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FORCE *of* NATURE

**SANTA CRUZAN CLIFF HODGES
TOSSED ASIDE THE CONVENTIONAL
FOR A LIFE OF ADVENTURE.
WHY SURVIVAL IS SUDDENLY
HIS NEW BUSINESS.**

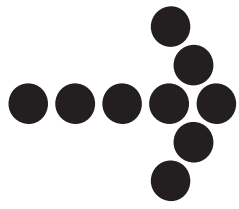




force of NATURE

Hodges (above) in survival mode during a class demonstration for natural camouflage. (Opposite page) Hodges at Steamer Lane.





Santa Cruzan Cliff Hodges tossed aside the conventional for a life of adventure. Now he's riding the wave of his life.

by Henry Jones

Cliff Hodges is not an easy guy to pigeonhole. On one hand, he is well-schooled and tech-savvy—he earned a bachelors and a masters degree in electrical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in just five years. On the other, Hodges is stuck in the Mesolithic stone age. He makes fire by friction, hunts using homemade stone tip weapons, and tans animal hides.

What Hodges has done with himself can be looked as a case study in that semi-mythical aphorism that usually exists only in motivational office posters and *Rocky* movies. I'm talking about reaching for the stars, following your dreams, and all those other adages that tend to not actually mean anything. If you happened to catch a look at Hodges' yoga mat, it reads "Live Your Vision," which could be equally as meaningless as any other motivational words if Hodges' hadn't ripped it free of irony and, bless his heart, actually lived it.

At 26, the Santa Cruz local has tossed aside the conventional to live his dream, which, in his case, is being the proud owner of Adventure Out, an outdoor programming company that specializes in wilderness survival training, rock climbing, backpacking and—another love of Hodges'—surfing.

"My two favorite things in the world are one, to be outdoors, and two, to teach," he says. "The company provides me with the opportunity to do both."

Hodges doesn't look like your typical business owner. Adventure Out has no office, so he has no reason to wear a tie. The "office" is pretty much wherever Hodges feels like working—the administrative work is designed to be "mobile," so he can work in his home, on the road, or in the great outdoors. When he conducts outdoor lessons, work attire is either a wetsuit or pants that he doesn't mind getting dirty. So it's the T-shirt-and-jeans look for Hodges, a far cry from the Brooks Brothers guise that you might expect from an MIT graduate.

By his own admission, Hodges is a talker. I tagged along on one of Adventure Out's surf lessons early one Saturday morning. Hodges began the lesson the same way he does with practically all of his classes—with a story. Sitting on the beach, arranged in a semi-circle, Hodges told the class about his first wave. "I remember everything so crystal clear, like it was five minutes ago because it was such an influential moment in my life," Hodges said. "And I know that I was smiling from ear to ear. I was so unbelievably stoked that I knew from that moment that I would be a surfer for the rest of my life."

Everybody in the group nodded politely, even though they were a bit too groggy at eight in the morning to fully appreciate the story. But it was clear what he intended to do—tell us about his first wave to put into context what we were about to do. But as surf virgins, these sorts of things just can't be explained.

After basic surf lessons on dry land, Hodges and his fellow instructors (local surfers Tiffany Morgan and Sonrisa Steepath) led us into the water. Once we were arranged above a friendly break out past the jetty, surf school really began.

