

The Miracle Break

There is a secret surf spot in Boston. It's about 20 minutes from the State House, without traffic, and nearly impossible to pick out. When the conditions are just right, though, it becomes a kind of urban nirvana. And that makes it a place the regulars will do almost anything to defend...

By Gregory Mone

Look closely and you can spot the hints. A busted-up surfboard nailed to the deck of a two-family home. The occasional car cruising slowly as the driver, dressed in a wetsuit, a board riding shotgun beside him, scans the water.

A kid pedaling his bike with a shortboard under his arm and a towel over his shoulder. There's even a surf shop in the adjacent neighborhood, though its presence has confused several locals, according to co-owner Mark Wysocki. "People come in and ask, 'Why do you sell surfboards?'"

He sells surfboards because nearby lies a section of shore where the sea sometimes does show off its power. Hawaiian-bred surfer Larry Hanson was cycling through the area in 2001 when he noticed the Break for the first time. "I kind of got lost, and I looked out at the water and saw this knee-high, perfect peeler and said, 'Whoa! What is *that?*'"

There aren't supposed to be rideable waves near Boston, not within just 10 miles of downtown, anyway. Of course, the vast majority of the time the surf here is nonexistent, or too sloppy to enjoy. Hanson happened to show up at one of those rare moments when wind, weather, and tide all cooperate and grant local surfers a chance to do their best impressions of Californians. Within these slivers of time, swells generated hundreds or even thousands of miles away complete a complex journey that has brought them across the open ocean, around the Harbor Islands, and over the shoals that generally guard Boston's shores.

The Break itself is well guarded, too, in keeping with the culture of the sport. The Illuminati have nothing on surfers. Wave riders are intensely dedicated keepers of secrets, and when it comes to Poseidon's bounty, a sort of protectionist paranoia takes hold. Even asking questions about this spot provokes an odd curtness among those who know it's here. The owner of a popular surf-forecasting website, which serves as a Weather Channel for waves, tells me that he removed all mention of the location from his site because of harassing e-mails. Not surprisingly, people were furious when Wysocki and his partners opened their shop in 2007, fearing that this would attract hordes. In deference to the surfer's code, I can't report exactly where this strip of water sits. But I will tell you what I discovered when I went looking for it myself.

On my initial visit to the Break, it's not apparent what its regulars are so desperate to protect. It is early spring, a time of year that has delivered good waves in the past. Yet in the predawn the water is flat. The beach and sky are gray, dismal, bleak. A huge stretch of dark clouds sits on the horizon like a distant mountain range. The air is stale, citified. And then, finally, a sign. Not a set of waves, but a single old car. It pulls up hastily, and the driver, a young man in an unzipped hoodie, jumps out and stares at the water. I peer into his hatchback, see a board angled into the passenger seat, and join him in a studious stare at the ocean. He tells me he's new to the area—based on his brogue he could still have an Aer Lingus boarding pass in his pocket—and that he was out a few

days earlier riding perfect, head-high waves with only four other guys. "It was gorgeous," he says.



A small collection of pioneering wave riders has been surfing at the Break for decades. Chick Frodigh, 56, says that when he used to work downtown in the 1980s, he'd go up to the top of his office building and look out the windows toward the Harbor Islands. If he saw waves breaking, he'd jump in his car at lunch, change into his wetsuit while driving, surf for 45 minutes, then head back to the office before he was missed. Steve Crombie, 26, who grew up nearby, recalls riding hurricane-generated swells in the early 1990s, when he was barely tall enough to be allowed on a roller coaster. "There weren't so many guys around then," he says. "There were days with awesome, awesome barrels." Legend has it that another rider paddled out into massive swells during the 1991 nor'easter that Sebastian Junger chronicled in *The Perfect Storm*. The waves that day were enormous enough to deposit sand and rocks nearly a block inland from the beach, which made it a fine day for a surf.

Back then, riders did more than battle big swells. They also had to brave the harbor's infamous pollution. Rich Quist, 28, remembers when the water was brown and roiled with a yellowish head of foam. He once cut his foot on an engine block that had been tossed into the sea. "You'd have to dive under a layer of shit to get out to deeper, cleaner water," adds Wysocki, the surf shop owner.

These days the water quality varies. You can't quite see the heart of Boston from the Break, but the effect of its proximity is obvious. A nearby sewage plant now pumps treated waste into the ocean. Winter floods dose the water with petrochemicals, antifreeze, ice-melting salt. These are very much urban waves crashing before a city beach. Sometimes brownish in color, the water often looks like a pool that hasn't been cleaned in a while. Depending on the day and the direction of the gusts, the air can taste like a sea breeze or the asphalt-tinged winds of the Mass. Pike. In the distance, trucks rumble on highways; jet engines roar overhead.

