





SHOCK WAVES

FROM RIDING GIANT SWELLS AT NIGHT TO FENDING OFF SHARKS IN THE BAHAMAS, DAREDEVIL SURFER MARK VISSER HAS FACED SITUATIONS THAT WOULD COMPEL A LESSER ATHLETE TO SELL HIS BOARD AND STICK TO DRY LAND. AND HERE'S THE THING: THEY ALL PALE IN COMPARISON TO WHAT HE'S DOING NEXT.

By Rod O'Connor • Photographs by Mark Lobo



RECEIVED WORD THE WEEK
before my scheduled arrival on Australia's Sunshine Coast. Mark Visser, surfer turned extreme athlete, oceanic explorer and, quite possibly, future reality-television star, had suffered a Grade 2 tear of his medial collateral ligament while filming a segment for his adventure documentary, Nine Lives, due out next year.

Surely the knee injury would ground his planned parachuting drill—and scupper my chance to behold firsthand this most extreme of extreme-sports fanatics as the 29-year-old Aussie prepares for his most outlandish stunt yet. But Visser is all smiles when he pulls his Jeep up to my hotel in Mooloolaba, an oceanside resort town near Point Cartwright, which he calls home when he's

not crisscrossing the map conquering the planet's most fearsome waves. "I'm good to go," he says. "Hop in."

An hour later, we're sweating in the back of a tiny Cessna flying above Caboolture, a wooded burg 27 miles north of Brisbane. The plane's buzzing twin engines make conversation difficult as we climb into the clouds, the emerald patches of Bribie Island National Park shrinking ever smaller. Looking to the east, I see the shimmering blue of the Coral Sea. To the northwest, the russet tips of the Glass House Mountains stand proud in the distance.

Across from us is Ian McGregor, 70, a salty former military instructor with more than 12,000 jumps under his belt. We reach 3,300 feet, and McGregor pulls the ring on a flare attached to a sandbag and small parachute and flings it out the hatch. Before

GPS, these contraptions, known as drifters, were used for spotting landing locations. For today's exercise, the jumpers will use the flare's orange smoke as a target, touching down, with any luck, within a few yards of the drifter.

Landing with that sort of accuracy is a skill that takes elite skydivers years to master. Visser is attempting it after just a couple of months of training. In fact, 12 months ago, he had zero experience with the sport. But off he goes anyway, and some minutes later, both men hit their designated targets. Yet while McGregor touches down softly, Visser comes in hot and rips a Frisbee-size chunk of turf from the ground, twisting his left knee in the process. Angry with himself at first, he limps to the hangar and duct-tapes a bag of ice to his leg. "I'll be fine," he says through clenched teeth. Then he grins. "That was amazing."

BUT NOT NEARLY as amazing as what comes next.

For 18 months now, a camera crew has been following Visser and a supporting cast of fellow thrill junkies as they attempt a series of increasingly daring exploits, most involving surfboards and all of them dreamed up by Visser. Today's parachuting exercise was designed to help ensure military precision for Visser's most outrageous scheme yet: Operation Deep Blue. If everything goes according to plan, this will encompass jumping out of an aircraft and surfing Godzilla-size rogue waves, the freakish water walls that appear miles out to





sea when violent storm systems clash with jagged mountain ranges deep underwater. These are the types of swells that can topple oil tankers and turn an ocean cruise into *The Poseidon Adventure*.

They are, however, elusive. So to find them, Visser has cajoled off-the-clock oceanographers into sharing secret coordinates and other covert data. And he's enlisted professional forecasters like Ben Macartney of Sydney-based Coastalwatch to monitor the globe for the perfect weather conditions: gale-force winds blowing in the same direction over 500 to 2,000 nautical miles for more than 24 hours straight. "Once you get winds of that caliber blowing over a

number of days, that's where you see the really massive waves we're looking for," says Macartney, who has accompanied Visser on a test mission over the Indian Ocean. "What we're trying to do is target these spots out in the middle of nowhere, where they're not impacted by landmasses or continental shelves. It's a tricky process."

And while atmospheric computer models can help pinpoint the moment when the rough winds will drop away and leave in their wake surfable, raw ocean swells, the real challenge is getting there. "It could take up to four days by boat. Four days before a swell is never going to give you an active reading," Visser says. "The only way

IDLE HANDS Daredevil surfer Mark Visser, in a rare moment of calm



to do it is to airdrop in." That means Visser and his colleagues must be ready to deploy at a moment's notice to far-flung locations that, for now, remain mostly undisclosed in order to deter copycats who might try to snake these prized waves. The complex operation requires a team of four to leap out of a plane

along with their surfboards, a life raft and two Jet Skis. After successfully landing on the open ocean, they must wait out the monster surf break and, when their wave riding is over, survive at sea until a designated boat arrives to pick them up.

Visser has located and surfed 30-footers so far, but the endgame is much more ambitious. "My goal is to ride a 100-foot wave," he says. "We've found them on charts. I don't know if they're real. But there's only one way to find out."



THERE'S A GOOD chance you've already seen the feat that propelled Visser into a career of extreme adventure: A clip of his brazen nighttime ride of "Jaws," the notoriously unforgiving 30-foot break off the coast of Maui, is a bona fide Internet hit. It scored hundreds of thousands of views and was picked up by the likes of "Good Morning America."

