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INTERVIEW



# WOOD IS GOOD

## DAVID SAUTEBIN OF ELLECIEL SURFBOARDS

Photo : Angelino, Tomkat, David Sautebin



Where are all these funky wooden surfboards surfacing around Phuket coming from? What in the heck was that stubby plank that Jimbo Welch was ripping on near the contest area during last year’s Quiksilver comp (and getting more attention than most of the competitors!)?

The unlikely wooden creations are the brainchild of David Sautebin of Elleciel Surfboards – probably Thailand’s first real homegrown surfboard label. David hand-shapes these seemingly quirky designs in his small 18 square meter workshop next to his home in Rawai. The name “Elleciel” (pronounced el-es-si-el), may sound like an elegant French term, but it actually comes from the letters L-S-C-L, an acronym for David’s “Live Simple, Consume Less” philosophy.

“I really didn’t want to be identified with the ‘rip, tear, and thrash’ image portrayed by the modern surf industry” says David, “I wanted a more flowing, blissful name that’s in tune with my way of thinking and what surfing means to me.”

The friendly, well spoken, and infectiously enthusiastic David was born in land-locked Switzerland. He dreamed of surfing as a kid, but tended to stay away from surfing videos and magazines as they were a depressing reminder of his inability to actively pursue his dream. His first surf session was on an EPS kid’s board during a family trip to France at the age of 8. That was all it took to get him hooked for life, but it would be a while before he left Switzerland to pursue his passion.





In the meantime, David worked various jobs, including kite and boomerang making, and studied to become a professional watchmaker (he is Swiss, after all!) While this seems like an unlikely background for a surfboard shaper, consider the curves of a boomerang, the foil of a kite, and the precision machining used in watch making - all elements of good surfboard design.

He shaped his first board at the age of 20 under the guidance of shaper Jean Bouldoires who showed him how to make a "foam sandwich" longboard. Soon after, he started doing extended surf trips which took him around the world to places like Maui, the Atlantic coast of Europe, the Caribbean, Japan, Saipan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

"After a boat trip around Nias in 2008, and before going back to Sri Lanka, I stopped in Thailand to enjoy the good food and easy life for a while." Says David. "Phuket was the only place where I heard I could find a little wave, so I went there, not convinced at all."

But after finding surfable waves, smiling people, an easygoing surf scene, and meeting his lovely girlfriend Neung, a few days stay turned into a few weeks, a few weeks into a few months ...and he's still here. A familiar story, no doubt.

"I worked on boats and tried other things around Phuket for a while, but I wasn't really satisfied. One day I checked my

"Dream List" of things I wanted to do in life and found that "Building Surfboards" was near the top. I decided it was time to go for it!"

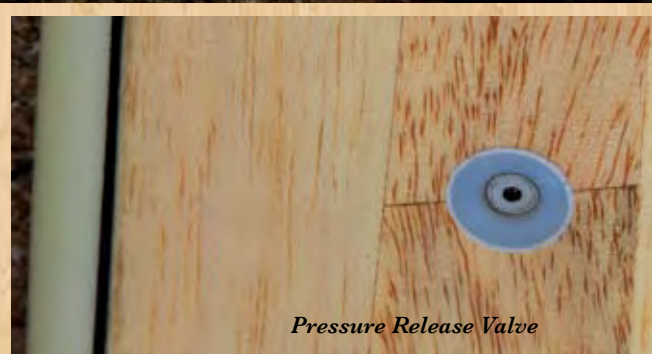
With a little bit of seed money from his mom, David got to work on his lifelong dream and set up his workshop in Rawai. Sourcing tools and materials in Thailand was difficult at first, but with some perseverance, everything came together. Now, one and a half years later, David is shaping board number 35 and going strong.

Elleciel boards begin with locally made stringerless EPS foam blanks that David hand shapes according to his customer's specifications. Glassing is done with epoxy and starts with 2 layers of 6oz fiberglass cloth on the rails. Next comes the distinctive Elleciel look: a 2mm layer of balsa wood covering the deck and the underside. These are adhered to the board with laminating epoxy and a layer of either 4oz or 6oz cloth between wood and core. The "sandwich" is placed in a vacuum bag until cured to ensure a strong bond.

Wooden nose and tail blocks are then added (usually coconut wood, balsa-teak or bamboo) and, after a smooth sanding to define the final shape, the board is completed with another layer of 6 ounce cloth on the deck and bottom (overlapping the rails) and finally topped off with a sand-coat finish.

"Elleciel Surfboards have a matt-finish that gets shiny and sexy when wet!" according to David.



*Concave Deck**Leash Loop**Pressure Release Valve*

The flex characteristics created by the lack of stringer, thick rail glassing, and wooden sandwich are, in our experience, superior to the often rigid, corky feel of the typical “factory pop-out” epoxy board. In addition to the unique construction techniques, David adds a few more innovative ideas. One of the most noticeable are the deeply concave decks which, David says, improves paddling comfort by creating a form-fitting shape, lowers the surfer’s center of gravity while riding, and adds volume for better floatation. This is not at the expense of performance, however, as the extra thickness is moved inward from the rails leaving nice, high performance transitions at the edges.