That nature would intrude here in the form of occasionally beautiful waves is not just an oddity in an otherwise metropolitan landscape. It's also a happy consequence of a geological obstacle course laid out millions of years ago.



The kinds of waves that surfers crave—large, smooth lines rolling toward shore with a sameness that can seem computer-generated—aren't produced near the beach. They're born far out to sea, often in massive storms moving over the ocean. The chances of their wriggling into the harbor to somehow be found by surfers at the Break are incredibly small.

To get large swells you need wind, blowing intensely in a consistent direction over hundreds of miles of water. That's how choppy ripples build into energy-filled waves. Only when a storm is strong and persistent enough can it send clean swells toward a coast thousands of miles away.

Hurricane waves are the most coveted, but those swells don't always reach the Break. Out on the open ocean, several hundred feet typically separate the peak of one sizable wave from the next, according to Bob Hamilton, a coastal engineer with the Woods Hole Group and a veteran surfer. As a rule, he says, the sea floor begins creating drag on waves when the depth of the water is half as great as the distance between their peaks. So as the swells reach the continental shelf—the spot where the sea floor starts rising toward the shoreline—the ocean bottom begins sapping them of their pop. Shallow water is a wave killer, and unlike the coasts of, say, Rhode Island or southern Massachusetts, Boston's is sheltered in a harbor, 50 miles from the open sea.

Prevailing weather patterns don't help the Break much, either. Hurricane swells generally move up from the south, which means that

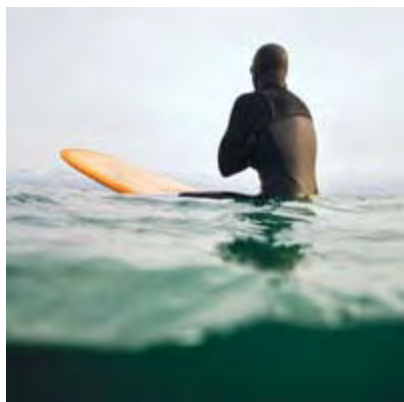
the Cape, extending out from the coast like a giant flexed arm, absorbs the brunt of them, leaving Boston in a kind of wave shadow. Still, some swells can sneak in. Hamilton, who carried out extensive wave-modeling work near the Break in the late 1990s, explains that waves tend to refract, or bend, toward shallow water and away from the depths. And on occasion the Cape's northern tip redirects some waves into the harbor.

From here, the swells have to make it past the Harbor Islands and over a collection of underwater shoals and rock ledges. These glacial leftovers rise from the harbor bottom to steal still more energy from the waves. But Hamilton says that in certain fortuitous cases these undulations can also focus waves the way a lens focuses light, restoring some of the energy previously drained out.

Finally, several hundred yards offshore, the swells that have made it this far meet a last twist of luck in the form of a curious geological feature that directs them toward the Break. "There is a very shallow boulder deposit that sort of focuses wave energy toward that area," says John Ramsey of Applied Coastal Research and Engineering in Mashpee, who also has done extensive research in the area. "That's what gives you the waves there."

Along with hurricanes, the mighty New England nor'easter can deliver swells, too. Since these storms move in from the northeast, the waves they produce don't have to make that turn around the Cape. The trouble with a nor'easter, though, is that it also brings the kind of weather that can ruin waves near the shore, pounding them with heavy winds, reducing them to a choppy mess.

What the particulars of wave mechanics and undersea features add up to is tremendous unpredictability at the Break. "It's so fickle," says Hanson (who, in keeping with the secrecy of the Break, asked that his name be changed). He estimates that the waves are rideable—big enough to stand up and surf on without prompting you to wonder whether you should have stayed home—less than 45 days each year, and legitimately good around 12 times annually. And he's not even talking about whole days. Each of those sessions might last just a few hours before the wind intensifies, the tide changes, and the waves disappear. Because of the factors involved, wind charts and buoy readings that indicate how large the swells are in the middle of Massachusetts Bay aren't much use. "The eyeball is best," says Hanson. Indeed, most of the hard-cores live within a few minutes of the Break, and drive by as often as possible to check the conditions. To find the waves worth riding, that's what I start doing, too.



The first time I paddle out, the air is cold, thick, and damp. As I head into the water, a lone surfer is walking out, red-faced. He's a regular here, and looks the part, brawny and aged. Many of the locals resemble hardened fishermen, not the sinewy, six-packed surf studs you see in movies. Their standards are different from those poster boys', too. The waves today are fairly small, but that doesn't bother this man. "Guys whine, 'Oh, it's too small.' Go to Hawaii then!"

