

# **Consuming Nirvana: An exploration of surfing tourist space.**

**A Thesis Presented By  
Jess Ponting  
BSc. M.M.**

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of  
Technology, Sydney in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
January 2008**

## **CERTIFICATION**

I Jess Ponting, certify that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for a degree at any other institution and that it is the original work of the candidate except where sources are acknowledged.

Production Note:  
Signature removed prior to publication.

31<sup>st</sup> January 2008

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful to many people who made this inquiry possible. In particular I wish to thank the following.

- The University of Technology Sydney's School of Leisure, Sport and Tourism which provided me with a scholarship that enabled me to research full time.
- Vice-Chancellor Ross Milbourne who took a personal interest in my work and who went out on a limb to allow me to carry out field work in Indonesia in the months following the 2002 Bali Bombing.
- The Mentawai surf tour operators who provided extremely generous in-kind support for this study, in particular Daniel Spirn, Earnest Egan, Christie Carter and Paul King.
- Jossi and Andi from Surf Aid International who were invaluable in locating research participants.
- The 29 participants in this study who generously gave their time and spoke frankly and honestly about their social realities.
- My supervisors Stephen Wearing and Matthew McDonald. Dr Robert Whelan for world class proof reading.
- My wife Sun-Ah Cynn who never bored of discussing the finer points of social constructionism, who indulged my need to consume Nirvana as frequently as possible, who coped with my obsessively long hours of writing and tendency to turn our whole house into my office, and who provided me with love and support throughout.
- My father Ralph for enduring moral support, and finally, my late mother Francis Ponting (1944-1998) who always encouraged my education, supported my desire to travel, and always understood that surfing was more than just a hobby to me. Her legacy has enabled me to combine all three.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CERTIFICATION .....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES .....</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>XII</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 NIRVANA.....	1
1.2 JUSTIFICATION FOR RESEARCH.....	4
1.3 DEVELOPING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY.....	9
1.4 DEFINING TOURISM, DEFINING SURFING TOURISM .....	15
1.4.1 <i>What type of tourism is surfing tourism?</i> .....	16
1.4.2 <i>What is surfing?</i> .....	17
1.4.3 <i>What is a surfer?</i> .....	19
1.4.4 <i>Surf tourism or surfing tourism?</i> .....	23
1.4.5 <i>Recreational, commercial or both?</i> .....	24
1.4.6 <i>A definition of surfing tourism</i> .....	25
1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY AND LIMITATIONS.....	26
1.5.1 <i>Influence of researcher subjectivity</i> .....	26
1.5.2 <i>Australian focus</i> .....	26
1.5.3 <i>Gender issues</i> .....	26
1.5.3 <i>Dynamic, evolving research subject</i> .....	27
1.6 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY .....	28
1.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY AND THESIS OUTLINE.....	30
1.7.1 <i>Thesis outline</i> .....	31
<b>CHAPTER 2. SURFING TOURISM – LITERATURE AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>33</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	33

2.2 CONSTRUCTING A HISTORY OF SURFING TOURISM.....	34
2.2.1 <i>In the beginning</i> .....	37
2.2.2 <i>Destination marketing saves surfing</i> .....	39
2.2.3 <i>From the horse and buggy straight to the Porsche</i> .....	41
2.2.4 <i>Surf media &amp; the search for the perfect wave</i> .....	43
2.2.5 <i>Country soul: resistance through disengagement</i> .....	46
2.2.6 <i>The surf media – constructing Nirvana</i> .....	50
2.2.7 <i>From country soul to ‘pay to play’</i> .....	57
2.2.8 <i>The hegemony of Nirvanic marketing</i> .....	63
2.2.9 <i>A tripartite marketing synergy</i> .....	66
2.2.10 <i>Surfing and surfing tourism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century</i> .....	70
2.3 SUMMARY .....	74
<b>CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>77</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	77
3.2 ESTABLISHING THE APPROACH .....	77
3.3 GROUNDED THEORY .....	81
3.3.1 <i>Social constructionist revision of grounded theory</i> .....	84
3.4 DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION .....	86
3.5 THE CASE STUDY .....	89
3.6 ADDRESSING QUALITY, VALIDITY AND RIGOUR .....	91
3.7 METHODS OF INQUIRY.....	98
3.7.1 <i>Introduction</i> .....	98
3.7.2 <i>Recruitment strategy</i> .....	101
3.7.3 <i>Interview guidelines</i> .....	102
3.7.4 <i>Data recording and transcriptions</i> .....	103
3.7.5 <i>Data analysis</i> .....	103
3.7.6 <i>Ethical procedures</i> .....	105
3.8 THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY.....	105
3.9 SUMMARY .....	107

