

surf

&

stay

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01

Nothing in this book was sponsored and nobody paid for a mention. *Surf & Stay* is 100% independent. The hotels, B&Bs, surf schools, Airbnb homes and restaurants are all here because I loved them, because the folks who run them stole my heart, or because their locations left me speechless. *Surf & Stay* is an ode to old-school journalism.

02

Out of respect for the locals, *Surf & Stay* doesn't divulge the details of any secret surf spots. In the middle of the book, though, there's a tutorial to help you hunt down the right waves (p. 174-175).

03

This is a collection of the most exceptional waves and my personal favourites, so not all surf spots in Spain and Portugal are listed. Use a specialist guidebook such as *Stormrider* if you need a more comprehensive overview.

04

Surf info is as unpredictable as sea foam. Sandbanks sometimes shift, making a spot unsurfable or better suited to a different tide. If my info about a spot becomes inaccurate, you know who to blame: the ocean.

05

For those of you into #vanlife, the coordinates of all the campervan spots are listed at the end of the book. FYI: wild camping is not officially permitted in Spain and Portugal. The authorities sometimes tolerate it, but not always. In exchange for your sea view, make sure you're always respectful of your surroundings and the local residents.

06

Planning a road trip yourself? Your playlist is already sorted: *Surf & Stay* on Spotify is a collection of all the songs in this book and then some. While you read, stick on *Society* by Eddie Vedder.

07

Send me a card. Use the hashtag #2surfstay and let me know where you are. Better yet, put one in the post to Veerle Helsen, Hoveniersstraat 60, 9050 Gent, Belgium. Return mail guaranteed.

08

Surf & Stay combines two burning passions of mine: architecture and surfing. Beauty is an important element of all the accommodation in this book, but that doesn't mean it's all high-end. The view from a free campervan spot on one night is a perfect complement to the design of a boutique hotel on another. Some places are a bit pricey, but it's OK to dream.

09

It's OK to dream, but it isn't enough.
I stalled for five years before taking the plunge.
If you're thinking of hitting the road, just do it.

**Take a walk
on the wet side**



S

Out of office

What made me take off on my own for a six-month campervan trip when I had everything I needed – house, job, relationship, friends – at home? Simple: I was on the treadmill of life and I wanted to get off. To jump into the unknown.

It hit me like a train one day, soon after I'd turned 35. Sitting in motorway traffic on the way to work, I realised there was something missing from my life: I'd stopped trying to live my dreams and challenge myself – I was stuck on autopilot. For more than ten years I'd been working for the most prestigious media outlets in the country, but was my work making me happy? Was the security of a steady job keeping me going or was it holding me back?

It was time for me to get my own project off the ground: a book about surfing, about learning to read the sea, about architecture and interior design, about a campervan. Full of photos to feed your fantasies, and laid out beautifully to draw you in.

Design and surfing in one book, though? Really? What was I thinking? Surfers sleep in bunkbeds or shabby Airbnb rooms, don't they? Well, no, not always. Slowly but surely, more and more places are popping up for a generation of surfers who are tired of that clichéd image. I, too, think there's a different way.

That different way is in your hands, in the pages of this book. It's filled with the adventures that I finally summoned up the courage to go and live. Treat it with care, because it's the product of my blood, sweat and tears. You can fold the corners, draw in it and get it all sandy at the beach, but please don't lose it: this dream needs to be nurtured. For fifteen years, I've excelled at making magazines. The art of making paper pretty – that's my thing. *Surf & Stay* is the best mag I've ever made.

Connor the campervan

Imagine this: you're sitting on a beach in the middle of nowhere, your campervan facing the sea. Portuguese tunes are blaring out as you tuck into freshly barbecued fish and a glass of *vinho verde*. Welcome to dreamland. I inhabited it for six months, travelling the surf coasts of Spain and Portugal to bring you this book.

I wanted to improve my surfing, learn about photography and fly a drone. I spent the whole trip living in Connor the campervan, an old Fiat Riviera that starts to splutter at 55 mph. He's 19 years old but he proved his worth, taking me from Belgium to Sagres, the southernmost tip of Portugal, then on to Northern Spain to where it hits the border with France. He was my home and the ocean was my backyard.

Connor the campervan. A cool name, but it wasn't chosen for the alliteration. He's named after the tragically deceased son of Mieke and Madou, two of my best friends. I call them the Madoutjes. Our hearts were broken when Connor died. I bought the campervan at around the same time, and we made the decision together. That way, he's still around. His name lives on. Connor the adventurer. Connor the surf boy. The more I and others say his name, the more it warms the hearts of the Madoutjes. Their Connor has been on one hell of an adventure.