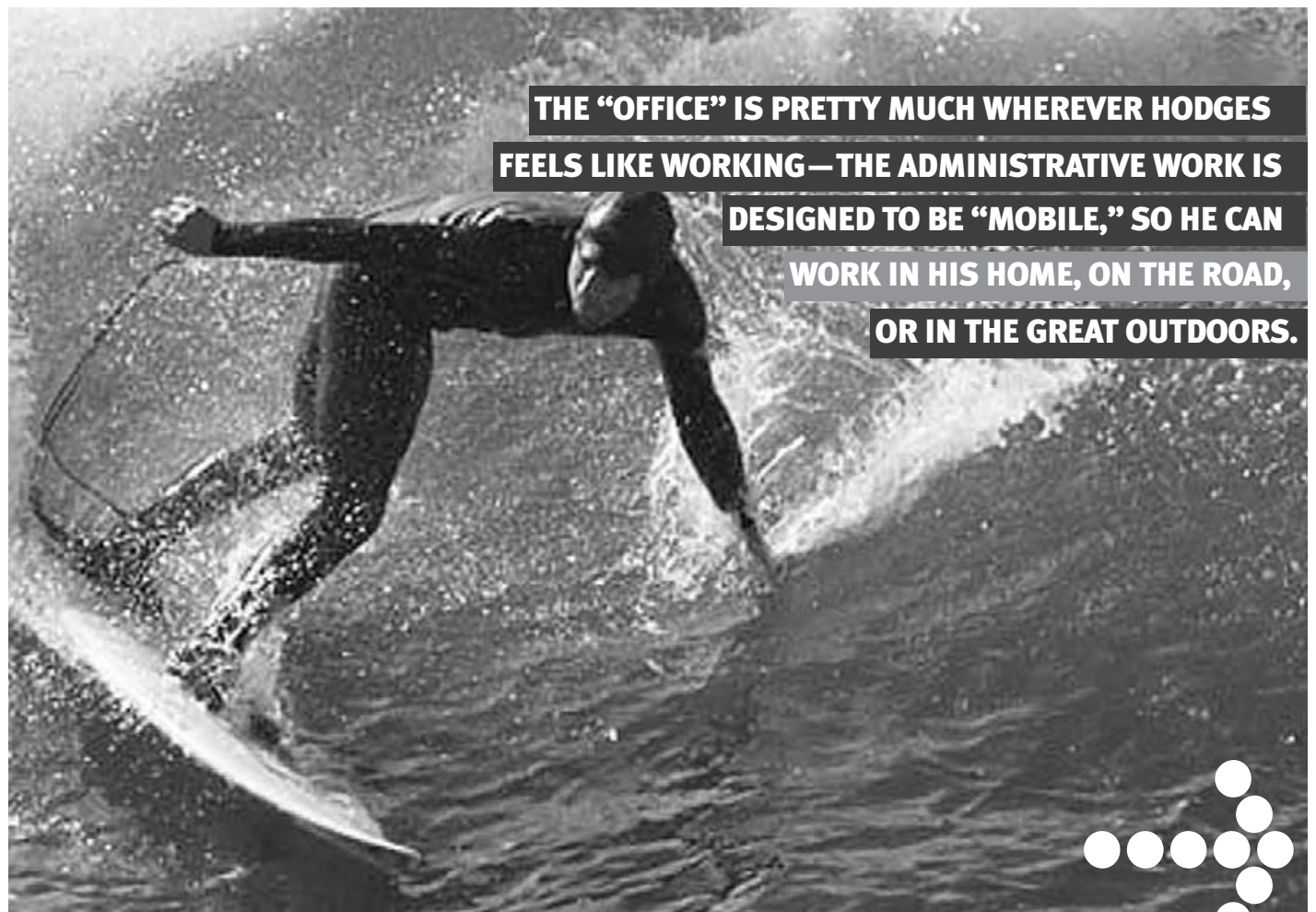
When the wave's momentum died down, and you bailed out into the waist-deep water, you'd look back toward the group to check if anybody saw you do what you just did. There, just past the waves, was Hodges—just his face bobbing up over the water with a congratulatory fist in the air, grinning from ear to ear.

Later, Hodges would tell me that that sort of thing is the best part of his job. "I get to get take people out into the water and see that look on their face when they catch their first wave," he says. "That makes it so unbelievably worth it."

But top among Hodges concerns about MIT wasn't necessarily the academic rigor. "I was thinking, 'Jesus! Am I going to be able to surf? Am I going to be able to be outdoors even? It's so cold in the wintertime.'"

Through a stroke of fortune, he met a fellow MIT student named Kai McDonald who hailed from the Mount Madonna area. They shared not only a common homeland, but a love for surfing that bordered on a necessity.

"There's a lot nerdy characters at MIT," McDonald remembers. "The whole scene is Nerd Pride—that's the battle cry. It was refreshing to meet some like Cliff."



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The instructors waded in the neck-deep water right at the wave's sweet spot. They called out for you to get into position as the swell came. Usually they gave you a helpful shove to get you going at the right speed, and once the wave arrived, as you felt its momentum, you executed the pop-up-to-a-crouch maneuver you've spent so much time practicing on the beach. If you were lucky, and if your balance was right, you'd be surprised to find yourself rushing right along with the wave—honest to-god surfing.

LESSON PLANS

With a growing business, plenty of outdoor time, and doing it all in his hometown of Santa Cruz, Hodges appears to be happy with the direction of his life. But it wasn't always that way.

In the fall of 1998, just after graduating from Santa Cruz High, he boarded a plane heading east to Boston, a city he had never been to before. "You get into a school like MIT and you have to go. You can't really split hairs on that one."

The duo managed to find some surf spots out in New Hampshire and Rhode Island. Every weekend—when there were waves—they drove to the beach. "It taught me that surfing was a labor of love when you're wearing seven millimeter wetsuits hiking through the snow to get to the beach," he says, "you've got to love it because it's not that fun."

