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*Note: This is a reproduction of the original article as the Jean Pierre's website is no longer functioning. Photographs are at the end of the interview.*

### **You maintain a very nice website on paipos ... most people will ask: paipo? What on earth is a paipo?**

Paipo surfing traces its roots to bodysurfing. In fact, the Hawaiian term for paipo surfing has its origins in the Hawaiian word for bodysurfing. John Clark, in his recent book, *Hawaiian surfing: traditions from the past*, wrote: "The literal translation of *pae po`o* is "ride [a wave] head-first," or in other words, bodysurf, and a *papa pae po`o* was a bodysurfing board, or what surfers today call a bodyboard."

Riding prone on a board in the Hawaiian language is known as *kipapa*-style surfing. Surfing research now shows that bodysurfing and *kipapa*-style surfing were practiced throughout warm water regions of the world or wherever indigenous peoples lived, worked and played in or near the sea, including Tahiti, New Zealand and elsewhere in the Oceania region, Peru and Western Africa. Men, women, and children rode *kipapa*-style on small wooden surfing boards, reed mats and banana trunks, or anything that would slide across the waves. It is fair to say that bodysurfing, handplane surfing boogie boarding, and paipo/bellyboard surfing are all part of the same family: riding a wave head first with our body stretched out.

Today's paipo boards are made from a wide range of materials including woods, oils, foams, plastics, glass clothes, and resins. The size and shape of paipo boards are even more diverse, ranging from 2 to 6 feet, 12 to 30 inches wide and from one-quarter to 5 inches thick.

### **How did you get interested? Why the paipo instead of a traditional surfboard, let's say a shortboard?**

I started surfing in spring 1967, while a freshman in high school, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. My gremmie spots were Sheraton and Presbyterian (Condado); Pine Grove and La Islita (Isla Verde) and La Pared (Luquillo). My first board was a 9'4" Hobie noserider.

During the summer of 1967, my family moved to the west side of Puerto Rico, where my surfing opportunities exploded. My friends and I jumped to shortboards during the winter of 1967-68, ditching our longboards or stripping them down and attempting to reshape them into something short and maneuverable. In those days we paipo surfed mostly in dangerous or large wave conditions (this was during the pre-leash era) such as Tres Palmas and Gas Chambers. Tres Palmas is a large wave spot about a quarter of a mile out to sea. Gas Chambers is a top-to-bottom, inside-out wave, tucked inside the NW point of Puerto Rico that only breaks on large swells wrapping around inside the NW point. Riding longboards at Gas Chambers was not an option—riding the wave on any board is a challenge to master—the wave tends to own the rider! It was a miracle to survive a surfing session without the board washing up against the rock cliff or inside shore rocks.

Before too long, I decided that surfing VERY short boards was even more fun than shortboard surfing. So, when a friend's Holmsey Sidewinder snapped in half at Bridges on a nice 4-foot day,

the front half was shaped and glassed into a 50-inch teardrop shape paipo board for me to use full-time.

Like most prone-riding surfcraft, my paipo board is very easy to travel with, be it a day trip or an overseas flight. It fits in the back of virtually all vehicle trunks and avoids most of those outrageous airline baggage fees. No racks needed! Requires less wax than a longboard! Another practical advantage is my lower body strength favors using my legs and swim fins instead of my arms for paddling. However, it all comes down to the pure joy of it.

**Is there any limit on the wave size ... lower limit like Maine in summer ... upper limit like North Shore in winter?**

Not really. It more a matter of a person's preference and the surfing opportunities that are available. Generally speaking, a paipo board requires more wave punch than say a longboard or SUP, so a mushy 1 to 3 ft. wave does not work very well. But, as we all know, talented surfers can ride just about any type of board in any type of conditions. I have used one or two paipo boards in waves ranging from 2 to 12 feet, usually adjusting the fin position or mix to match the size and type of waves. Others have paipo surfed large Hawaiian and Indonesian waves on finless paipo boards.

**Any limit on the rider's size?**

Big, small, narrow, wide. It doesn't matter! Board floatation is a matter of preference. Wood boards tend to have minimal float and foam/fiberglass boards tend to have more float. Riders adjust the way they catch and ride the wave. Low floatation boards are usually positioned in front of the person catching the wave whereas boards with more buoyancy can be hand paddled and foot kicked into a wave with the person already mounted on the board. Adding a little width or thickness or length can add a lot of float. Given that the paipo community rides boards with neutral buoyancy through longboard-like float, there is something for everybody.

**Is it better to buy an off the shelf bodyboard (paipo?) or one shaped by a shaper? Can you notice a difference?**

I can't comment on the relative value of off-the-shelf vs. custom shaped bodyboards (aka boogie boards) although almost all of my bodyboard friends buy off-the-shelf.

In the world of paipo surfing there are very few shapers who make paipo boards for off-the-shelf sales. Austin Saunders (Austin Surfboards) and Josh Klein (Xylem Surfboards) come to mind. Austin specializes in poly foam/glass surfboards and has shaped and sold hundreds of the off-the-shelf baseline design. Josh builds wood surfing boards finished with tung oil, and features two paipo models, the Malama Kai and the Preacher. Both Austin and Xylem off-the-shelf models will work fine in a wide range of conditions. They are also more than ready to build a custom model if the customer knows what they want. A couple of other shapers should be mentioned: Malcolm Campbell (Campbell Brothers Surfboards) builds custom Bonzers paipos and Thomas Patrick Haugh (Thomas Patrick Surfboards) has been building an evolving line of off-the-shelf/custom paipo boards.

