



LA Voyage

Described as Europe's answer to Laird Hamilton, Ludovic Dulou certainly fits the profile - he's an accomplished and highly focused waterman who is as comfortable on an outrigger canoe as he is on a foil. He holds a deep interest in both ocean and island culture. He aspires to draw his own lines, and not those of convention. Ludo, however, has his own story, and it's one of both big highs, and big lows. It's a story we wanted to hear..

PHOTOS GREGORY RABEJAC



Hey Ludo. You've been a professional lifeguard and waterman for many years. How were you first introduced to the ocean, and where did that passion come from?

From very early on, at the age of 11, I was marked out as having good swimming capabilities at the local pool, but that was really a summer thing and it didn't continue. But as a teenager, I developed a passion for spearfishing, and I had some very rich and memorable experiences when I was totally immersed underwater. After that I became a lifeguard and got plenty of experience in the ocean from that. Our coasts in Aquitaine in southwest France can be very dangerous and you need the skills to deal with them when working as a lifeguard there.

I then traveled to French Polynesia and learned a lot about the Polynesian culture and that's when I first started surfing, at 25-years-old. Then when I was back in France, I decided to settle on the Basque coast, to experience a stronger relationship with the ocean and with outdoor sports generally. I am a super active person, and my love of the ocean has helped me to calm down and feel good about myself. That contact and connection with the water and the ocean is vital for me, otherwise I can become a pretty gnarly person!

I believe you were there at the start of the foiling revolution. Is this correct? When did you first notice it, and how did you first get into it?

It's been over 15 years since I first started thinking that one day I might glide on the tidal bore of the Entre-Deux-Mers in Aquitaine, close to where I was born, thanks to the pioneering surf foil actions of Laird Hamilton. It

was a dream that I carried with me for a long time. There was also the dream of using foiling to help me ride downwinders. I have done a lot of paddleboarding and outrigger canoeing in the open ocean, and I could see the clear benefits that foiling could bring to it. I made those connections in my mind long before the modern surf foil revolution that we see today.

In 2013 I was invited to Kauai by the Kinimaka family. I approached people in the tow-in foil scene but quickly realized that I needed boots, jet skis, a full-time pilot, flotation vests and lots of gear that I just couldn't organize at the time. However, in 2014, thanks to my waterman/windsurfer friend Bruno André and a company called AHD Foil, I obtained the very first SUP foil in a version we might recognise today, with a carbon wing, with no boots and no foot straps. It was a very flat, thin and very technical foil wing with a surface area around 1000 cm² with a mast of 80cm that Bruno had developed with his team. The board was a Sea Lion 7'6. It worked but it was not easy. Bruno André definitely did not get the recognition he deserved at the time!

Then soon after, Kai Lenny along with Alex Aguera from GoFoil made us all realize that we could go even further. I began surf foiling in 2016, and once I'd completed the Molokai 2 Oahu in August 2017, I really improved quickly, thanks to my lifeguard friend, Victor Marça. We were foiling on the North Shore of Oahu in the small swells of the summer season. I started to try pumping and Terry Chung got me my first 100% surf foil board. The rest is history...

Has it surprised you how fast the sport has developed since then?

No, because the sensations are just so ex-



traordinary. Many manufacturers in the kite-surfing industry who were ahead of the curve had already started looking at SUP, surf and E-foils. The first practitioners of kite foiling had already paved the way. The foils were robust and efficient but not developed specifically for all the new disciplines. But everything moved very quickly thereafter.

Your story is one of both personal successes and personal tragedy (Ludo lost his partner Karen to cancer when he was 33). Has your passion for the ocean and for foiling helped you through the harder times?

Today I take it upon myself to show my fragilities openly, and that is an integral part of my sporting career now. I admit that I had a rage in me early on and nowhere to channel it. I had no real experience of surf culture, of paddling in the middle of the ocean... Apart from my brother, Maxence, who started surfing before me, no-one in my family had ever surfed. We come from the countryside, and I had to learn it little by little from my close friends. Today I wear my heart on my sleeve. I just love what I do, and I am passionate about ocean sports. I like to receive advice from people who are better at it than I am, and I also love to translate what I have experienced to others. And I am proud to have accomplished a different journey in the "surfing world". Yes the sport has helped me. I've been able to channel this rage that was deep inside me. But I don't think that I am a special case, and I think many of us purge our sorrows and our sadness with physical exercise. In my case, it just happened to be endurance waterman sports.