It takes a while to get to dreamland. Literally, of course: 1,500 miles takes two days in a normal car, three in an old campervan. But spiritually as well. You don't just flip a switch in your head when you get behind the wheel of a campervan. I drove and drove and drove. There isn't a place in the western Algarve that I haven't seen. I explored like a maniac, without a goal or a compass. Watching, driving, hiking,

searching, chatting. Gradually, the Algarve got under my skin. It broke down my wall of bottled-up stress, haste and indecisiveness, brick by brick.

The west coast blew away the panic in my mind. I spent the first night at Praia da Bordeira, sleeping next to an old, mint-green Westfalia. I secretly nicknamed it Minty, and the next morning I observed its Dutch owner from behind the curtains. He made coffee, waxed his board, brushed his teeth. It couldn't have been more trivial, but we were actors on a postcard. There they were, Connor and Minty, at the end of the world, a hundred feet above the sea, surrounded by shifting colours. The rising sun reflected off the rocks, golden one minute and pale pink the next. The Algarve was dressed to impress.

Whenever Google Maps said there was no beach in a region, I searched and searched. There are *always* secret beaches hidden from the world. I never realised how beautiful and how pristine Spain and Portugal could be, but more importantly I never expected to see their wild, rugged side, where time stands still and the views haven't changed in fifty years.

I learned a lot: the best beaches in Spain are not in the sunny south but in the untamed north, and Portugal is infused with a melancholic yearning called *saudade*. Everything runs slowly in both countries. It can be frustrating when you're making appointments, recording interviews or trying to get your campervan repaired, but the secret is patience. The locals are simply cut from a different cloth. They're not in a hurry – and that's something to envy.

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Go your own way

Salt and wonder: two words to sum up my trip. Salt was on my skin every day when I got up and went to bed. I patted Connor's dashboard when he had to climb a steep incline, even though the speedometer had dropped to 10 mph and a line of frustrated drivers were stuck behind me. Well done, Connor! At night, I could hear the raindrops literally five inches above my head. In the morning, I'd open the curtains and there was the sea. According to the letter of the law in Portugal and Spain, you can't just spend the night in a campervan in a public place – but that's what I did every day, just like the rest of the surf community. Sometimes I'd drive to the edge of the cliffs and play my music nice and loud. *Go Your Own Way* by Fleetwood Mac or *Don't Stop Believin'* by Journey. My own private party.

But I also met the loveliest and sweetest of people. Do you know the campervan code? Drivers all wave when they cross paths. Strangers find each other: that's the way it goes, especially when you're travelling by yourself. The American author Kio Stark wrote a book about it: *When Strangers Meet*. It was in the glove compartment of the campervan for six months. She writes about the pleasure of an unexpected chat. When was the last time you spoke to a stranger? And do you really talk to people or do you just text them?

In São Pedro de Moel, Connor got stuck in the sand. One man stopped first, before going to get help and coming back with five friends. But you need a lot more hands on deck for a job like that. Five phone calls and twenty text messages later, the whole village pushed Connor out of the hole. And me? I was crying with gratitude. In the surf lineup, on campervan spots and in seaside bars: ocean people are everywhere. You can't define us by age, nationality or sex, but a strong bond brings us all together.

When I look back at the trip, memories glide by like summer clouds in a blue sky. To mention all the episodes that touched my heart would be impossible, but here's the top sixteen in geographical sequence:

- 01 The magic of a long drive, taking to the road day after day
- 02 Spending the night in a campervan under a perfect sky (Praia da Bordeira, p. 43)
- 03 A haphazard drive through cornfields, ending up on secret cliffs (Praia da Almagreira, p. 119)
- 04 From the sea to José and Joana's barbecue (Mar Dentro, p. 172)
- 05 Fish and potatoes at *senhor* Moreira's – and his wife's chocolate mousse! (Porto, Salta o Muro, p. 172)
- 06 An unexpected knock at the door on my birthday (Praia de Moledo, p. 171)
- 07 Drinking a Sagres at a hidden picnic spot (A Lanzada, p. 197)
- 08 Collecting firewood and making bonfires on the beach (Praia Area Grande, p. 197)
- 09 Surfing with dolphins (Praia as Furnas in Galicia, p. 197)
- 10 Carpool karaoke in Northern Spain – tune your radio to Kiss FM (between Galicia and Cantabria, p. 198)
- 11 Driving from one river to the other over never-ending bridges (River hopping, Southern Galicia, p. 198)
- 12 Unwittingly barging into a Michelin-starred restaurant wearing flip-flops (Pepe Vieira, p. 198)
- 13 Parking Connor on a cliff at the end of the world (Cabo Fisterra, p. 220)
- 14 Wandering about in a Milka advert (Picos de Europa, p. 253)
- 15 Scoring wave after wave in a longboard dream (Playa de Oyambre, p. 275)
- 16 Cracking open a bottle of Basque bubbly on my own, in a vineyard with a sea view (Getaria, p. 298)

Surf stoke

Every beach is different, and there are always so many elements to consider. What's the current like? Are there any hidden rocks? Where? The mental game is as tough as the physical battle with the sea.

