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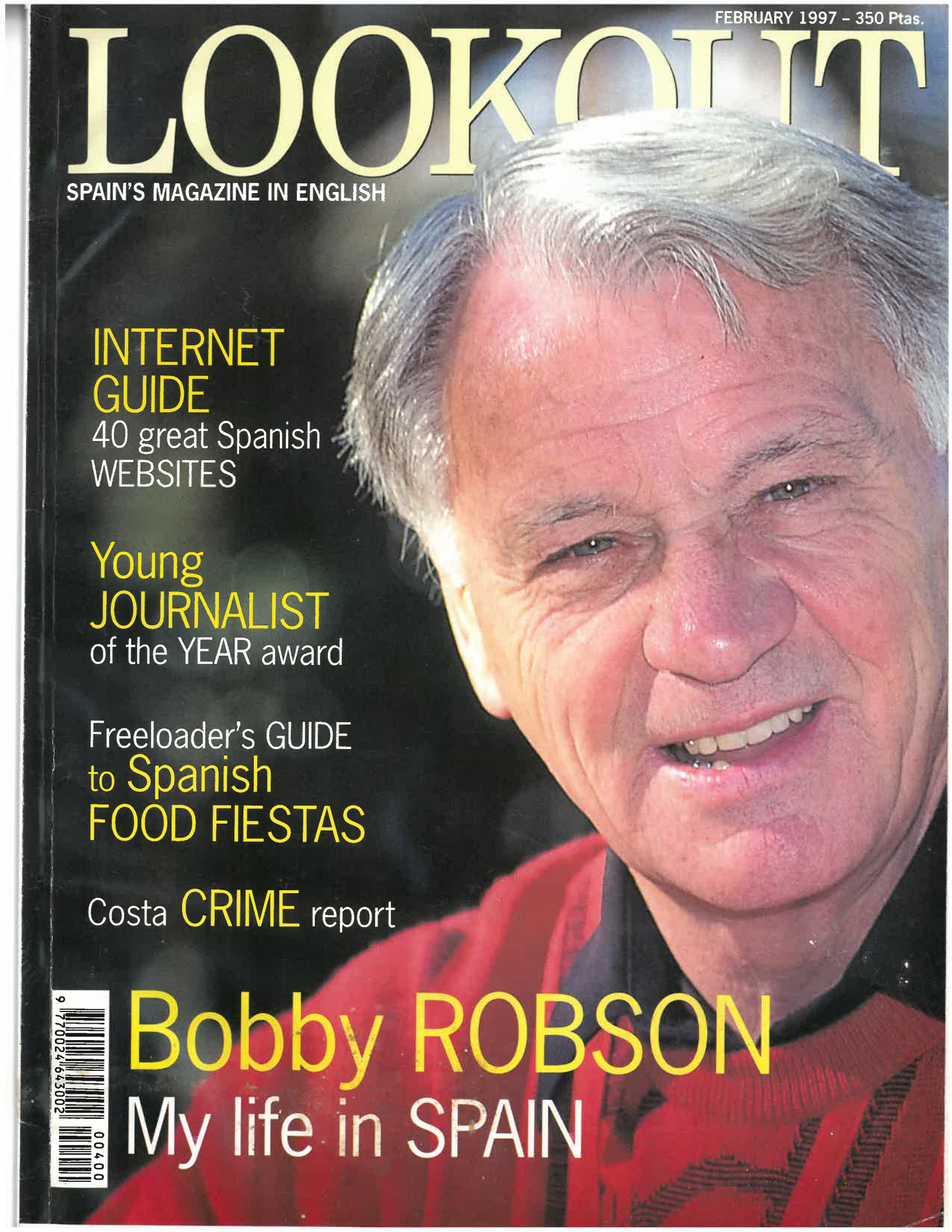
LOOKOUT

SPAIN'S MAGAZINE IN ENGLISH



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40 great Spanish WEBSITES

Young JOURNALIST of the YEAR award

Freeloader's GUIDE to Spanish FOOD FIESTAS

Costa CRIME report

Bobby ROBSON
My life in SPAIN

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Meet some of this month's contributors

MICHELLE CHAPLOW, who interviewed and photographed British football trainer Bobby Robson for this month's cover feature, has lived in southern Spain since 1991. Born in Durham, England, Chaplow had never even touched a camera until a trip to the Amazon jungle in the late eighties, when she felt compelled to record the experience on film. Her selection of photographs of South American Indians won an award at an exhibition in Gibraltar organized by the Royal Photographic Society, which encouraged her to take up photojournalism full time. Today she photographs Spain for major publications worldwide, and has just completed a six-month contract for the Spanish tourism authority, photographing 700 kilometres of Spanish coastline from Alicante to Murcia. Chaplow, whose first photograph in Lookout was an entry in our monthly photo competition (June 1993), has since contributed regularly to the magazine.

