



SCHOOL OF SURF: LESSONS FROM SCARS

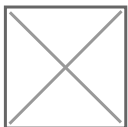
Description

The Pondy Marina is a beach filled with possibilities. Despite being located in the touristy Pondicherry, very few locals and travellers turn up for a fun time at this beach. One surfer-turned-instructor wants to change this.

Bosco has lived in Pondicherry all his life. This 33-year-old surfer has gone through numerous jobs before opening his surf school, Ecole de Surf. He wants to make surfing a tourist attraction which will make tourists flock to Pondicherry beaches, especially Pondy Marina. There are surfing hotspots around Pondicherry, such as Serenity Beach which has been actually developed by Tami Nadu. Pondicherry's surfing scene has not developed to that level.

It is slowly growing and within 10 years it will be a wholly different scenario. We surfers are developing tourism here.

Bosco



Bosco founded his own surfing school at 33. He wants to change the way people look at Pondicherry beaches.

Work smart not hard

Bosco is committed to making the surf school a place where everyone can experience surfing to the fullest. He charges around ₹1200 per session and beginners normally require 8-10 such sessions to learn how to catch a wave and balance their bodies on the board properly. His prices are also quite

affordable in comparison to the more famous places around, which charge as much as ₹3200 per session.

Even with this stark difference in prices, he has managed to earn ₹60,000 since he started his surf school in January. He calls this work *smart work*, a contrast to the hard work he had done previously.

Four years ago, when Bosco started learning how to surf, he visited a friend in Goa. Surf schools there have survived due to the hard work of surfers who succeeded in making it a surf spot. However, everything there was expensive, especially for the tourists who travelled on a budget with the desire to explore. So Bosco wishes to create a different surfing culture in Pondicherry.

For him, the *budget travellers* are just as important. People can ask him to give lessons at only ₹1000 and save themselves 200 bucks. He says, *Those few hundred will not do much to me but it will help the budget travellers a lot. It will be the same lessons, but the lower price will allow everyone to at least try it once.*



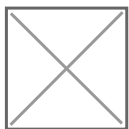
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Shelley, another surfing instructor, watches the waves as he takes a brief pause to replenish his energy with some bananas and cool water. Shelley runs his own surf school and is a good friend of Bosco.

Surfing and India: A date for the Paris Olympics

India will be sending a surfing team to the Olympics for the first time in the Paris Olympics in 2024. This news brings great excitement to Bosco, for whom the surfers are friends. With only 300 professional surfers in India, the surfing community is a very closely-knit one. Out of these 300, only 5 hail from Pondicherry.

One of Bosco's close friends, who goes by the nickname Coffee, was the one who pushed him into surfing. Coffee, a professional surfer, gives surf classes at Goa and incidentally, was the one who also gave Bosco the idea of starting a surf school.



With a damaged surfboard and YouTube videos of professional surfers as his guide, Bosco learnt to surf by himself in 8 months.

Learning from scars, and YouTube

Bosco calls the YouTube platform the best teacher he has had. This comment comes as he recounts his days in high school, where the teachers would cane Bosco and his classmates for failing to write essays or do their homework. The students, regardless of their gender, would be pushed against the board and made to turn so they couldn't resist when they were hit.

No one could handle the excruciating pain daily. When the students tried to deal with the punishment by wearing more layers under their uniform, they would be asked to strip the extra layers before getting caned. The welts made by the canes would scar Bosco's back forever.

The only thing Bosco remembers having learnt at school was to read.

Bosco's college experience was no better. He had chosen Pure Science despite not scoring as well in his matric exams. According to him, he now learns more about science through the internet and videos on topics such as space, the big bang, and the universe. Surfing also continues to teach him physics.

At 18, Bosco lost his house due to a familial conflict. This incident made him grow up beyond his years and forced him to discontinue college. "Before that age, I thought life was very easy. It was all about playing and chilling with friends."

After that, he had to take up work as a daily wage worker, first as a plumber and then as a steel worker in construction. These were days of laborious work with a hammer and chisel, where he would work for 8 long hours to earn ₹10,000 a month. At 19, he also worked for a pathology lab, linking them up with various doctors, who for a commission fee, would send them patients for blood and HIV/AIDS testing.

