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SURF
REPORT

SURFING RAYONG

Wave Magnet of the Eastern Gulf

Photos & story by S. A. Martin

When I first entertained the thought of looking for waves in the Eastern Gulf of Thailand, I found a few hazy-gray photos on the internet and heard tales of wind-blown chest-height waves from several friends at surfboard manufacturing giant Cobra in Chonburi. Then I met Greg Hodge, the pioneer of surfing in Rayong. Greg suggested I come check it out, go for a surf, and see for myself.

Located just a few hours from Bangkok, the 12 kilometer-long Mae Ramphueng Beach at Rayong is the surfer's escape from the big city — a chance to get in the water without having to drive across Thailand to Phuket or get on an airplane to Bali. Surfing the area has been an occasional past-time for any number of years by for cash-rich, time-poor executives from Cobra and for a various local expats from the Bangkok area.

Going back some five years, Australian Greg Hodge, working and living in Pattaya, began to look for waves in the area and soon realized that Rayong was the wave magnet of the Eastern Gulf, the area picking up almost as much swell during the blustery Southwest Monsoon season as Phuket! Westerly tracking storms move quickly across the Gulf, pushing up

wave heights and altering the Gulf's unusual diurnal (one high tide per day) tidal pattern into a semidiurnal (two high tides per day) cycle. Although the swell period is generally shorter than that of the Andaman Coast, surfable waves appear in the Rayong area and can actually get rather good at times.

Hodge notes that in the past very little was known about Rayong, mainly because no one had put the time in to study it. Several years ago, he decided to pack up and move to a house on the beach, start a small surf business, and monitor and study the conditions full time. Giving credit where credit is due, Hodge has mastered the area, documenting daily wave heights and directions, calculating swell angles, and identifying wind and wave patterns. Using a home-made compass drawn on the cement rail of the front porch, he has learned any number of peculiarities of the region. Inimitably, Mae Ramphueng Beach at Rayong faces more west than south, so it picks up a lot of swell activity in the Gulf, and, according to Hodge, even somewhat northerly swells!?!? This is due to the unique shape of the beach and the long headland at the southwest corner of the beach which trap northerly wind swell sweeping down the coast from Bangkok! Go figure!



Greg Hodge & Burger



The Surfers' Compass

Today, Hodge lives at Mae Ramphueng Beach where he promotes his surfing business and the area as a tourism destination. He also aims to create a safe environment.

This year in particular has been one of the best in recorded history with fast-tracking storms alight from the west pushing wave heights up and over those in Phuket on the very same days!

The Rayong area also picks up a bit of south swell in the off-season (November to April) with smaller surf and very clean conditions, including off-shore winds. Also, water quality is much better due to the lack of rain and onshore wind depositing marine debris on the beach.

In terms of locals and tourists surfing in Rayong, Hodge said that to his knowledge there were no Thai surfers in the area, although had given a lessons and a surfboard to a 21-year-old sure-footed Thai fisherman who picked the sport up quickly but later became too busy and doesn't surf anymore. Nonetheless, there is a new tourism market emerging around Hodge's Rayong Surf School with a variety of foreign tourists who come to take lessons or rent boards. The latest twist is a surge in Russian surf tourists!



Greg Hodge at feeling at home



Bert Burger in style



The wild and windy Gulf of Thailand at Mae Ramphueng Beach, Rayong

With a dash of good attitude, Rayong can have surprisingly fun surf during the Southwest Monsoon season.

*Degenerated sand bags*

Ocean Safety

Like Phuket, beach safety is slowly gaining awareness among local residents at Mae Ramphueng Beach. Unfortunately, this is due in part to recent surf-related drownings in the area. Recently, Hodge has taken steps to form a volunteer lifeguard club and to discuss the issue with local authorities.

Environmental Issues

Like so many places we live and love to surf, Rayong is not without environmental issues, and these include water pollution from any number of sources, especially during the rainy season. Particularly, Hodge mentions that approximately three times a year diesel oil tar from ships (likely from ships emptying their bilges) appear as gooey black balls which stick to your skin, hair, or surfboard. Similar to Phuket, marine debris is an all too common site on the beach. Interviews with local fishermen point to Ko Samet as a major source of the beach trash given problems of waste disposal on the nearby island. Furthermore, local and regional currents (including currents from China) carry marine debris from Vietnam & Cambodia. While plastics of all sorts are most obvious, particular hazards are light bulbs discarded by squid fishers (strings of lights are used to draw squid close to waiting nets). As the bulbs float well, they travel considerable distances and wash up on local beaches. These glass bulbs are especially dangerous when stepped on after your surf session! Ouch!

*Marine Debris*

Of other concerns are incessant coastal erosion and related issues. In an attempt to address the erosion problem, local authorities sandbagged the beach, whereby beach sand is placed in rice sacks and buried side-by-side along the entire beach. Although this has helped erosion to some degree, the bags degenerate after a few seasons to become yet another source of marine debris.