<b>CHAPTER FOUR – MENTAWAI CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>110</b>
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	110
4.1.1 <i>Mentawai Islands</i> .....	110
4.2 NON-SURFING TOURISM IN THE MENTAWAI ISLANDS .....	115
4.3 THE SCIENCE OF A SURFER’S NIRVANA.....	117
4.3.1 <i>Swell</i> .....	118
4.3.2 <i>Wind</i> .....	119
4.3.3 <i>Swell, wind, tide and reef</i> .....	121
4.4 SURFING TOURISM IN THE MENTAWAI .....	123
4.5 SUMMARY .....	138
<b>CHAPTER 5. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SURFING TOURISM.....</b>	<b>139</b>
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	139
5.2 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF NIRVANA (SURFING TOURIST SPACE).....	143
5.2.1 <i>Socially constructed space</i> .....	143
5.2.2 <i>Poststructuralist theory and tourist space</i> .....	151
5.2.3 <i>Contested tourist places</i> .....	154
5.2.4 <i>Enclavie tourist space as an extension of colonial power</i> .....	157
5.2.5 <i>Tourist space as a disembedded hermeneutic circle</i> .....	160
5.2.6 <i>A grounded theory of tourist space</i> .....	163
5.3 BUILDING THEORY: THE HOW AND WHY OF SURFING TOURIST SPACE .....	164
5.3.1 <i>To dream of Nirvana</i> .....	164
5.3.2 <i>Why dream of Nirvana?</i> .....	166
5.3.3 <i>How has Nirvana come to be the ultimate experience in surfing?</i> .....	172
5.3.4 <i>Coveting Nirvana</i> .....	174
5.4 SUMMARY .....	181
<b>CHAPTER 6. THE SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF NIRVANA.....</b>	<b>186</b>
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	186
6.2 MENTAWAI NIRVANA – LIVING THE PERFECT DREAM .....	188
6.3 THE SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF NIRVANA .....	193

6.3.1 <i>Perfect waves – the Holy Grail of surfing</i> .....	193
6.3.2 <i>Uncrowded – sharing candy</i> .....	198
6.3.3 <i>Cushioned adventure – the floating utopia</i> .....	203
6.3.4 <i>Pristine tropical environment – green, blue and white</i> .....	210
6.4 SUMMARY .....	213
<b>CHAPTER 7. THE NIRVANIFICATION OF THE MENTAWAI ISLANDS .....</b>	<b>216</b>
7.1 INTRODUCTION.....	216
7.2 NIRVANIFICATION .....	217
7.2.1 <i>Phase one: The social construction of Nirvana</i> .....	218
7.2.2 <i>Phase two: Threats</i> .....	225
7.2.3 <i>Phase three: Nirvana's armoury of myth</i> .....	227
7.2.4 <i>Phase four: Alternative discourse</i> .....	235
7.3 SUMMARY .....	242
<b>CHAPTER 8. GROUNDING NIRVANIFICATION.....</b>	<b>244</b>
8.1 INTRODUCTION.....	244
8.2 FIRST SYMBOLIC ELEMENT OF NIRVANA: PERFECT WAVES.....	248
8.2.1 <i>Recapping the symbolic element</i> .....	248
8.2.2 <i>Perfect waves: Threat One, weather</i> .....	249
8.3 SECOND SYMBOLIC ELEMENT OF NIRVANA: UNCROWDED CONDITIONS .....	253
8.3.1 <i>Recapping the symbolic element</i> .....	253
8.3.2 <i>Uncrowded: Threat One, too many boats at breaks</i> .....	255
8.3.3 <i>Uncrowded: Threat Two, local surfers</i> .....	259
8.3.4 <i>Uncrowded: Threat Three, land based accommodation</i> .....	262
8.4 THIRD SYMBOLIC ELEMENT: CUSHIONED ADVENTURE.....	272
8.4.1 <i>Recapping the symbolic element</i> .....	272
8.4.2 <i>Cushioned Adventure: Threat One, too much adventure/experiences of local space</i> .....	273
8.5 FOURTH SYMBOLIC ELEMENT: PRISTINE TROPICAL ENVIRONMENT .....	285
8.5.1 <i>Recapping the symbolic element</i> .....	285
8.5.2 <i>Pristine Tropical Environment: Threat One, impacts from surfing tourism</i> .....	285