Several other shapers have built custom paipo boards (see "Other Links" at [MyPaipoBoards.org](http://MyPaipoBoards.org)). Another option is talking with a local shaper (some familiarity with paipo surfing helps!). You can

also go the “Do It Yourself” route and try your hand at shaping a wood board (using inexpensive or used plywood for practice) – there is plenty of information on the Paipo Forums.

Back to your original question... all of my boards are custom shapes... there are a lot of good board designs but the trick is knowing what is best for your style of surfriding, experience level and wave types.

### **It is cheaper to buy a paipo than a regular board? Why don't we see more in the water?**

Most paipos cost less than thrusters, fish boards, longboards and other foot boards, but cost more than boogie boards and hand planes. Prices are probably close to the cost of a kneeboard depending upon the complexity of the design and the add-ons (board fins, leash plugs, pads, resin/artwork, and materials). Boogie boards are light, do not ding easily, will not hurt you and are relatively inexpensive. During the 1970s, the boogie board largely displaced the paipo board for the reasons mentioned above and the fact that beach towns blackballed hard surface boards but allowed the softer boogie board to share the surf with bathers.

### **Do they break? Do you lose a lot of fins?**

Always a fear, but I have never known of a paipo board snapping in the surf. Some of the wood boards are subject to splitting but in other ways are more durable than foam/glass boards.

Fins? Do you mean the skegs that go on a paipo board or the swim fins that goes on the paipo surfer's feet? I have scraped and deranged my fair share of board fins on shallow reefs and the occasional underwater rock but have only torn out one fin & fin box. I have not lost a swim fin since a surf session at Big Rock, in La Jolla, about 30 years ago... since then I always use fin tethers (leashes attaching the fin to the ankle). The biggest challenge is finding a swim fin that is a good match to your foot's shape and your kicking needs.

### **A good paipo day is ... ?**

Uncrowded, glassy offshore conditions, 4-8 ft., with a few friends. Guess that is a universal good day! Maybe those are great days... good days can also include 2 to 3 ft. A-frames peaks or much larger conditions... Paipo boards have been ridden at large Sunset Beach, Pipeline, and Waimea, but I have not seen any video of Jaws or Mavericks... those might be a little hairy for riding a board with such a low center of gravity.

### **Can you tell us more about yourself?**

I grew up in Puerto Rico, initially living in the countryside near San Juan and the last three years in the village of San German, in the southwest of Puerto Rico. I started surfriding a longboard during 9<sup>th</sup> grade while still living in the San Juan area. Moving to the west coast of the Island during early summer of 1967, before 10<sup>th</sup> grade, boosted my surfing opportunities and opened a completely new world, or playground, for me. Maria's Beach, in Rincon, was my home break during the winter season and Jobos was our main summer break. Looking back, I count my blessings every day for having had the opportunity to experience the NW coast of PR in its surfriding infancy, its virgin years. Going back to PR each year is like returning home to my roots. Love the people, culture, music, food, language and of course, my waves and friends.

My first trip to Costa Rica was in 1988. Wow, has it ever changed! I cannot imagine surfriding in the Hermosa/Jaco area after riding pristine waves solo with only green pastures, cattle, and mountains as the view from the sea. About ten years ago, I stumbled upon a little cove that is not very crowded and is now an annual destination.

I have lived in Maryland for over 40 years and worked in Washington, D.C., for nearly 30 years as a congressional naval analyst and investigator. Although the nearest surfing beach is about 2-1/2 hours away, our local surf club keeps a watchful eye on the swell forecasts and we regularly ride share down to the coast. My career also “forced” me to visit many naval sites such as Virginia Beach, Jacksonville, San Diego, Seattle, and Pearl Harbor. In addition to Puerto Rico and Costa Rica, favorite wave destinations include N. Oregon and Cape Hatteras. In 2000, I enjoyed a one-week trip to the southwest coast of France—what’s not to enjoy there?

**So ... should I rush to my local shaper and order a paipo?**

No hurry unless I am receiving a 10 percent finder’s fee!

**Now ... tell my readers about palinka ...**

LOL, maybe we should talk about pitorro (Puerto Rican moonshine rum where personal recipes abound—it is commonly shared during holiday celebrations). Knowing my heart is still filled with Borinquen, my local friends are always sure to have us over for some lechon, pasteles, and other local foods during our annual visits in December or January. And, pitorro. Palinka is a fruit brandy native to Hungary... the relatives love to share!!! Enough said.

Paipo website: <https://mypaipoboard.org/>

Paipo forums: <https://mypaipoboard.org/forum3/viewforum.php?f=1>

Send me an email: [paipodude@mypaipoboard.org](mailto:paipodude@mypaipoboard.org)

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### Photo descriptions and credits

Photo by: Cher Pendarvis

- “Rod holding his custom Checkered RPM (Austin Surfboards) in the Pendoflex garage”



Photo by: Chris Smith

- “Ready for shack time in Costa Rica”



Photo by: Jim Crotty of <https://www.caliprsurfphotos.com/>

- “Paipo surfing in NW Puerto Rico”





Photo by: Trevor Yamamoto

- “Paipo boards come in many shapes, sizes and materials”



Photo by: Jan Messersmith

- “Madang, Papua New Guinea plank-surfing kids”



Photo by: Larry Goddard.

- “The paipo guys at Queens Beach. They're down there every weekend or whenever there's surf”



Photo by: Xylem Surfboards

- “Josh Klein holding a Xylem Malama Kai paipo at Cape Canaveral Pier, Florida”

