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Photographing Surfers at the Giant Waves of Nazaré

By Dan Wagner

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Catch Some Waves
ADVENTURE WEEK

The moment I saw Tó Mané's iconic 2013 photo of Garrett McNamara surfing an up to 100-foot wave in Nazaré, Portugal, I knew I was hooked. I write the words "up to," because estimating wave size is not an exact science. It involves guesswork based on the surfer's height, board length, the opinions of experts, and other factors. And while the tangible rewards of "capturing" a record-setting wave are undeniable—surfers will tell you the real reward is spiritual, and all about the journey. This is true for photographers, as well, in that the pleasure of creating a beautiful photo has more to do with the joy of being immersed in the moment, than the resulting photo.

Photographs © Dan Wagner

After much research, I picked the third week of December 2018 as a good time to photograph the giant waves of Nazaré. Generally, the largest waves occur between October and March. This is due to ocean swells produced by winter storms, which under perfect conditions, are funneled through and amplified by a deep underwater canyon that abruptly ends at a shallow ledge near Praia do Norte beach in Nazaré, Portugal. This location is special because it's accessible, close to shore, and offers ideal vantage points for photography.

As I learned the hard way, making travel plans more than three or four days prior to visiting Nazaré for giant wave photography is risky. Had I left two days earlier, I would have been treated to 60-foot tall waves instead of "tiny" 30-footers. Yet, tiny giants at Nazaré are still awe-inspiring. The takeaway here is that making multiple trips to surfing locations such as Nazaré will increase the likelihood of getting the photos you're after.

Items discussed

Sigma 60-600mm f/4.5-6.3 DG OS HSM Sports Lens
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Nikon D850 DSLR Camera
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Sigma 24-70mm f/2.8 DG OS HSM Art Lens for
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Surf forecasting sites such as Magicseaweed provide up to 16 days of information. However, even with wave buoys, storm charts, satellite imagery, and other data, it's still very difficult to make accurate predictions. As a novice to surf photography, I'm still learning about the importance of wave periods (the time between waves), and how the wind speed and direction can make a wave face easier to surf. The good news is that on days with smaller waves, I could explore the historic town, meet charming locals, dine at excellent restaurants, go on a boat tour/dolphin watch/jet ski with Atlantic Safaris, or visit Lisbon and Porto.

By viewing photos of Nazaré, and using Google Earth to explore the vantage points from which they were shot, I could form a plan on where to shoot and what gear to bring. One of the elements that made Tó Mané's photo of Garrett McNamara's epic ride so hypnotic was the scale provided by the lighthouse in the foreground. Examining the photo revealed that it was shot from a high vantage point with a telephoto lens. Google Earth allowed me to "wander" the hill overlooking the lighthouse where the photo was taken. This combination of telephoto lens compression and high vantage point resulted in making the 100-foot wave appear even more impressive—a fact Garret McNamara humbly mentions in his superb, must-read book, *Hound of the Sea*.

Lens Selection

After careful consideration, I decided to buy the Sigma 60-600mm f/4.5-6.3 DG OS HSM Sports Lens. This proved to be a great choice. In the field, the lens was razor sharp, focused extremely fast, and though heavy, could be handheld. I also appreciated the weather sealing, bokeh from the 9-blade diaphragm, image stabilization, and removable Arca-type tripod foot. Additionally, the wide zoom range made it easy to locate, follow, and quickly get tight shots of subjects. In fact, I was surprised how often I was shooting at the wider end. To make the most of the Sigma's resolving power, I matched it up with my Nikon D850's 45.7MP sensor.

While shooting, I set my ISO as required to shoot at shutter speeds above 1/2000 second, and f/stops between f/8 and f/11. When I zoom in on many of my surf photos—thanks to the fast shutter speeds—I can even see water droplets that are frozen in midair. I chose these f/stops because they result in optimal lens performance for this lens. Wider and smaller f/stops also performed well.

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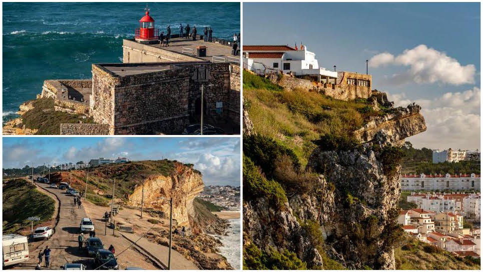
One of the recent trends in surf photography is showing more wave, and less of the surfer. In the past, there seemed to be more close-up surfer shots. Personally, I enjoy both types of shots. But when time and gear are limited, it does make sense to see the surfer in the context of the wave. In some ways, a wide shot can depict a surfer's accomplishment more "heroically" than a tight shot. For this reason, I packed my Sigma 24-70mm f/2.8 DG OS HSM Art Lens. Based on experience, I plan on bringing a Sigma 14-24mm f/2.8 DG HSM Art Lens on my next trip. To dial-in lens performance, I recommend the Sigma USB Dock and Datacolor SpyderLensCal Autofocus Calibration Aid.