HARRY DEBELIUS, who wrote this month's feature on Spanish food fiestas (page 50), was born in Baltimore, and boasts that his grand-parents were respectively German, Irish, Dutch and English-American. A freelance writer established for many years in Madrid, he is the author of two humourous books, *Helpless Hints on Life in Spain* and *The Day the Toilet Caught Fire,* and also wrote *The Independent Travellers' Guide, Spain* and was the editor of *Retirement in Spain*, a book published by the Spanish government. In between writing books and newspaper articles (one of the most respected foreign correspondents in Spain, he was a regular contributor to *The Times* of London for 22 years), Debelius fathered eight children.

YOUNG JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR AWARD

DAVID VICTORSON ignored the advice included in the Competition Guidelines we sent to those wishing to participate in Lookout's Young Journalist of the Year Award.

"Avoid writing in the first person – it's fully of booby traps", we warned. "And don't wait until the last minute to send in your entry; it won't increase your chances of being selected."

Victorson's first-person account of surfing on Spain's northern coast, which we received only days before the competition deadline, has won him our Young Journalist of the Year Award, with a cash prize of 70,000 pesetas. His entry appears on page 48.

25-year-old David Victorson comes from Michigan, and lives in Santander (Cantabria), where he teaches at an international school of English. Prior to moving to Spain, he spent time in Central America teaching and doing volunteer work. He enjoys outdoor sports, music, salsa dancing... and writing.

Lookout Magazine instituted the award to encourage young English-speaking people living in Spain to try their hand at journalism. We'd like to thank all the young writers who took part in this competition, and congratulate David Victorson and the other two finalists, Monica Bell of Rota and Eric Roylance of Puerto de Santa María.

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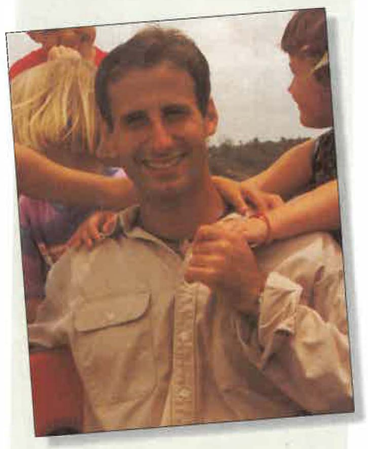
LOOKOUT YOUNG JOURNALIST OF THE YEAR AWARD

A Swell Place in the Winter

By David Victorson

The Winner



David Victorson, an American who lives in Santander (northern Spain), has been chosen as the winner of Lookout's Young Journalist of the Year Award, for this article.

As I undress in the middle of a remote farmer's field in Cantabria, on the north coast of Spain, my feet get swallowed up by squashy, morning mud. The *Agallego* – the westerly December wind – picks up. I look around in all directions and see the famous green hills and jagged cliffs of northern Spain. I especially concentrate on the rocky cliffs, and the way they abruptly carve and groove their way down to the sea.

The sea... a nice-looking set forms and a beautiful six-foot wave peels left from the center. Pavlov's dog has nothing on the saliva secreting in my mouth right now. I step into my black wet suit and wiggle my toes into the leggings. At this time of year it's recommended to use a winter wet suit of at least 4.5 millimetres, and mine is still a bit damp from two days earlier.

After I push my feet through and secure the ankles, I pull this artificial sealskin up to my neck. Shiwerrr... Reaching behind my head, I grab hold of the zipper strap, yank it up, and fasten a Velcro strip across the back of my neck. I pick up my surf board and trot down some wooden make-shift stairs, over some rocks, and onto the beach.

Once my feet are submerged and adjusting to the temperature of the water, I squat down and attach the Velcro leash to my right ankle. I begin walking out, fighting the current which is sucking and pulling me in all directions. White water approaches and I glide my board over it, losing some ground in the process. After the wave passes, I leap on to this piece of designer fiberglass, stomach down, and begin crawl-stroking my way out. Another wave approaches, this time about to break much closer to me. It gets closer, closer, closer, and at the last minute I grab hold of the front of the board, fasten my left foot to the back, and plunge underneath, feeling a nice slap on the Achilles tendon as the wave passes overhead. I pop back up and continue paddling, repeating this diving technique with each new wave that comes, until I've reached a good distance from the shore. My deltoids and trap muscles always experience a good burn after these fights out.

I now sit on the board so that the tip is sticking out of the water, my feet kicking about like a duck's. The sun breaks from behind charcoal-purple-colored clouds. It heats my wet hair and shoulders until I get bumpy, avocado skin.

Some surfers pee in their suits to warm up. I prefer the sun.

I notice the light is different out on the water. Surreal hues of blue, green, and yellow, play against the mist and spray produced by breaking waves. I balance there, alert, rising and sinking to the tempo... day-dreaming, thinking how not many people have experienced what I have just witnessed in the last ten minutes. I sniff the salty snot back into my nose and wait for the next ridable wave to break in my direction.