We start talking about the Break, but he cuts our conversation short. The tide is changing, and he wants me to get out there and catch a few before the ocean flattens out. The Break is offering an opportunity, and he doesn't want me to miss it.

The surface of the sea is glass-smooth, the waves 3 feet tall and rolling in steadily. The water is nearly ice-cold, in the low 40s, but I remind myself that this is toasty compared with the heart of winter, when the temperature dips near freezing and the regulars spend hours out here regardless. Wysocki, the surf store owner, is tall, thin, and 34 years old, with longish hair and a goatee. He doesn't look particularly hardy. But he tells me later, not bragging, just matter-of-fact, that throughout the winter it's not uncommon for him to surf for two hours straight. Other guys he knows will stay out twice as long; they'll run back to their cars to pour a Thermos of hot water down their wetsuits, then paddle back out for more. They'll surf in the snow and the rain, and they aren't dissuaded by the fact that the wax on their boards sometimes turns black from the jet fuel exhaust that falls from the sky and collects in a film on the sea's surface. Hanson and a friend once surfed for two hours at night, using the light from street lamps to find their way. If you happen to be there when the Break offers rideable waves, you surf. No matter what.

Given all this, I should consider myself blessed. It's daytime, and the water is harsh but not frigid. A broken strand of kelp floats by; a

pair of seagulls dive for fish. Despite the slightly unnatural color of the water, it almost feels like nature. With the city back over my shoulder, I sit up on my board and face the approaching swells. A wide mound of water rolls in. The section nearest me stands up taller, transforming from a gentle hill into a 4-foot-high wall. I turn, paddle, jump to my feet, and sweep down to the right, sneaking in a turn and a half before the rest of the wave collapses into whitewater. The fog has thickened. Now even the weather-beaten houses are hard to discern.

They aren't perfect swells, offering only small, three-to-five-second-long rides. They don't pack much punch, and the taste of the water has me convinced that I'll ride out of here with an infection. Plus, I'm no hardened local. I'm freaking cold.

But I'm also alone. Two million people are working in tall buildings just a few miles away, and I'm by myself with these waves. Instead of natural beauty, what the Break offers is the potential for peace and solitude, a kind of oneness with the ocean that completely liberates you from time and place.



Even in New England, where one might not expect crowds, decent surf breaks can beckon throngs. The well-known break at Point Judith in Rhode Island, for instance, gets bogged down with as many as 100 surfers on a good day. To avoid packs like this, surfers scour maps for coastal nooks and crannies in search of undiscovered breaks. "All surfers are living in this perpetual state of wanting more," says Matt Warshaw, author of *The Encyclopedia of Surfing*. "If you've got this spot, you'll use intimidation, vandalizing, even violence to keep people out."

Being a peaceful sort, I was at first a little wary about paddling out into Boston's secret surf spot. Yet my introduction to the place wasn't as hostile as I feared. Sure, I was interrogated during an early visit, but a few waves later, the same person who'd angrily asked me how I'd discovered the Break complimented me on my board. Catch a particularly nice wave, and you're likely to earn whoops and hollers from your fellow riders, not the competitive, I-can-do-better stares common at the more popular spots. The regulars take turns and conduct casual, across-the-water conversations. "It's not about going out there and trying to be a pro surfer," Wysocki says.

That solo day I enjoyed isn't a rarity, but at the same time, the crowds have begun to arrive. On some days there might be 30 riders in the water. Even on these overpopulated days, though, the Break can retain that rare friendly vibe.

The dedicated regulars insist that it can offer near-perfect waves, too. Hanson has surfed all over the world, and he says that when conditions are right, the spot is truly special. "When it's good," he says, "it's amazing. There are big, hollow barrels breaking over a foot of water. I've caught waves a hundred yards out and ridden them all the way in to the beach, hopped right off my board onto the rocks, and walked off."

These transcendent sessions happen only a few times a year, at most. I've spent nearly a year stalking the Break and never seen one. In fact, I don't even think it's the legendary days that the regulars are protecting. The Break, with all its complexities and unpredictability, reserves those swells for the small, lucky group that lives close enough to check the ocean daily and has the occupational flexibility to ride waves at 2:30 on a Wednesday, if that's what's required.

Instead, they're guarding the experience of surfing with people who will ride in snow and rain, through shit and sewage, and walk out smiling—people who understand that knee-high waves in the middle of winter can deliver as much joy as clean barrels in the heat of summer.

Then again, maybe the magic of the Break is simpler than that. Maybe it reduces to an instinct that there just shouldn't be a surf break here. As Hanson puts it: "To be able to surf in Massachusetts Bay? That's pretty tops."

Gregory Mone is a contributing editor at *Popular Science*.