

★ endless summer

*Seeking year-round swell drenched in sunshine, culture and adventure?
Senegal could be the endless summer destination you're looking for.*

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Under starry skies the boat motored away from the shores of Dakar, leaving the city skyline in its wake and bumping over the swell to an island oasis. I had little idea what lay ahead when I disembarked, barefoot in the black of night, on the sandy hem of N'gor Island. A place immortalised in the 1966 surf flick, *The Endless Summer*, when Robert August and Mike Hynson were the first to surf its long, reeling point breaks, way before surfing had even been heard of in Senegal.

To this day surfing is still in its infancy in this West African destination. Despite waves for every wind and swell direction, incredible scenery



Shopping, Senegalese style.

and a rich culture, surf travellers are only trickling in. And an emerging crew of locals are transferring their ocean skills from their fishing boats to surfboards. Just two hours further by plane than Morocco, this is still the sort of place where you can wake up and have a leisurely coffee, check the waves and still be the first in the uncrowded line-up.

I wasn't looking for an average surfing destination. I had a three-week window and I wanted a surf adventure to somewhere the waves would challenge an intermediate surfer looking to step-up to reef breaks and faster, longer waves than we get at home in Cornwall. Even once I'd hit on Senegal and the hand-holding service provided by N'Gor Island, I still wasn't sure I could hack the level of the rocky breaks littering both the island and the Dakar area. But located on the Cabo Verde Peninsula, and exposed to both southern and northern hemisphere swells, I figured there would be plenty of waves to choose from. And in the meantime I could banter with the beach vendors, savour the seafood and sunsets, and make up for some well-earned hammock time.

As it turned out, only days into the trip, I'd already pushed my wave-riding limits, slipped well and truly into island life and fallen head over heels for Senegal: Rolling out of bed to rooftop yoga and leg-trembling



Hayley making the most of the Senegal waves.



IGOR ISLAND SURF CAMP

Dogs, boats and the colourful beach life of Senegal.



CHEIKH TIDJAN NDIAYE

“The Endless Summer was filmed here in the 60s, but it wasn’t until the late 70s that the first Senegalese surfer trail-blazed his way into the line-up.”

sunrise surf sessions, boat-hopping to and from the mainland, and soaking up the pungent, eye-popping culture. It’s not often you get an island this close to a city that’s so disconnected. There’s no mains power and sandy paths labyrinth past tiled doorways, graffiti-alleys and tiny galleries, to emerge on three beaches and a rocky, wave-lashed rim. It’s just a few minutes from north to south, east to west, on foot. And what with local fishermen landing the ocean’s bounty, a laidback surf camp with expert guides on tap, and the opportunity to fill yourself to the gills with food and waves, it more than fulfilled what I’d been looking for.

Being just a couple of minutes’ boat ride from a wave-lashed peninsula, there was easy access to the waves of the day. The local guides have every spot dialled, making sure you get to the right spot for the conditions – and for your ability. And while the camp and destination isn’t best suited for beginners wanting soft, sandy-bottomed waves, there are a few beach breaks if you don’t want to take on the reefs. And when you do get it wrong and get to know the rocky depths and their spiky friends, the guides are also a dab hand at getting the urchin spines out of your feet.

For the first few days of the trip the famous N’gor Left and Right were big and blown out, but south swell in the forecast meant waves on the Almadies peninsula, at the not-so-secret Secrets and Vivier. Within minutes of my first, badly timed, paddle out, I was washed back to the rocky shoreline with my tail well and truly between my legs. It took a few days to get used to the speed of the take-offs, and the hollower waves, despite the freedom from my usual 5mm of winter neoprene. When Ngor Left and Right cleaned up, my first surfs back on the island were similarly challenging; a long paddle out to tremble in

the channel, waiting to snag an empty shoulder as I cheered on the locals and a few Euros dropping into the overhead-and-some peaks.

Watching the fluid, athletic form of the local surfers, you’d think that the sport was well engrained into Senegalese culture. However, even after *The Endless Summer* was filmed here in the 60s, it wasn’t until the late 70s that the first Senegalese surfer trail-blazed his way into the line-up. A windsurfing instructor whose family lived in Ngor village, Patina Ndiaye was amazed when he witnessed a surfer from Sierra Leone catching waves on a board without a sail. He asked if he could have a go, and was hooked. “I would walk two or three kilometres in my shorts with my board under my arm, and people would think I was crazy,” Patina told me. “I was the only black surfer and no one understood why I would I go surfing if it didn’t make me money. They said I was wasting my time.”

