

riding the SUBWAY

THE PLIGHT OF THE SUBWAY SURFER

Article by Robert Cummings / Photo by Bradford Walker Evans Hitz

Shortly before six in the morning, surfboard tucked securely under his arm, Raymond Kowalski enters the nearly deserted subway station by his East Village apartment. Under the queasy glare of the fluorescent lights, he steps around the handful of bums asleep on benches, and buys a newspaper, cup of coffee and a bagel.

Then, deftly juggling his purchases, the nearly six-foot-tall actor/model scrambles aboard the A train and makes his way toward the last car. He leans the board against the corner, stays within arm's length of it, takes his seat and starts reading the news.

As he turns the pages, the train rockets on. It passes under the streets of Brownsville and do-or-die Bed Stuy in Brooklyn, and finally surfaces some eight miles from the Rock, near the aptly named Ozone Park, Queens.

No matter how many times he makes the journey, this transition from the tunnel's utter darkness into the

light startles him. He blinks and looks out from the elevated track at the row houses that spread out in every direction. New York's version of the heartland, he thinks.

Eventually the tiny houses give way to reeds lining Jamaica Bay. The train rolls to a stop. It is now time for Kowalski to change trains.

Sometimes he shares the platform with another of the small but dedicated cadre of subway surfers; Manhattanites who are hooked on the waves. Other days, like today, he has the train to Rockaway to himself.

Several hours after leaving the Village, Kowalski gets off the subway at 90th Street/Holland Beach. He walks a few blocks past old Irish bars and a shopping center; past highrise apartments and handball courts, to the boardwalk.

He has been doing this long enough now to know that surfing Rockaway—like anywhere in the Northeast—is largely an exercise in faith. The waves are almost always terrible; the water, dirty and cold. During the summer, the Atlantic tends to be as calm as a lake.

Still, it's all he's got. So, like the other true believers, he puts up with the vagaries of weather and locale, listens intently to the marine forecasts and, most of all, makes do. Even this surf is better than no surf.

And then there are the days like today, where even a New York surfer gets lucky. Several days before, Hurricane Gabrielle swept up the coast. It is now stalled somewhere off Nova Scotia, and is pushing fat, consistent swells down the North Atlantic beaches.

Kowalski quickly moves past the young Puerto Rican couple sharing a soda; the aging hippie mesmerized by the flight patterns of the jets landing at Kennedy; the two girls in bikinis, listening to "Ticket to Ride" on an oldies station, giggling at some private joke; and the Russian pensioners staring at the eight-foot waves.

Within minutes of leaving the subway, he's joined about 15 other neoprene-clad surfers already bobbing up and down in the swell. There is little of the tribalism marking the West Coast surfing scene, and more conviviality. He smiles and gets his first wave.

It's small, but steep. He pulls a quick bottom turn and runs with the left-breaking wave. He milks it, riding it almost until it collapses. Two rides later, he catches a big, hollow curl. On the drop, he buries a rail and falls. His board, attached by a legrope, follows.

When he gets out of the water he's limping, and has a purplish-red line on his leg where the board's skeg raked across his thigh. Although it's the best surf of the season, he sits the next one out.

By now the sun is high overhead, and the beach speckled with sun worshippers and surf poseurs. They are mostly kids with neon wet-suits, dingless \$300 boards and stylized haircuts.



Kowalski, who is 36, and the other regulars call them Team Manhattan, and are more relieved than peeved by their tendency to spend the day preening on the beach rather than in the water.

Kowalski, who was born in North Carolina and learned to surf on the Outer Banks when he was 11, pulls the brim of his Cub Scout hat low and turns to the jetty. Overhead, a single engine plane tows a flag, reminding bathers that the AIDS crisis is not over.

Like most of the other hardcore surfers, he doesn't give the banner a second thought. Sure, they had a "little" needle scare last year, but it didn't stop anyone from surfing. "I just didn't swallow any water," he grins.

Drew Dwyer, another regular, sits nearby watching the waves, smoking a cigarette. He waves, crushes the butt and comes over. Thin, tall and blond enough to pass for a Californian, he is actually from New England. He works as a lighting rigger in Manhattan, and comes to the beach whenever he can. Dwyer's board is out of commission, so Kowalski loans him his.

While Dwyer is in the water, another regular, Frank Cullen, strikes up a conversation. Cullen, who's in his 30s, has a thick mat of chest hair and carries a beat-up board under his arm. He is atypical. He's a native of these parts, but he had to go to Texas to become a surfer.

"I met this guy on South Padre Island who told me he would sell me a surfboard for 10 bucks. I didn't want the board, but I thought what the hell, it's only 10 bucks," he explains. He hauled it back to Brooklyn, where his neighbors now think he's crazy. "They keep telling me there's no surf in New York."

"My friends back in North Carolina say the same thing," says Kowalski. "I tell them it's wild, sitting on my board while the damn Concorde flies over. I mean, it's real urban surfing." Somehow, they remain unimpressed.

The talk soon turns to autumn and the hurricane season—the best three months of the year in every New York surfer's almanac—and then, more painfully, to winter. During these months, surfing in the Northeast gets painful.

"It's like an ice-cream headache," says one of the surfers. "You know...the feeling you get when you eat too much ice cream too fast."

Amid groans of recognition, two young men walk over and ask in broken English if they can look at the surf magazine sticking out of Ray's bag. As they pour over it, he asks where they're from.

"Buenos Aires," one replies.

"You surf down there?" Kowalski asks.

Someone shakes his head and laughs. "Surf? There's no surf in Buenos Aires." X