Nazaré Surf Photo Locations

Nazaré offers a variety of prime surf photo locations. At the top of the hill, not far from the church, is a free parking lot. This lot is unpaved, and can have some deep ruts. It's a good place to park if there isn't any room on the road leading down to the lighthouse, or at the small lot by the lighthouse. From this parking lot, you can also get some nice shots of downtown Nazaré. At certain times, there is a shuttle vehicle to the lighthouse that costs around one euro. There are also some paid parking spots closer to the church area.



My preference is to arrive very early, and park at the lighthouse. This way I have a good place to store my gear, warm up, retreat from rain, and store a variety of clothing to match the wide temperature swing from morning to afternoon. You want to be ready to shoot when the conditions are best for surfing. This depends a lot on wind strength and direction. The far-right side of the lighthouse is where most of the surfing takes place. The reason for this is that there are dangerous rocks and whitewater near the lighthouse.

For those as sure-footed as mountain goats, there are steps on the right side of the lighthouse leading to a viewing area closer to the water. From this vantage point, it's possible to shoot photos of waves crashing on the rocks. But be advised, these steps are very dangerous, the seaside wall is low, and you'll probably get soaked.

Entry to the lighthouse costs one euro. Inside, there's a cool cave-like display area with surfboards, photos, and mementos that pay tribute to the brave surfers. The primitive interior of the lighthouse, which was built in 1903, features some dirt floor areas, and stairs that are challenging. In fact, I had a bad wipeout on the right staircase leading to the roof. Making matters scarier is the roof itself. The only thing protecting selfie-taking visitors from falling over the edge is a very low wall. If you take proper precautions, though, it's a good spot to take photos.

Surfers Alessandro Marcianò, and Andrei Ovchinnikov

One of my favorite spots to take photos is from the dirt road that leads inland from the lighthouse parking lot, which is why I recommend a tripod with spikes. It's somewhat difficult to get a view perpendicular to the spot where the surfers drop-in. Shooting at an angle generally works well. Adventurous photographers can hike further down the dirt road on a very uneven rutted path that leads closer to the water. Keep an eye out for significant spray from larger waves. This is one area I'd recommend a pair of hiking boots and a rain cover for your gear.

There's also a road you can drive from not too far from the church that takes you to a parking area near the beach. From this vantage point, you can get photos of the waves at beach level and dramatic shots of the lighthouse and the massive granite promontory underneath it. It's worth a visit. You might even get some nice shots after rides and wipeouts that bring surfers close to the beach. Make sure to give them space, and keep your eyes peeled for jet-skiers, and rescue personnel.

Tripod Selection

Like many other photographers, I often place too much importance on gear being lightweight and compact. There's no denying that it's more pleasant to travel lighter. To this end, I packed my 3.4 lb, 16.9" (folded length) Manfrotto Befree GT Travel Carbon Fiber Tripod with 496 Ball Head. Overall, the tripod worked out quite well. Before leaving, I knew the ball head wasn't a great match for my heavy telephoto—however, I was able to make it work.

Upon returning home, I bought a Jobu Design Jobu Jr.3 Deluxe Gimbal Kit with Swing-Arm HM-J3D. Although the gimbal fit the tripod, and allowed the Sigma 60-600mm lens to maneuver more easily, it just didn't feel suited to the purpose. Upon further consideration, and at the expense of weight (with gimbal) and folded length, I bought the sturdier FEISOL CT-3442 Tournament Rapid Carbon Fiber Tripod. And for added stability on soft terrain, I added FEISOL Short Stainless Steel Spikes. These are also available in Long.

Even though the FEISOL tripod and Jobu gimbal make a great pair, I'm still exploring other options. One combo that appeals to me is the ProMediaGear TR344 34mm Series 59" Pro-Stix Carbon-Fiber Tripod with Top Plate and ProMediaGear GKJr. Katana Junior Aluminum Gimbal Head. The ProMediaGear has a greater load capacity, and built-in spikes. Even though I hate to be one of "those" gearheads, it does look amazing. The added weight can work to your advantage by making your rig less susceptible to wind and other factors that might cause it to fall.