Hodges indulged in plenty of surf trips, but he also put in plenty of studying. And though he managed to get good grades, it became increasingly clear that his heart just



Adventure Out's Women's Surf Class at Cowells (below). The writer of this story learns how to ride a wave (right).



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wasn't in it. He'd make extended weekend sojourns to indulge in outdoor activities and it was during this time that Hodges gained an interest in survival training. He connected with a survival expert named Bill McConnell, who, in the Pine Barren forests of New Jersey, taught Hodges the finer points of making fire, shelter, and hunting.

"Bill teaches wilderness survival from a purely native, indigenous aspect," Hodges explains. "Not like Outward Bound where they teach you how to use a compass and a water filter, but full-on Native American style survival."

There, he learned how to make stone-point arrows and spears, as well as knives out of obsidian and animal bone. He could make bow drill kits out of pieces of wood and plant fiber to make fire by friction. He could hunt with these tools, then skin and cure the fur using the emulsified oils of the animal's brain.

His skill of tool-making has developed into his own art. Last year, the Cultural Council of Santa Cruz County featured Hodges' native style tools—formed and decorated using only natural materials—in Open Studios.

The man insists on teaching as much of the Adventure Out's outdoor skills classes as

he can. "That's really the class where I see people making a connection with the natural environment," he notes. "I can see the shift in people's minds and their eyes light up when they see a whole new way of thinking. It's so innately human."

But it's even more than that. Not a religious man in the conventional sense, Hodges finds that outdoor survival skills give him a kind of "spiritual connection." A few weeks ago, when I sat in on a Fire by Friction class one Sunday morning at De Laveaga Park, Hodges explained that before he begins the process of fire-by-friction, which can be physically rigorous and not always successful, he always takes a moment to close his eyes and say a prayer. "It doesn't always work," Hodges notes, "but the few times I didn't do that, I guarantee you, I didn't get it a flame."

Because he could only manage to get out of Boston during the weekends, he had to bring some of the skills back with him.

He would sit on his board shorts in the middle of winter trying to start a fire on the floor. In the freezer: a bag of deer brain that he used to tan leather.

Hodges' attention was drifting. He came to realize that engineering may not have been

something he was passionate about, but something he was just good at.

POST-COLLEGE BLUES

After graduating, Hodges made his way back to Santa Cruz, where he spent his days giving surf lessons for Girls Adventure Out, an outdoor company geared at women only. Soon enough, he came to terms with what he knew anyway—that being a surf instructor wasn't going to pay the bills. So, not knowing what else to do with his masters in electrical engineering from MIT, he landed a "classic *Office Space* job" in Silicon Valley where he morphed into the tech marketing manager for a firm that produced flash memory. "I was in a cubicle in a basement under florescent lights for 10 hours a day with an hour and a half commute each way.

"I'd be in meetings all day," Hodges adds with no apparent sense of nostalgia. "I told people in one meeting what other people talked about in an earlier one."

Still, he had a future ahead of him. The position paid well and had great benefits. But he was unhappy. He lasted seven months before quitting. "It just wasn't for me. The

world needs engineers. I just don't think I'm one of them. I've always been the kind of person who needs to be outdoors."

Though Hodges' parents were concerned, they weren't altogether surprised when he decided he wanted to quit. Still, they were thrown yet another curve ball when their son explained his next plan: He wanted to buy the struggling Girls Adventure Out company, which had recently been put up for sale.

"They did their best to maintain the whole 'we want you to be happy and do what you want,'" Hodges remembers. "But there was some sweat on their brows."

His father had Cliff talk to some of his business savvy friends to see if it was really something worth pursuing and the consensus seemed to be that, in his father's words, "might not be unrealistic."

There was the issue of Hodges having no real business background. But he convinced his naysayers that his vision could come to fruition.

"When I was your age," his father recalls telling his son at that time, "I don't know whether I would have been dumb enough or smart enough to do what you're doing. What happens from here on out is up to you."