8.5.3 <i>Pristine Tropical Environment: Threat Two, local development</i> .....	292
8.6 SUMMARY .....	294
<b>CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION - CONSUMING NIRVANA.....</b>	<b>298</b>
9.1 INTRODUCTION.....	298
9.2 A SUMMARY OF THE STUDY .....	299
9.3 IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH .....	315
9.3.1 <i>Disembedding and mobilisation of Nirvana as a means of deterritorialisation</i> .....	316
9.3.2 <i>Beyond Nirvana</i> .....	324
9.3.3 <i>Moving forward, challenging assumptions</i> .....	326
9.3.4 <i>Re-embedding Nirvana</i> .....	330
9.3.5 <i>Broader applications of Nirvanification</i> .....	333
9.4 FINAL COMMENT.....	334
<b>APPENDIX 1: STATEMENT OF RESEARCHER VALUES AND PRIOR ENGAGEMENT WITH SUBJECT MATTER.....</b>	<b>336</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2: LETTER OF CONSENT.....</b>	<b>340</b>
<b>REFERENCES:.....</b>	<b>341</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 2.2 DESTINATIONS COVERED BY SPECIALISED SURFING TOURISM GUIDEBOOKS.....	73
TABLE 3.1 UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO INQUIRY .....	88
TABLE 3.2 PARTICIPANTS BY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS .....	100
TABLE 4.1 SURF BREAKS OF THE MENTAWAI ISLANDS .....	122
TABLE 4.2. LIVE-ABOARD MENTAWAI SURF CHARTER OPERATORS IN 2000 .....	128
TABLE 4.3 LAND-BASED SURFING TOURIST ACCOMMODATION: MENTAWAIS 2000 .....	128
TABLE 4.3 LIVE-ABOARD MENTAWAI SURF CHARTER OPERATORS IN 2008 .....	134
TABLE 4.4 LAND-BASED SURFING TOURIST ACCOMMODATION: MENTAWAIS 2008 .....	135
TABLE 5.1 PROGRESSION IN THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF PLACE .....	149
TABLE 5.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF ENCLAVIC AND HETEROGENEOUS TOURIST SPACES.....	156
TABLE 8.1 CONCEPTUAL OUTLINE OF CHAPTER EIGHT STRUCTURE .....	247
TABLE 8.2 KEY TO THREATS, MYTH/RESPONSE AND ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE ASSOCIATED WITH PERFECT WAVES. ....	248
TABLE 8.3 KEY TO THREATS, MYTH/RESPONSE AND ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE ASSOCIATED WITH UNCROWDED CONDITIONS. ....	254
TABLE 8.3.1 KEY TO UNCROWDED: THREAT ONE, TOO MANY BOATS .....	255
TABLE 8.3.2 KEY TO UNCROWDED: THREAT TWO, LOCAL SURFERS.....	259
TABLE 8.3.3 KEY TO UNCROWDED: THREAT THREE, LAND-BASED ACCOMMODATION.....	262
TABLE 8.4 KEY TO THREATS, MYTH/RESPONSE AND ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE ASSOCIATED WITH CUSHIONED ADVENTURE. ....	273
TABLE 8.4.1 KEY TO CUSHIONED ADVENTURE: THREAT ONE, TOO MUCH ADVENTURE .....	273
TABLE 8.5 KEY TO THREATS, MYTH/RESPONSE AND ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE ASSOCIATED WITH PRISTINE TROPICAL ENVIRONMENT.....	285
TABLE 8.5.1 KEY TO PRISTINE TROPICAL ENVIRONMENT: THREAT ONE, IMPACTS FROM TOURISM ...	285
TABLE 8.5.2 KEY TO PRISTINE TROPICAL ENVIRONMENT: THREAT TWO, LOCAL DEVELOPMENT.....	292