Most of the boards are made with FCS type fin systems and many offer a full range of fin placement options from single fin all the way up to 5 fin. Another interesting feature (something those of us old enough to remember haven’t seen since the late 70’s) is a “leash loop” in lieu of the now standard plastic legrope plug. Because the boards use EPS foam, which expands and contracts up to 10% with varying temperature and pressure (as on hot days or when traveling by airplane), David has added a pressure release valve to each board, similar to those found on another innovative board manufacturer’s products: Firewire Surfboards.

“When I first started shaping I went through some periods of low self confidence,” admits David, “I mean, what business does a Swiss guy with little shaping experience have making

surfboards? One day I asked Lane, a veteran surfboard glasser from Maui living here in Phuket, to come check out my work. He gave me his wholehearted approval along with some good tips on the finer points of glassing. This was a tremendous boost to my confidence.”

Most of David’s shapes are, in a word, radical. He is definitely thinking outside the box and making unique and distinctive forms, taking cues from proven formulas and putting them together in combinations according to his own vision and the requirements of his customers.

“I want my boards to be about fun. No preconceptions. I would like people to forget about the boards they are used to seeing the pros riding in magazines and videos,” David argues, “There are so many different surfers, so many possible ways to ride a wave, and so many different kinds of waves to ride. Why limit yourself?”

David believes that most of us in Phuket are riding the “wrong” board. Indeed, it makes sense that the average surfer in Phuket and around Thailand riding the average waves here probably shouldn’t be on a high-performance shortboard in waist high wind-slop.

“For the most part, the average high-performance shortboard limits people’s ability to catch waves and actually surf the conditions here. People shouldn’t be afraid to try new shapes.





Bamboo Fishet

Bamboo Koi

Big Fish

Comet

Cup

Drop

Eggplant

Fish

Fishet

FrankKostain

Hobbit

Huevoito

Huevon

Platypus

Pumpkin

Rooster

Single Fin

Squid

SUP

Twin Fish

Ultra

*Elleciel*

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They shouldn't be scared of a little extra volume. Basically, more volume = more waves = more fun!"

We certainly can't argue with that, but while it all sounds great, it still begs the question: do Elleciel surfboards really work? Sure, Jimbo rips on them, but he could probably surf circles around most of us on an ironing board.

So, David was kind enough to bring down a quiver of his creations (most of them lent back to him by his customers) for us to test drive in the surf. We pulled up at the North end of Patong Beach on an overcast Saturday morning to find David and Neung with 10 boards of all shapes and sizes spread out on the sand. The waves had come up overnight and conditions were surprisingly clean, with consistent head high peaks peeling off on the high tide.

The boys were like kids in a candy store as they darted in and out of the water in a surfing relay race, having a go on each different design, wondering what the next one would offer. The first thing you notice about an Elleciel board is the weight. As you reach for one, your brain is telling you that this big chunk of wood is going to be heavy, but surprise! They're as light as a feather; even the longboard models.

The concave decks feel odd at first, but you soon realize that it certainly does give an advantage to balance and comfort while paddling, and a more solid, connected feeling while surfing.

Do they surf well? The answer from the boys on the beach that day is a resounding yes. While one shape would make one surfer scratch his head a bit, another guy would love it. By the end of the day, everyone had found several boards that worked for them. Those shapes that didn't feel quite right on the first try certainly would after a few more sessions figuring them out.

All the boards we tried paddled and caught waves exceptionally easy. More notably, the boards seemed to have a built in afterburner that shot you off the bottom like a rocket, something that caught a few of us by surprise. Definitely a desirable characteristic for Thailand's generally gutless surf; a board that generates its own speed and drive is a must. The boards carved silky turns and demonstrated smooth release. The longboards trimmed nicely and maneuvered with ease. All-in-all, TSM gives Elleciel Surfboards a big thumbs up!

When asked how he does his marketing, David just smiled, spreading his hands open to the beach, "Like this!"

Indeed, other than our test crew, all sorts of guys had crawled out of the woodwork and were asking if they could have a try on the eye-catching designs. The lineup was soon filled with smiling faces, hoots, hollers, and friendly debates on the merits of each shape. David ended up getting 3 orders for new boards that day. It looks as though his marketing technique works just fine.





*David on the Huevon Bug*



*Man carving it up*



*The Elleciel Workshop*

What's in store for the future? Well, David has been experimenting with other wood types and, of course, new experimental shapes.

"I've done a few boards with 1/2mm ashwood, but this technique needs a bit of tuning as the boards had too much flex because of an oversight in my initial design," explains David. "I've also done a few boards with decks out of woven bamboo. My goal is to use more local wood and materials, and less glass."

Nearly all Elleciel Surfboards are custom-made-to-order with very few boards "in-stock". Shaping time is typically around ten days, but may vary a bit. Moisture is not a hardwood's best friend, and blowing dust can get into wet resin, so David sometimes has to work around the weather to ensure a quality product.

David deals with each customer individually to make certain everyone gets exactly what they want. Many customers show up with a "magic board" to have copied, sometimes adding special Elleciel modifications in size, volume, and often a concave deck. He even goes as far as to ask what type of music he should listen to while shaping, thus hopefully transferring the desired type of energy from shaper to board. Sounds a bit off-the-wall, but hey, whatever works!



*David and girlfriend Neung*

**TSM** would like to thank **David** and **Neung** of **Elleciel Surfboards** for sharing their designs with us and providing a truly enjoyable day in the surf. If you're interested in learning more about Elleciel Surfboards, visit [www.elleciel.com](http://www.elleciel.com) or call **David** on **+66 83 192 8161**.