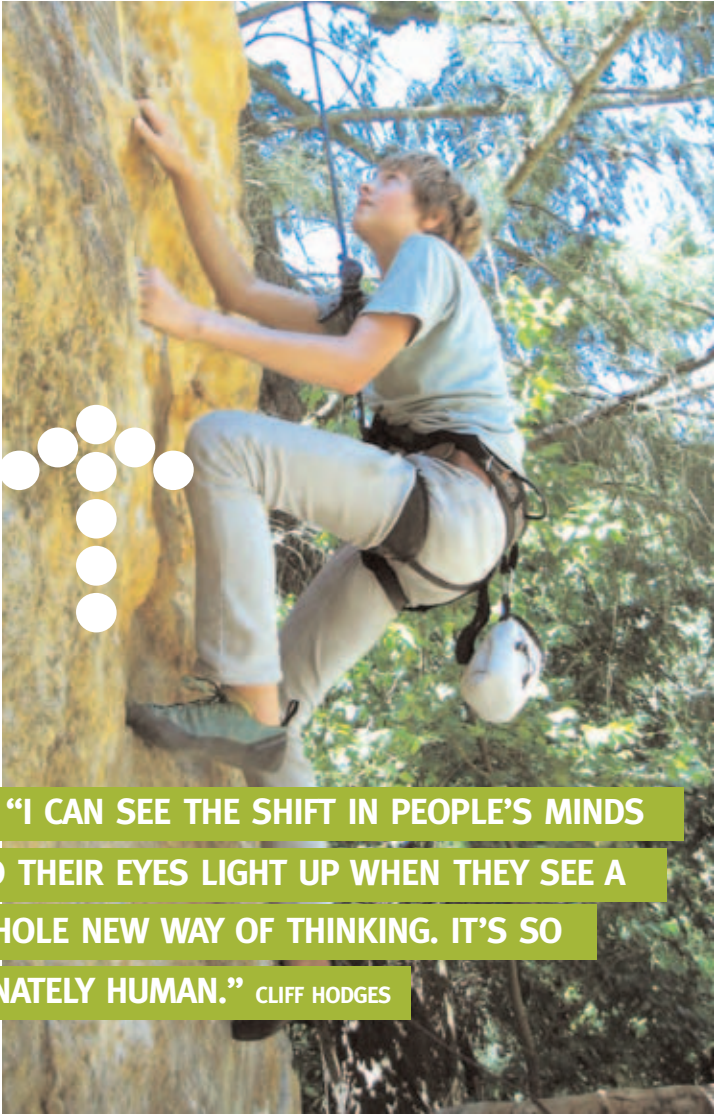


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Adventure Out students in Survival Class build shelter (left). A young boy learns how to create an indigenous trap.

Hodges' Rock Climbing class (below). (Right) A young girl makes natural cordage in Adventure Out's Wilderness Skills.



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ADVENTURE OUT

After securing a bank loan, Hodges took the plunge and purchased the company in the winter of 2004. His first order of business was to cut down on the less profitable programs, like some of the mountain biking and backpacking trips, and effectively doubled its market reach by dropping the “Girls” prefix from the name. The company he owns now is roughly 50 percent his creation and 50 percent of the existing company. What worked in his favor was the company’s established customer base, and the company’s permits. Adventure Out also has the only permit to conduct surf lessons in Pacifica, which is one of the only beginner surfing spot near San Francisco.

Additionally, Hodges has attempted to focus on the individual customer’s experience. He keeps his classes small and all if his instructors are highly qualified.

“We don’t teach people just how to get up on a surfboard, we try to teach them about the history of surfing, the culture around it,” he says. “We really try to involve our customers into the community so they can feel a part of it and feel like stockholders.

“Connecting with the outdoors is one of the more meaningful things we can experience as human beings. I think there will always be something missing if you can’t strike that balance.”

Indeed, for all the time that Hodges spends

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Hodges and student Aimee Vasseur create fire (left). (Below) Student Jesse Bushberg embraces the flame.



“EVERY SINGLE DAY OF MINE IS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT. I HAVE NOT HAD TWO DAYS BE THE SAME SINCE I STARTED THIS BUSINESS.” CLIFF HODGES

connecting with the outdoors, there’s plenty of time he spends balancing that out with good, old-fashioned office work. He’s currently the lone administrator of Adventure Out, so he’s in charge of the payroll, programming, scheduling, and sales. “A lot of people could look at my job and glamorize it and say wow, he gets to play outside all day long. I get to do that sometimes, but running a business means there’s a billion things you have to do.”

True, he hasn’t had what you’d call a day off in a long time, but he says he wouldn’t trade it for anything.

“I don’t have a routine,” he says. “I love the exact opposite of routine. Every single day of mine is completely different. I have not had two days be the same since I started this business.”

Considering the success that Hodges has had in field that made no practical use of his MIT masters, he maintains that he has no regrets about his decision to go to school there. What it taught him, in addition to electrical engineering, was work ethic.

“When I finished MIT, I came out knowing I could do anything,” Hodges adds. “I’ve never done anything as hard as that. Not working over the hill, running a business, surfing a 18-foot wave—” He stops, reconsiders. “Well I don’t know if I’d say *that*. Surfing a 18-foot wave is pretty hard to do.”

Something tells me he can handle it. ■

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