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THE ADVENTURE ISSUE

MAN OVER BOARD

Bruno enjoys a free surf, one day before the 2018 Adaptive World Surfing competition at North Beach, Durban

DESTINATION DURBAN LEGEND

Come hell or high water



Bruno Hansen has survived it all: baboon attacks, crocodile-infested waters, shark surgery, a carjacking that cost him the use of his legs, a jungle shaman, bankruptcy, a mental breakdown, mortar bombs and the deadliest tsunami in recorded history. As the three-times Adaptive World Surfing champion prepares to defend his crown in Durban, he tells his remarkable story to TOM WARD

Photography: Alexandre Rochard

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WAVE HELLO

Hansen keeps an eye on the waves from Moyo Ushaka; hosing down at the Durban Surf Lifesaving Club



At

the water's edge of New Pier beach, Bruno Hansen ties his legs with a length of rope and begins to stretch. His upper half is a tightly wound bundle of tanned sinews and well-worn muscle. Up close, he resembles

a blond, *Bad Lieutenant*-era Harvey Keitel. In conversation, however, he is far closer to Patrick Swayze's Bodhi, the charismatic outlaw from *Point Break*. But right now, Hansen's gregarious nature has taken a back seat. Right now, he needs time alone to get in tune with the ocean. To study its rhythms and his own.

Pushing his surfboard before him, Hansen crawls into the breaking waves. The ocean lifts him up and renders him weightless. Suddenly, he catches a wave. Unable to stand on the surfboard, he rides it like you might a bodyboard; arms straight, back arched in. While his competitors flounder, he glides 50 metres along a turquoise crest before heading back out to catch another. Hansen surfs as he lives: with his all. It's the reason why he has become the face not only of adaptive surfing, but also of the resilience of the human spirit.

Hansen – who splits his time between Cornwall, Denmark and Panama – has returned to Durban to compete in the South African Adaptive Surfing Championship. The victors will progress to the World Adaptive Surfing Championship in San Diego this December. Competitors have travelled from as far away as Hawaii and Israel to take part, and are divided into different heats depending on their disability. Some have lost limbs due to shark attacks, others have mental impairments. Antony Smyth, an old school friend of Hansen's, lost the use of his right arm in a car accident at

the age of five. Another competitor, 23-year-old Welshman Llewelyn Williams, lost his right leg at 16 and has been slowly plugging away on the adaptive surfing scene ever since.

Hansen has never lost an adaptive surfing competition and isn't about to start now. He comfortably wins his division and seems vaguely embarrassed by his success. None of this was planned, after all. Born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) in 1971, he didn't set foot in the sea until the age of seven. Instead, he learnt to surf on a lake, catching small waves stirred up by the wind. "It was infested with crocodiles," he laughs. "Lots of people got chomped."

We sit in California Dreaming, a café on the beachfront, as we wait for Hansen's next competition heat. It's difficult to imagine the trauma that has defined his life. In 1978, his parents became two of just a handful of survivors of the Hunyani Disaster, carried out by members of the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA).

Afterwards, the family relocated to Sea Port, South Africa, 100km south of Durban. This, says Hansen, was the start of his love affair with the sea: "I knew this ocean was mine. Surfing took me and cleansed me."

A stint in the South African Navy followed, then a job skippering surfers around Bali. It was a carefree time. It was in 1998, during a flying visit to Cape Town, when Hansen's life was permanently reshaped. On his last night, he met a woman in a bar (he declines to name her). They were driving on a deserted highway when a car pulled up beside them. The next part is sketchy, but Hansen remembers gunshots, the car mounting the embankment, and waking up upside down.

The woman was dragged from the car and Hansen was attacked. The momentum made the car roll back down the embankment and land ☹



**DESTINATION
DURBAN LEGEND**

on his companion. Half in and half out of the window, Hansen's back was crushed. When he woke up in intensive care, a doctor announced: "Son, you're paralysed and you'll never walk again."

Hansen still feels anger, disbelief and terror at the doctor's words. Life-saving operations and rehab followed, both in Cape Town and Salisbury, UK. His parents spent their life savings on his treatment. He saw the woman once in hospital. She was badly burned, but alive. Years later, he chanced across her on Facebook, and reached out. She didn't reply. "I can understand her wanting to forget such a traumatic experience," Hansen shrugs. "But I thought it would be interesting to meet."

During his recovery, Hansen couldn't focus on anything but his immediate survival. "My brain compartmentalised and just put surfing to one side," he recalls. "I'd been told I was paralysed, but I didn't believe that. I thought I could fix myself then get back to surfing. I told the physiotherapist in the hospital that I would walk out of there and I could see the sadness in her eyes. I thought, 'What do these people know? I'm 27 years old, man. I'll survive this.'"

Hansen spent the next five years in the grip of depression, over the course of which he became increasingly desperate. At one point, he travelled to Tijuana to undergo a £39,000 procedure that was yet to be approved by the USA's Food and Drug Administration. It involved injecting the damaged spine with embryonic cells from a blue shark. Research suggested the cells might bridge the damaged spinal cord. Expecting to wake up post-op able to wiggle his toes, he saw no change and no chance of retrieving his money.

the beach. He surfed in, to the cheers of those watching, who believed that surfing had been the plan all along. Hansen was reminded of some of the best waves he'd ever surfed. "I was so unfit," he says. "I decided I'd kill myself tomorrow; I was too tired to do it then."