My adrenaline was always racing as I paddled in the lineup. There are priority rules: you have to be in the right position to catch the wave. If you miss your chance, you drop down in the ranking and fellow surfers are more likely to steal a wave from you.

Then there's the sad fact that surfing is perceived as a man's world. The more pristine the beach, the fewer women there are in the water. My heart would sink when I saw a bunch of alpha-male surfers in the sea. But surfing is more feminine than you would think: the waves and the fluid lines are the language of the sea. Surfers form a layer of eiderdown on the water's surface – that's the gentleness I wanted to convey in this book.

The photographers I chose all understand that. They look past the length of a board and capture the pure poetry of surfers dancing on the water. No classic cutbacks needed.

I've been surfing for four years and I still don't always get it right. But I improve with each wave. I'm determined to make it. The thrill of getting in my car and checking out different spots to compare their qualities – it's an obsession, an addiction. Surfing is hard work, and progress feels painfully slow. If you're not on the right part of the wave, it rolls under you or crashes over your head. If you paddle too slowly, the sea says you can forget about it. You have to catch the momentum.

But even when nothing seems to work, the sessions still make you happy. The feeling of being in the sea is incomparable, as if that great blue mass is taking control of your mind. Surfing is like daydreaming: your hard disk is wiped clean and your problems disappear. It doesn't matter how badly you just surfed, you always – okay, nearly always – come out of the sea feeling better. It's a buddy that never lets you down.

New Zealander Bridget Reedman has carried out scientific research to explain the *surf stoke* phenomenon. 'Turbulence created by breaking waves changes the structure of water and air, releasing charged ions into the atmosphere,' she wrote for the surf website theinertia.com. 'Contact with the ions has a positive effect on your frame of mind; it triggers endorphins and serotonin, the so-called happy hormones.' Add to that the physical and psychological effects, the adrenaline and the oxygen injection, and you have a chemical cocktail of surf euphoria. Only a surfer knows that feeling, and the science behind it doesn't really matter.

Sea rhythm

I slowly adapted to the rhythm of the sea. I learned to rearrange my thoughts in the evening light and stop attaching so much importance to time – the sea has no idea it's Tuesday morning. Instead of checking for traffic jams each day, I was looking up ocean conditions on the Windy app. More or less wind, onshore or offshore, high tide or low tide. That was all that mattered.

People of my generation often live according to the TINA philosophy: there is no alternative. Work, home, family. They take out a mortgage and work themselves to death, because that's what they're meant to do. An open-minded view of the world is difficult when your path has already been mapped out. But there is another way. There is always another way. It's a lesson I've finally learnt, and I wish I could put it in the drinking water. When I was younger, I thought it was great to have material stuff. Now I've managed to live on a tight budget for months, and I was fine. Better than fine. Who cares if I couldn't shower every day?

I don't know exactly what the future will bring, but as I sit here stirring my coffee I'm dreaming of my next adventure. I'll soon be surfing the world again.

Veerle Helsen
instagram @veerlehelsen





A gigantic winter swell pounds the coast of Sagres, Algarve.

This photo captures the power of Storm Hercules, which raged through the region in 2015.







If I could bottle up the sea breeze
I would take it over to your house
And pour it loose through your garden
So the hinges on your windows would rust and colour
Like the boats pulled up on the sand for the summer
And your sweet clean clothes would go stiff on the line
And there'd be sand in your pockets and nothing
on your mind

Algarve

Sea

you

soon





Praia do Zavial on
fire down on the
south coast of the
Algarve. The west
coast is just as
spectacular, so
the region never
disappoints. There's
always a wave to be
found somewhere.





looking up from
underneath ~~~~~ fractured
moonlight on the sea ~~~~~
and it's peaceful in the
deep ~~~~~ 'cause either way
you cannot breathe ~~~~~
oh, and it's breaking over
me ~~~~~ a thousand miles
out to the sea bed ~~~~~
found the place to rest my
head ~~~~~ and the arms of
the ocean are carrying me
~~~~~ and all this devotion  
was rushing over me

**The name  
Algarve is  
of Arabic  
origin and  
refers to  
'the West'**

**Praia da Bordeira**





**Wouldn't it be nice if we were older?  
Then we wouldn't have to wait so long  
And wouldn't it be nice to live together in the kind of  
world where we belong**

**Praia do Zavial**



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