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 2.1 RIP CURL ADVERTISEMENT, SEPTEMBER 2004 .....	67
FIGURE 2.2 CLASSIC NIRVANIC MARKETING IMAGERY: PERFECT EMPTY SURF BREAK, NO IDENTIFYING PLACE MARKERS, SURFERS PORTRAYED AS EXPLORERS.....	68
FIGURE 2.3 QUIKSILVER CHARTERED <i>INDIES TRADER IV</i> FOR THE FILMING OF PROMOTIONAL FILM <i>YOUNG GUNS II</i> IN THE MENTAWAIS.....	72
FIGURE 4.1 LOCATION OF THE MENTAWAI ARCHIPELAGO.....	111
FIGURE 4.2 REGULATION 16. MAIN ISSUES FOR SURFING TOURISM OPERATIONS .....	130
FIGURE 5.1 SURFERS VIDEO THE ACTION ONBOARD A SURF CHARTER BOAT .....	169
FIGURE 5.2 A SURFER PERFORMING A HANDS BEHIND BACK TUDERIDE AT HTS/LANCE'S RIGHT .....	170
FIGURE 6.1 THE SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF NIRVANA, CONSTRUCTED AND MAINTAINED BY NIRVANIC DISCOURSE .....	188
FIGURE 6.2 AN UNCROWDED LINE UP OF PERFECT WAVES AT 'THUNDERS' .....	198
FIGURE 6.3. MENTAWAI SURF CHARTER YACHT <i>FREEDOM</i> .....	204
FIGURE 6.4 GREEN, BLUE AND WHITE. THE 'PLAYGROUNDS' AREA,.....	210
FIGURE 7.1 THE SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF NIRVANA, CONSTRUCTED AND MAINTAINED BY NIRVANIC DISCOURSE .....	219
FIGURE 7.2 SECOND PHASE OF THE NIRVANIFICATION PROCESS: THREATS TO NIRVANA AND ITS SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS .....	226
FIGURE 7.3 NIRVANIC DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTS AND MAINTAINS SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS OF NIRVANA AND ARMOURS THEM AGAINST THREATS WITH NIRVANIC MYTH .....	234
FIGURE 7.4 THE NIRVANIFICATION PROCESS.....	239
FIGURE 8.1 MODEL OF NIRVANIFICATION PROCESS .....	245
FIGURE 8.2 FIVE BOATS AT ANCHOR AT LANCE'S RIGHT, KATIET .....	255
FIGURE 8.3 MENTAWAI BOY FROM KATIET VILLAGE WITH A BROKEN SURFBOARD WITH MAKESHIFT LEG ROPE AND FIN CEMENTED INTO THE HULL.....	261
FIGURE 8.4 DESPITE NIRVANIC MYTH TO THE CONTRARY WAVE PARK MENTAWAI HAS BEEN IN OPERATION SINCE 1998 .....	269
FIGURE 8.5 A SURFING TOURIST FILMS A UKULELE PLAYING LOCAL AT KATIET .....	275

FIGURE 8.6 A SURF GUIDE MEDIATES INTERACTIONS BETWEEN HANDICRAFT SELLERS ATTEMPTING TO ENTER THE SURFING TOURISM ECONOMY AND SURFING TOURISTS UNDER HIS CARE AT KATIET	277
FIGURE 9.1 MODEL OF THE NIRVANIFICATION PROCESS.....	313

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore the social construction of surfing tourist space in the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia and to expand existing theory to explain the process by which tourist space comes to be overlaid upon the geographical and social domain of destination communities. A review of surfing tourism literature revealed a modest body of knowledge that was largely descriptive, and devoid of any clear theoretical and philosophical perspectives. In order to gain an understanding of the historicity in the production of surfing tourist space, a review of academic and popular surfing literature was undertaken. This review indicated the importance of commercial surf industry discourse, disseminated through a specialist surf media, in defining and maintaining an idealised surfing tourist space (labelled ‘Nirvana’), which is based on the search for, and consumption of, the ‘perfect wave’. A social constructionist interpretation of grounded theory was employed in order to collect and analyse observations and in-depth interviews of surfing tourists, surf tour operators, surf industry and media representatives, and locals, from which a number of interpretations were drawn. Firstly, surfing tourist space – Nirvana - is a fragile and contested space based upon four symbolic elements: perfect waves; uncrowded conditions; cushioned adventure; and, a pristine tropical environment. A four-phase process (referred to as Nirvanification) was developed in order to interpret the way in which tourist space is overlaid upon the social and geographical domain of destinations. It is argued that this space is remotely constructed, highly symbolic, and ‘disembedded’ from local realities in the Mentawai Islands. Nirvanification revolves around the construction of symbolic elements of tourist space where it is threatened by alternative discourses, which the industry counters by deploying various myths. The ramification of Nirvanification for

local communities in the Mentawai is marginalisation from the economic benefits from tourism. In conclusion this study identified channels for resistance and change which provide an alternative theoretical and philosophical position from which to question the assumptions that underlie socially constructed tourist space.