

Living the simple life



David at work placing a board in a vacuum bag in his shop in Nai Harn.



Sarong cloth is often used.



David prepares to apply epoxy resin to a board being made for a VIP.

By Jeremie Schatz

Live simple, consume less. This philosophy is engrained in the business and life of custom surfboard maker David "Mouset" Sautebin.

Originally from Bienne, Switzerland, the wiry 36-year-old stood in the entrance of his Nai Harn workshop clad only in Thai fisherman's pants. A quiver of surfboards lined the doorway which emitted a tinny soundtrack of Bob Marley from within.

"All of this story started with 1,500 dollars [US] to build the workshop, buy all of the materials and build two boards," says David of his business Elleciel Surfboards. The name is derived from the pronunciation of the letters LSCL, which stand for "live simple, consume less."

"The name came out of what I didn't want, and what I didn't want was a predator or raptor or any of these aggressive things. For me surfing is everything but aggressive. For me surfing is nature, it's organic, it's flowy."

What inspired the Swiss watchmaker turned surfboard shaper to make the leap from the micro-precision engineering of time-

pieces to the fluid design of surfboards was the direction he saw the surfboard industry going, "That's the industry, they make disposal things, you use it a few times and you throw it away... It's giant money for them."

With guidance and advice from people with vast experience in the industry, David set off to create the distinctive designs found lining his walls today. The construction method of Elleciel boards consists of a type of sandwich composite. They are still made with a foam core – although it is EPS (expanded polystyrene) opposed to the polyurethane found in more traditional boards – but he sandwiches a thin layer of material such as wood or cloth between layers of fiberglass cloth to create a structural shell. "The idea is many layers put together to make structure out of something that is not necessarily strong by itself," explains David.

The most tangible benefit of this construction method is the increased durability. A normally constructed fiberglass and polyurethane board dents and dings quite easily and may only survive a season or two. However, an Epoxy and EPS board of comparable size and weight can last for years.

It isn't readily apparent as you look at and handle an Elleciel board just how strong they are. As David explains his construction technique, he picks one up and punches it very hard several times

– strikes that would certainly dent a normal board. Of the more than 120 Elleciel boards in the water, David knows of only one that has succumbed under extreme conditions in Africa.

"I try to only work with Thai products... I try to source everything here," he says about the raw materials. The EPS he uses for the cores was manufactured right here in Phuket until recently, when they ran into problems, and now his source is in Hat Yai. He even incorporates materials such as Thai sarong cloth and other local textiles into his boards.

The less tangible but equally, if not more, impressive aspect of David's boards is the high level of craftsmanship. Many of the boards scattered around his workshop look like works of art intended to be hung on the wall instead of gliding underfoot in the ocean. This has been a big selling point he says, describing the eye-catching reputation building up around his boards, "My friend in California said that every time [he goes surfing] it takes him 45 minutes to get in the water."

So how does a Swiss watchmaker end up as a surfboard shaper in Phuket? Like many who have set up a home here, it is an interesting, and long, story. David had been plagued with knee problems for many years and has undergone dozens of surgeries. With the surgeries resulting in little success, he turned to Chinese medicine which, overtime, began

to lessen his suffering. While on surf trips he also began to realize that his knee problems were less severe when he was in warmer climates.

David embarked on numerous surfing trips to far-flung destinations like Hawaii and Morocco and enjoying some of the best breaks that the world has to offer. Later on he began sea-hitchhiking and finding himself in places like Sri Lanka and Indonesia – living the lifestyle that many surfers only dream of.

With a simple stop-off in Phuket, David's path in life led him in a different direction. Following a chance encounter and subsequent two month tour around Thailand with Thai reggae star Job 2 Do, David found himself back in Phuket where he stumbled upon his soul-mate and is still with her today. After being dropped off at the Ao Sane bungalows five years ago, David has literally set up shop in Nai Harn.

He has spent four of those years building up his business which blossomed out of humble beginnings where David struggled to find an adequate place for a workshop, dealt with the challenges of finding tools and materials, and patiently searched out resources and advice. He persisted and now maintains enough business to stay afloat.

David is realistic about the direction he is going and has no intention of sacrificing the high standards that he now adheres to.

From the beginning he has known that in his business, one must start with, and maintain, a clean reputation, "I knew that I had no chance to do anything that was not perfect." A flawed board floating around out there would bear his name and a product of sub-par quality would certainly come back to haunt him.

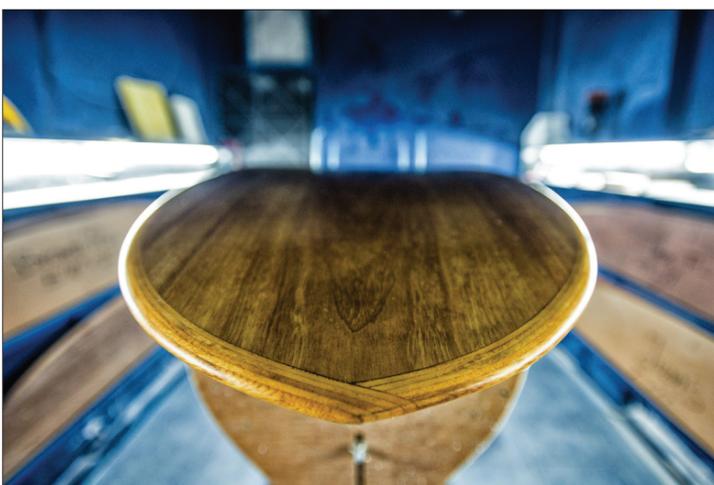
Currently, he is constrained to making only about two boards per week and with no grandiose dreams of dominating the world surfboard market, he has no complaints.

"Every board is a seed," says David. He started with just a few boards around Nai Harn, but each board sparks new interest and the potential to build upon his reputation. Now, a small selection of his boards can be found all over the island and even in Khao Lak.

Custom boards are available from 18,000 baht.

Elleciel is a sponsor of the Khao Lak Surfing Competition which will be held at Pakarang Beach on April 26-28.

To get your hands on one of David's custom creations, call him at 083-192 8161 or visit elleciel.com



David's boards are created using a sandwich composite method.



Handmade jigs for shaping.



Pigments can be added to create a unique style for any custom board.