With the nine-times Senegalese surfer Cherif Fall now sponsored by Billabong and chasing the next Olympics, the attitude to surfing is changing. One of the fledgling Senegalese female surf stars, Aita Drop, told me: “Cherif inspired me to surf, he’s my hero. Now my dream is to go to California and be a professional surfer.” But it hasn’t always been an easy ride. With very few girls in the line-up, it has taken time for Aita to be accepted by her male peers. For many Senegalese youths wanting to take up the sport there are still the obstacles of affording surfboards, learning to swim, and bucking the traditional family roles – especially for women. And while sport and fitness underpins the Senegalese culture, much of the funding goes into the national sports of wrestling and football, and it’s usually only the fishing tribes who have the inherent water knowledge and skills to pick up a surfboard.

One organisation striving to change this is Surf Kids Shredding Senegal. Set up by Marta Imarisio, founder of Malika Surf Camp, the foundation is working hard to open up opportunities for Senegalese groms, by rolling out surf training alongside education and work opportunities. Aita could've followed her mum's footsteps selling fish on the beach, but under Marta's mentorship, instead she is improving her surfing, entering competitions, learning languages and helping to cook at the camp. "If you want to be a pro surfer, you still have to be educated and be able to express yourself," explains Marta. "And if you can't read your travel ticket, where are you going to go?" With a growing crew of groms developing their skills in the water and at school, Surf Kids Shredding Senegal is nurturing a brighter future for Senegalese surfers.

Surrounded by the positive and influential style of the local surfers, I soon found my own flow in the waves, overcoming my fears to take on the technical – and shallow – Club Med, and edging my way towards the mighty peak at N'Gor Right. An encounter with the rocky depths earned me a foot of urchin spikes and a huge dent to my ego, but with three weeks of pumping waves (which isn't an unusual run in these parts), there was more than enough time to patch up my confidence, progress my surfing and catch more waves than on any surf trip I've ever been on.

Although the number of Senegalese surfers is steadily on the rise and surf travellers are fast catching wind of its treasures, if you go now, you're not destined to be sharing the line-up with hoards of tourists anytime soon. It's definitely one for the bucket list. Just be prepared to pick a few sea urchin spines out of your feet in paradise.



Beach snacks fresh out the ocean.

The Lowdown

When to Go:

There are waves year-round. Peak season is from October to April, with north swells and dry, sunny weather – the air temperature hovers between 24-28C and water temperature drops to a mild 18-24C – so you'll want a 3/2mm or decent shortie. May to October is south swell season; it's hot, humid and can be rainy, but you'll only need boardies rashie (preferred over a bikini due to the culture). Don't forget reef boots whatever time of year you choose.

Where to Stay:

NGor Island Surf Camp is bang on N'gor Island, offering accommodation, boards and guiding/coaching, with breakfast and dinner included. gosurfsenegal.com

Malika Surf Camp offers surfing and yoga camps based on Yoff Beach, on the northern coast of Dakar. malikasurfcamp.com

If you book independent accommodation you can contact the surf camps about their guiding service, surfboard hire etc.

Getting There:

The cheapest flights from the UK to Dakar are on TAP Air (via Lisbon from the UK), and Iberia or Vueling (via Spain). Taking surfboards is a nightmare on TAP Air – with seasonal restrictions and appalling customer service. However, you can hire surfboards at the surf camps for around 10€ per day and they also offer ding repair and spare fins/ leashes.

Budget

About €100 per day for accommodation, breakfast dinner and surfing. Extra meals range from 1€-20€ depending on whether you choose local food from beach vendors or a fancy restaurant.

Vaccinations

Hep A, Typhoid, Tetanus, Polio, Yellow Fever and Anti-malarials are advised. There is also risk of Giardia and other infections from contaminated water and food sources. Get up-to-date information at travelhealthpro.org.uk.

Support Surf Kids Shredding Senegal at surfkidsshreddingsenegal.com



Hayley negotiating the rocky, urchin infested entry at Club Med break.



Island vibes at Ngor Surf Camp