

# LEGENDARY SURFERS

Detailed Writings on Surfing's History, Culture and Legendary Surfers by Malcolm Gault-Williams, surf writer and historian for nearly 30 years.

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## Surfing's Origins

Aloha and Welcome to this chapter in the LEGENDARY SURFERS series that begins it all.

Unlike all the other chapters in these volumes, this small introduction is mostly my opinion about how and where and by whom surfing first started.

My chapter "[The First Surfers](#)" is a companion piece to this this one and should be read immediately following this intro.

Who were the first Surfers and when did surfing begin?

Actually, we will never know the answers to these questions, mainly because catching a wave and riding it most assuredly began before such things were documented and probably before documentation of human activity even began.

Sure, we have Polynesian oral histories, petroglyphs, and Peruvian artifacts -- as well as much later written records by Europeans, but they don't tell us when surfing really began.

Despite all this we can make certain logical guesses that can shed light on the questions themselves and give us a better idea of when surfing began and by whom.

If we include bodysurfing, then the first beaches surfed must have been those along the African Coast -- specifically those with long sandy shelves that facilitate standing and jumping into waves about to break without going over one's head.

The first body surfing surfers were probably homo sapiens, but also could have been our hominid ancestors. I feel, however, that surfing probably did not happen as an activity until after humans achieved cognition (the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through experiences and the senses), currently estimated at about 70,000 years ago.

If we don't count bodysurfing in our subject of the First Surfers, and specify having to ride some object used for buoyancy -- say a log or even a small fishing canoe -- the coast of Africa is still the most logical location and the First Surfers post cognitive homo sapiens, tens of thousands of years ago.

If we define surfing strictly as riding prone or standing on what Bob Simmons referred to as "plates", the First Surfers were early Polynesians around 2500 to 2000 years ago; comparatively recent times. These are the people we trace today's surf culture back to.

What about those Peruvian artifacts of riders straddling reedcraft, estimated at three thousand years ago? My feeling is that riding waves on bundled reeds goes far further back in time and may include river riding with and without coastlines. In Peru, surfing with bundled reeds certainly goes no further back than the migration of humans into the area, currently estimated at between around 11,000 to 13,000 years ago but probably go back further, possibly to 20,000-25,000 years ago.

As a final statement: it is my opinion that jumping into breaking waves and riding them for a short while (simple bodysurfing) has been practiced worldwide for tens of thousands of years and was not limited to certain areas like Africa, South America or Polynesia. Wherever there are waves, and a way to ride them, there have been people jumping into them and having the same fun we all experience when we do so, today.



Malcolm proning out on shorebreak, 1993.

Malcolm Gault-Williams at [7:41 PM](#)

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