All this while, Bosco admits that his communication skills had not improved since he had left school. A few years later, he started working in a guest house. There he started communicating with the tourists in English. Even though he made mistakes initially, the tourists were rarely from English-speaking countries and so didn't judge him.

His boss at the guest house was also a surfer; in 2019, Bosco asked his boss if he could give him the surfboard he wanted to throw away. His boss agreed to give him the damaged board. With this board, Bosco learnt how to surf. Watching his progress had also made his boss very excited, who offered him a new surfboard. Around the 6-month mark, Bosco switched to a short board. Within 8 months, he was surfing as well as the professionals.

Brother, in your memory

Bosco's relationship with his family is shaky. His mother used to be a helping staff at the Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Pondicherry, while his father got drunk and contributed nothing to the household. His grievance with his father runs deeper than that? Bosco blames his father for the death of his brother.

Economic stability is a crisis that Bosco's family had been dealing with for a while. His brother had been having problems with his wife who was also 8 months pregnant. One night, Bosco's brother called his mother and asked her why their uncle (the twin brother of Bosco's father) and their

(paternal) grandfather had committed suicide. He also begged his mother to get his body before it started smelling of decay. This was a cry for help as plain as anything, but his father dismissed it as something that was being blurted out in drunkenness even as his mother begged him to take her to her son.

In the morning, Bosco received a phone call from his crying father, informing him of the suicide. He told Bosco that he had lost his brother.

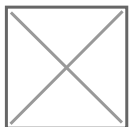
Bosco also blames himself for the incident. At the time, he owned a KTM RC which he had bought after saving up his salary for a long time; he couldn't have gone to help his brother out if he'd known in time.

Perhaps this is the reason why Bosco wants to apply for his International Certification which will have him recognised as a lifeguard. The certification will be from the International Surfing Association (ISA), which is also recognised by the Olympics Committee.

“Have you watched Baywatch? It's similar to that. It's very valuable as that certification will make me an international lifeguard and I will be able to rescue people.”

Bosco

This certificate would recognise Bosco as an international surfer and lifeguard, but it is also very expensive at £17,000. They cover a wide range of lessons on rescuing drowning people and how to calm them down. Initially, he used to just ask the people he rescued to calm down and think of him as their second mother. However, the drowning persons would panic and grab his limbs and pull him down.



Laying on the surfboard, Bosco demonstrates how a drowning person's limbs have to be locked together to make it easier for the person saving them to carry them out of the water. If the person flails around too much, it will cancel out the effort made by the rescuer to swim against the direction of the wave.

As a novice, he had tried saving three surfers who went out to the sea despite Bosco's warning about the undercurrents. They needed to be rescued when they lost their footing and couldn't find their balance.

“Two of them followed my instructions. I told them to relax and looped their arms with my legs. I swam them to the shore. There was a third person who was drowning and didn't understand what I was saying. He couldn't relax at all. He pulled my leg down and my survival kicked in and I pushed

him down.â?•

After two days, his body floated to the shore. Bosco is often disquieted while thinking about the unfortunate incident. He later said that he has been seeking therapy to deal with the loss he has faced and has been prescribed anti-depressants by his psychiatrist.

â??Teaching the way I have learntâ?•

Amit, a Pondicherry native and a surfing beginner, came to know about Bosco through online advertisements. He had been bodysurfing for quite some time and wanted to begin surfing as he also wanted to shed some weight. The dangers that the students have to look for are mostly the unsuspecting undercurrents and the reefs which will hassle an unseasoned surfer.

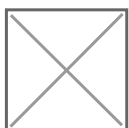
But Amit found Bosco to be very responsive throughout his lessons. After his beginner lessons were over, he gained a lot of confidence. After that, he continued surfing by renting a surfboard for ten days.



Amit and Bosco, reading the waves and locating a spot safe from undercurrents where Amit can surf independently. ĩ»¿

â??This is a sport where an absolute beginner and a professional make a fool of themselves. Youâ??re at the mercy of the sea. Every wave is different, so itâ??s a level playing field. It is an activity which breaks down social barriers and boundaries.â?•

Although Bosco earns well by giving surfing lessons and renting out his surfboards, surfing is an expensive activity by itself. He is currently the only instructor of the surf school and can easily handle up to 10 students in rotation. The surfboards are a costly affair and the damaged ones need to be replaced time and again.