Surfer on right is Maya Gabeira, Women's Big Wave Record Holder

Bag and Accessory Selection

Sometimes it comes down to pack and roll—as in backpack or roller bag. Not having been to Nazaré before made this decision harder. The most sensible approach was to try both. The MindShift Gear BackLight 18L Backpack seemed like a good choice, and if I were younger, or able to tolerate the loaded weight better, it would have been great. It really is a spectacular backpack—especially in Woodland Green.

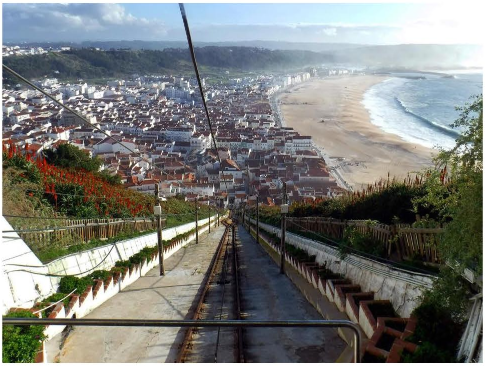
After trying more packs, bags, and rollers, I settled on the Think Tank Photo Airport Advantage Roller Sized Carry-On. At only six pounds, the roller was a delight to roll on those seemingly endless journeys to the airport gates. It worked well on steep hills, too. One thing that sold me on this roller was the ability to store the Nikon D850 with the Sigma 60-600mm lens attached. This gave me the ability to move from spot to spot without having to remove the lens. Plus, the roller had room for additional lenses, zippered inner pockets, and a large external compartment with flap closure. More important, the roller easily fit into the plane's overhead compartment. Heads up—on my return trip home, many passengers had to check their carry-ons due to size and weight issues.

Just because many camera and lenses are weather-sealed, there's no reason to subject them to corrosive salt spray or heavy rain. In pursuing my goal to be prepared on future visits to Nazaré, I've decided to test a few rain covers for my next trips. Based on preliminary research, I got the Think Tank Photo Hydrophobia DM 300-600 V3.0 Rain Cover. This is a robust rain cover and, though very workable, is somewhat large for my Sigma 60-600mm. Hydrophobia covers also require a camera-specific eyepiece. As an alternative, I also purchased the Think Tank Photo Hydrophobia D 70-200 V3.0 Rain Cover and the medium-size Think Tank Photo Emergency Rain Cover. The Hydrophobia is sturdier and has more features, and the Emergency is less bulky and lighter. Perfecting gear is like perfecting surfing or photography skills—it's a never-ending quest.

Nazaré Logistics

Getting to Nazaré is easy. The trip from Lisbon is predominantly on modern highways and takes about 90 minutes. Just make sure to set your GPS preferences to "fastest route," and not "shortest route." Car rental considerations include automatic/manual transmission; GPS—I brought my own and downloaded a Garmin map of Portugal and Spain; liability insurance, which should be included as cars in Portugal must have coverage; damage insurance, which my credit card offered; and tolls, for which your car should have a built-in transponder. Streets in Nazaré are very narrow, so a smaller car is the way to go. According to many sources, an International Driver's Permit isn't needed. However, it's required for side trips to Spain—so better safe than sorry.

When staying in Nazaré, Airbnb is a great value. Rates for a whole apartment are very reasonable. My advice is to make sure your accommodations offer heat, as temps can go below 45 degrees in winter, and read all the reviews to make sure they have ample hot water, and other necessities. In terms of where to stay, I recommend either the high elevation area near the lighthouse, or in town close to the beach and the funicular cable car that transports people from town to the lighthouse area for three euros.



Dining

Finding good food in Nazaré is affordable, fun, and easy. One of my favorite meals was at Tasquinha. The squid and octopus were amazing. So were the drinks the friendly and entertaining owner gave us while we waited for our table. Another great dinner was at Garrett McNamara's favorite, Celeste. They even have a meal named in his honor. A must visit is the restaurant, Sitiado—located on the hill near the funicular. The husband and wife owners offer great meals and are happy to share their knowledge on the Nazaré surfing scene. While there, I was lucky enough to meet fellow diner and world-renowned surfing cinematographer-director, Tim Bonython. Anyone interested in surf photography, or thinking about going to Nazaré should watch his latest film, *The Big Wave Project*.

Nazaré harbor and sunset photos with Sigma 60-600mm Lens

Please share your thoughts on Nazaré and surf photography in the Comments box, below.

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