You've traveled and competed worldwide, but you live and train in the Basque region of France. Does this area have everything you need to be a world-class waterman?

I don't know if I'm a world class waterman. In fact, I don't really know what that means.

What I can say though is that in France, on both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, in Aquitaine, and in the wider Basque country, we have oceanic playgrounds which allow us to gain very good experience in all manner of sports. You just have to look at all the pro French surfers, sailors, freedivers, windsurfers, kitesurfers, wingfoilers, swimmers and life-guards. So it's true, we are very lucky!

We understand that wine forms a big part of your life too. In fact, are we correct in thinking that wine first led you to this amazing river bore that we see in these photos? Where is that?

In a sense, that's correct. We used to live near the La Garonne river, in the village of Caudrot, and my uncle taught me traditional river fishing and hunting on the river and streams nearby, although the bore wasn't active here. But later on, as a wine maker, I got closer to certain places where the bore worked really well, places surrounded by beautiful vineyards. L'Entre-Deux-Mers, the region where we have those waves come up the river, means "between two oceans". 100 miles away from the coast, the ocean tides feed the bore into the rivers. It's crazy.

What gear are you riding in these shots?

I'm riding the Lift 34 liter, 4'6 Carbon board and the 120 High Aspect foil with the 32 mast. I change the back wing between the 320 and the 250.

You've completed some pretty hardcore challenges. Tell us about your foil crossing between the Canary Islands?

The truth is, I'm looking for my own ways to experience things in life. I told myself that the Molokai to Oahu is elitist, it's a lot of sacrifice, and maybe it's not there that I could express my potential, particularly being from France





and not living there. At the age of 48, finding myself competing with guys 20/25 years younger than me... and wanting to prove what exactly? Those guys are hypercompetitive, which I understand and I totally respect, but I understood that this was not what drove me deep inside.

So I thought to myself that I was going to create a real challenge of my own. The crossing from Tenerife to the island of La Gomera is approximately 40km, and it was a challenge outside of convention, a kind of freedom of expression, expressed by riding a hydrofoil in the middle of an ocean channel. A crossing without competitive rankings, without time constraints, without comparison, and really in agreement with myself. It's symbolic too... the Canaries are our Hawaii, right here in Europe.

So the 'uniqueness' appealed to you?

Yes, I wanted to find myself in the unknown, on a course that I had not plotted before. So that was a real challenge because I was absolutely not sure if I would get there by myself. I trained for two to three weeks on the south coast of the island, and when there was a window, we decided to go for it. I had a support boat with a cameraman and photographer aboard, two people I trusted. In the end, I must have taken over three hours, with a six-foot Atlantic groundswell underneath and around me, heavy currents and a 20/25 knot wind. It was fun! I finished the crossing lying on my board because the wind dropped, the current was against me, and I just couldn't take off again.

It was an extraordinary adventure, with marine mammals that appeared under my hydrofoil in

the middle of the channel, and an 8-foot hammerhead shark that followed me for part of the crossing, although I wasn't aware of this and the guys only told me this at the end! I am grateful to the ocean for this experience and I have to say thank you to everyone who supported me on this adventure. I'm going to release a short edit video of this crossing in the spring.

Have you had any other scary moments out in the water?

Yes, for sure. But like Nietzsche said, "anything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger", right?

Obviously no-one has had it easy these past two years, but how has the coronavirus affected your lifestyle?

I admit that I have suffered from a level of anxiousness and fear since March 2020, but I try to turn my anger and incomprehension into a spiritual energy. I tried to turn it into a positive rather than a negative situation. It has shown me my personal weak points, which I've tried to improve upon. So, in a way it's been an opportunity for me, but it's certainly not always been easy.

Is there anywhere you haven't yet foiled but is top of your list? And what's the next big challenge?

Ah yes, just like sailors on their ships, I want to experience groundswells and strong winds in the middle of the ocean! There are so many places I would love to go foiling. The next big challenges? That's likely to be somewhere in Polynesia and also somewhere in France....