When he started the surf school, Bosco sold his KTM RC to pay for 4 surfboards, which cost him around â?1.3 lakhs. He also bought a scooter that lets him take his boards with him from his house to the beach and back again. ĩ»¿

The lessons that are given to beginners are all very different from how the professionals surf. The difference starts right with which board is picked up for practice. The foam board, made of a foam base and plastic fins, is usually given to beginners. It is as long as 8 feet in length and can carry a weight of

up to 85 kg. A beginner can learn to surf with this board in just 8 days.

As a safety measure, a safety leash is put on the surfer's ankle to tie them to their board. This is especially important for people who don't know how to swim. Even the world champions have it as water safety. This lets the surfer come back to the surface safely, while also not losing track of their surfboard.

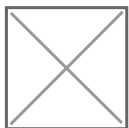
In life, we go from smaller things and move on to bigger ones. In the surfing world, it is exactly the opposite— the more experience you get, the smaller your surfboard gets. Bosco uses the fibre board, also called the shortboard. It is made of fibreglass and is generally more dangerous due to the material. The shortboards are usually around 6 feet and 6 inches in length, carry up to 65 kgs of weight and cut through waves more easily. The fibreglass can also have deadly hit backs that can cut your skin.

Not your 'regular' guy

Bosco is a 'goofy footer', which means that he balances on the left foot which is placed behind the right one. Most people in India are 'regular' which means, they balance on their right foot by placing it behind their left foot. The foot placed at the back is the strong foot because all the pressure is on that leg as a surfer carries out manoeuvres and cutbacks.

Bay of Bengal surfers are mostly Regulars who surf facing the waves. If the wave is behind you in this position, it gets uncomfortable. But there are surfers in Kerala who balance on their left sides. Outside India, all over the world, the left foot is mostly used for this. So it will also help for my ISA certification. •

Bosco chases the danger and seeks it out when everyone else returns home. The surfing season for beginners is from January to July, however, the pros come out to play during the monsoons when the sea gets agitated by the seasonal rains and cyclones.



During cyclones, which may occur around 3-4 times in the Bay of Bengal, the waves come as high as the lamppost.

We surf during this because otherwise, we can only get the waves in Bali or Sri Lanka. In India, the waves are like babies, very calm. •

The unnatural pier of Pondy Marina breaks the wave in ways the natural smooth shoreline cannot. The beach has witnessed waves as high as the lamppost, at around 7 meters. Pro surfers develop the instinct which allows them to 'read waves', which means they can see the wave, and its undercurrent and understand how to balance on the surfboard by throwing their body weight around.

A powerful wave can put you ten to fifteen feet deep in the water and coming back to the surface can take up to a whole minute. Surfers therefore also need to build up their stamina and ability to hold their breath.

The danger makes it even more thrilling for Bosco, who had once gotten 17 stitches from injuries sustained by surfing during cyclones. He cites the example of Kelly Slater, who is the current world champion of surfing at the age of 51 and carries scars from his surfing injuries.



Bosco's facial scars. He calls them lessons from the sea.

Are the locals on board?

The local coastguards are seemingly the only resistance these surfers have to face at the local beaches. These cops do not know what surfing consists of and turn up to stop the surfing instructors when they give lessons. Bosco has also taken up this issue with the local MLA, Annibal Kennedy.

“They (the police) might not even know how to swim, but they don’t think twice about insulting me in front of my students. If I get the ISA certificate, I’ll become an international lifeguard and the police won’t be able to ask me what I’m doing. I will have the authority.”

Bosco continues to bring in students for his surf school due to his humility about the sport as well as the easy way with which he teaches it. However, there is also a lack of tourist facilities at this beach such as drinking water and showers to wash off the sand. His venture, and that of many local surfers, would flourish if the Pondicherry government formalizes these schools and provides them with some storage space on the beach.

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Date Created

November 1, 2024

Author

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