Slowly, though, as he soaked up the sun, started eating healthily and surfing every day, the will to live returned. But Hansen's run of bad luck wasn't over. He spent 2004 sailing with a friend. By December, they had reached Thailand. The friend flew home for Christmas, leaving Hansen on the boat. On the morning of Boxing Day, a two-metre wave rolled into the secluded cove where he was anchored. ☺



Later, he travelled to Brazil, taking hallucinogenics in the jungle with a shaman called *João De Deus* (John of God). But even he could not make Hansen walk again.

He ended up living on the beach in Mexico with some friends. "I was stuck in a loop in my brain," Hansen says. "I decided to drown myself. I borrowed a longboard and paddled out, then I threw myself off and thought I would sink to the bottom. But I couldn't sink."

After 20 minutes, a wave hit him, spun his board and pushed him towards the

HANSEN'S HOTTEST DURBAN HANGOUTS

| -> | **DURBAN BEACHFRONT**

"A golden mile of great beaches, fantastic surf and piers to watches the waves from."

| -> | **THE ROYAL NATAL YACHT CLUB**

"I lived here on a yacht for a while. It has a great, affordable restaurant, and a place to meet international sailors."

| -> | **UMHLANGA ROCKS**

"North of Durban. Scenery, brilliant cafés, and beachfront walks."

| -> | **BREAD AHEAD BAKERY**

"Two words: spinach pies. The nearby botanical gardens are a good day trip, too."

| -> | **THE BLUFF**

"This is located near the old whaling station and is very eerie. But it has fantastic views of the ocean, as well as accessing a wilder surf beach than the main Durban spots."

BEACH LIFE

Hansen wears the official competition T-shirt on the day; Durban's Golden Mile promenade



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BA now flies direct to Durban three times a week from London Heathrow. Flight time: 11 hours, ten minutes

Photograph: Alamy

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HANSEN'S TOP SURF SPOTS ON THE PLANET

| → | **DURBAN**

"This is where I learnt to surf. It's a demanding coastline, so you end up surfing quite well."

| → | **CALIFORNIA**

"Whenever I go, I get a sense of that old-school Californian optimism, from San Diego up to L.A. It has a warm, dreamlike vibe."

| → | **THE MALDIVES**

"I have fond memories of the place. I went with a friend and learnt how to surf again properly on a board paralysed."

| → | **FRANCE**

"Biarritz is wheelchair-accessible. The lifeguards throw me on a quad bike and take me down to the water. They look on the spirit of adaptive surfing with great energy."

| → | **INDONESIA**

"These are the best waves in the world, with perfect, machine-like barrels. It's warm water, so you never need a wetsuit."

Realising something was wrong, Hansen headed out to deeper water. A whirlpool caught hold of him but he managed to break free, just as the first ten-metre wave rolled in. With the boat on its side, he gunned the engines and, eventually, made it over the wave. Of everyone moored in the bay, only Hansen survived.

Today, Durban is Hansen's town. It is also, he says, the best surf city in the world. As we journey along the promenade post-tournament, he recounts his progression to world champion. It was on a whim that he entered the World Championship Adaptive Surfing Championship held at La Jolla, San Diego in 2015. Hansen arrived sans surfboard, wetsuit or money. "The Americans had coaches, physios, wave analysts, expensive boards," he says. "I was a nobody." The waves, however, were small compared to the ones in Bali and he was confident he had an edge. "No one taught me how to surf," he says. "I got there on my own. I'm winning because I've struggled more, and I'm hungrier for it."

Hansen took that year's prize, and two after, but he shrugs off the suggestion that he is an ambassador for adaptive surfing. "I've met so many disabled people doing amazing things, and they blow my mind. There are a lot of unsung heroes out there," he says. Still, he continues to draw attention to the sport. He hopes the adaptive surf scene will begin to grow. He is vexed that it won't feature in the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics – despite able-bodied surfing making its Olympic debut the same year. "I can't understand it," he says. "Some of us who started this sport will be too old for the Paralympics – if they ever decide to put it in."

After Durban, he's off to Hawaii for another tournament, then to Malibu, California, before December's world championship in San Diego. "A lot of people think adaptive surfing is a 'cute' sport," Hansen shrugs. "But we surf waves that would kill a lot of able-bodied people."

Besides surfing, Hansen plans to sell handmade wheelchairs for paralysed people wishing to lead active lives, and to open a 'seahabilitation' centre in Panama for people who are newly injured or suffering from conditions such as PTSD.

"I didn't have a support system after my accident. I had to die or get through it. I chose to die, but that didn't work, and here I still am," he laughs. "Surfing keeps me real." He nods to the ocean. "I'm very humbled out there. A wave could finish me off at any moment. But I have a connection with the ocean that's mine alone. You'll never take that away." ■

🐦 @tomwardwrites

Follow Hansen's adventures on Instagram @brunocean13. Tom Ward's third novel *Fires* (£7.99, Crooked Cat) is out now. With thanks to Far & Wild Travel, which organises tailor-made holidays across Africa. Book a six-night Durban trip including a three-day safari and BA flights from £1,955pp, farandwild.travel. *High Life* stayed at the Garden Court Marine Parade. Rooms from around £50pp/pn, tsogosun.com*



BEACH AND EVERY ONE

From top: rickshaws near New Pier on the beachfront; local delicacy, bunny chow; Hansen surfing his way to a first place finish at North Beach

*The Garden Court Marine Parade has been recently refurbished. All rooms are sea-facing, price includes breakfast