward the tanker and salivate, our collective hearts beating faster, with the promise of a big set.



# Abandoned Mansion Found

When Bryan Sansivero discovered a New York mansion that had been abandoned four decades