The idea for that project, dubbed Night Rider, came to Visser one summer evening in 2007 while he and his younger brother, Kevin, were surfing near Visser's home on Point Cartwright, a rugged stretch of beach in the shadow of a historic lighthouse. With the sun dropping, the pair sat in the sand and shared the same thought: *Wouldn't it be great if we could surf just one more?*

A year earlier, one of Visser's buddies had relayed a dream he had about surfing mammoth waves at night. His friend had even experimented with rudimentary lighting concepts. But Visser and his brother largely considered the whole thing a joke. "We were both laughing, and Kevin said, 'I can't think of anyone who would be crazy enough to do it except you,'" Visser recalls. "I couldn't get the idea out of my head."

At the time, Visser was at a crossroads. After a roller-coaster three-year career competing



MARK LOBO (VISSEER + FRANKLIN); ERIK AEDER (NIGHT RIDE)



in the Association of Surfing Professionals World Qualifying Series, he had decided to quit and focus exclusively on pursuing big waves. "That was the real eye-opener," he says of his first experiences riding the legendary breaks off the coasts of Hawaii and Western Australia. "But there wasn't really a career path in big-wave surfing. Most people just did it for fun."

Visser, a plumber's son who grew up in rural Victoria and on the Queensland coast, had already ditched a promising career in Australian football, another hard-nosed

sport at which he excelled in high school. ("My dad's a big footy fan. I think it broke his heart when I told him I was going to be a surfer," Visser says.) Making a living in the cutthroat world of professional surfing was a major accomplishment, so friends wondered whether he was making the right move in leaving that behind. "I remember being shocked," says Kevin Visser. "He was going to give up this thing that was allowing him to travel the world and surf, and he was going to gamble it on becoming a big-wave surfer?"

CONTINUED ON PAGE 154 »

DOING THE WAVE Above, the night surfing stunt that brought Visser worldwide notoriety; opposite, Visser in training for his latest audacious project

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» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 93

While others doubted the wisdom of his decision, Visser was laser-focused. He remained dogged in his pursuit of a technology durable and flexible enough to make his dream of night surfing a reality. He cold-called lighting engineers and submarine technology experts, and eventually, after destroying six prototypes, found a solution: By embedding LEDs into the base of his board and onto the back of his buoyancy vest, he could shine a curtain of light large enough to illuminate the waves crashing behind him.

Finally, early on a Thursday morning in January 2011, Visser made history, riding more than a dozen 30-to-40-foot waves under pitch-black skies, the neon glow of his surfboard lighting his way. The accomplishment validated Visser's obsession while also providing a blueprint for what was to come. "It was the ultimate test of whether I could get the most out of me," he says. "What else could I do if I really put my mind to it?"

TO ACCOMPLISH these feats, Visser works out like a madman. He may look like a typical surfer at first glance, but with a muscle-bound 180-pound, 5-foot-8 frame, he's much stockier and more solid than most. During my visit, I observe a relatively light workout session with Scott Hipwell, a former Australian special forces commando. Built somewhat like a martini

glass, Hipwell boasts an exclusive client list that includes Olympic athletes and professional rugby players.

For 45 minutes, he punishes Visser from the shoreline of Lake Kawana, a man-made lake used for rowing training. Lying on his lime-green surfboard, Visser glides past two buoys set 15 meters apart, and then explodes through the next two. He's using only arm power, but I have to quicken my pace to keep up as I walk

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along the waterfront. After 20 minutes, Visser's thick arms likely feel as if they're made of concrete, but the intervals continue. "Last time I did that, I was throwing up out of the car," Visser says afterward, as he slugs down a post-workout electrolyte concoction.

"That's the intensity he needs to stay alive," says Hipwell. "If you're stuck in the middle of an impact zone, you're not going to get a breather to hang out on the shoulder. [It's] literally sink or swim."

Visser's training can be as dangerous as the stunts themselves. While free-diving in the Bahamas with Ant Williams, a New Zealander considered among the world's best, Visser had to fend off a group of sharks. During a skydiving drill on that

same trip, he nearly drowned when he got tangled in his line after a water jump. He fractured his tailbone a few weeks after my visit, thanks to another rough parachute landing. And that torn knee ligament? He did it snowboarding on a Utah mountaintop with fellow Aussie Torah Bright, an Olympic gold medalist and two-time world superpipe champion.

Jacqueline Weymes, Visser's fiancée, says she finds his passion for pushing boundaries an inspiration, even if the last-minute missions do put a strain on their relationship. "You can almost absorb his energy," she says. "Living with him without him doing what he loves would be like living with a caged lion."

"What's fascinating to me is you'd think he was the bravest guy on the planet," adds Richard Scotts, the producer of *Nine Lives*. "But he doesn't pretend he's a tough guy. He wears his heart on his sleeve. He's literally terrified. But he somehow overcomes it. It doesn't stop him."

On my way out of town, I visit Visser at the beach on Point Cartwright, where a photo shoot he's politely but unenthusiastically been sitting through

is coming to an end. The surf is picking up, crashing against the rocks. As we trudge over the sand toward his ocean-view

apartment, I ask if this latest project might prove to be a bit too much for even him.

Visser stops, looks out to the ocean where he first learned to surf, and ponders the question. "I've broken it down," he says, "and I honestly think I have a strong chance of achieving everything I've set out to achieve. If anyone doubts it, that's fine. I doubt things too." He loses himself in thought for a second. Then he turns back to me and says matter-of-factly, "Anyway, what's the point of setting a goal that's easy?"

ROD O'CONNOR, a Chicago-based writer, gets a serious adrenaline rush every time he watches Point Break.