They say people started catching waves in the Northern Peninsula during the 60's when surfers from southern France brought their boards down to see if Basque Country breaks were comparable. Needless to say, from that point on, this region's reputation as being the home to some of Europe's gnarliest waves grew. Two spots in particular are the hollow lefts of Mundaca and the six-meter rides of Menakoz. Since these quality waves are no secret today, both winter and summer seasons can get pretty crowded in the Basque region. Fortunately, due to the jagged formation of Spain's Northern Coast, there is an infinite number of hidden bays and sheltered coves, with just about all of them producing decent waves for all types of rides.

Contrary to popular belief that it's easier to catch a flu than a wave during the winter season, riding winter waves in Northern Spain has many advantages over it's summer counterpart. The first difference being the waves themselves.

A meteorologically-conscious surfer can tell you that the Atlantic Ocean is, in a nut shell, one big continuous swell after another. In the winter, southern born swells headed for the North Atlantic are cradled by the Bay of Biscay. Due to different trajectory paths in the summer, these swells tend to stay clear of land formations, and continue their course North.

In other words, the winter season is your best opportunity to ride consistent, six-foot-plus waves at just about any beach you go to. And with over 60 "documented" surfing beaches stretching across the Northern Peninsula, from the Basque Country to Galicia, you're set.

Another plus of winter surfing in the north is the seclusion and intimacy of the beaches you'll only experience at this time. Unlike July and August, when it can be hard just to find a place to sit on the sand, let alone surf, the winter offers the privacy to undress in the middle of a farmer's field if you fancy, or the freedom to go for any wave you want.

For me, it was the perfect time and place to learn to surf. I didn't have to worry about getting in anyone's way, and I could be as uncoordinated and stupid-looking as I wanted without feeling like a complete idiot. Many times I had the whole beach to myself. It's nice to know there are still places like this.

A third benefit for winter surfing in the North is that hotels and flats are incredibly inexpensive and vacant in the off-season. I managed to swing a nice three bedroom flat with a sea-side view in Santander's Sardinero for only 35,000 pesetas a month.

Northern Spain in the winter months is very beautiful, accessible, and quite often, less costly than in other seasons. You can bring your car over on the ferry which makes two trips a week from Plymouth to Santander. It takes about 24 hours. The roads in Spain are user-friendly, and petrol is cheaper than in Britain. A car is your best bet if you want to do any travelling between beaches. If you're flying from within Spain or abroad, Bilbao is probably the most economical, although you should ask the airline if there are any extra fees for bringing along your board. I've heard some charge up to £70!

Even though there are lot's of good reasons to surf northern Spain in the winter, catching these waves isn't for everyone. Some will always think winter surfers have lost all sense and reason when they spend dreary mornings and afternoons submerged in an icy-cold bay, battling gusty winds, occasional scattered showers, and the every-so-often downpour of hail.

Just the other day I overheard a conversation about the ferry being held up in Santander's port for three days because of dangerous storm conditions, yet during these same three days, surfers were zipping through tubes and getting smacked by some very humbling sets. Call it an addiction, a way of life, a form of therapy, or just a pastime, surfing "does" and "is" something that is very hard to fathom unless you've caught a wave yourself.

It's funny how quickly you forget about how cold and windy it might be when a jaw-dropping wave suddenly approaches and you turn on your board and begin paddling with the enthusiasm of a 10-year-old, excited and terrified that there's something so gigantic and powerful and liquid about to come crashing down.

You ask yourself, "Am I timing this right, or will I get smacked hard by this fat wave?" But then it happens... your body is slowly sucked backwards and you lie there, chest arched forward, wide-eyed, paddling with everything you've got, waiting for one... eternal... second... until the wave, with all it's virile magic jolts you forward so fast that you're cruising along 10 feet above everything. In one quick motion you push off the board until your feet are gripping wax. You cut down into the face of the wave, and ride the hell out of it as the break is closing in at your back. It now curls over you, so your bend lower, squeezing through a tube and scraping your fingers against pure wake. Finally, there's no where else to go and you disappear into white wash of foam with your board dolphining out of the water. Seconds later, you jump out with a gasp for air, followed by a stoked scream and laugh.

There's a very small list of things in life that you can do to match this feeling, so, yes, putting up with numb, blue toenails, a runny nose, an occasional sore neck, and some sand in the ears is completely worth it.

After a morning or afternoon of wave riding and being thrashed a bit, there's nothing better than de-thawing your exposed appendages with a frothy *café con leche* and a thick, olive-oily slab of *tortilla de patata*. You sit around with nappy surf hair and blood-shot eyes and laugh about mammoth waves that threw you around or held you under a little longer than desired. Then you make plans for that evening's pub crawl, knowing full well that the best cure for tomorrow's hangover will be when you're out sitting on your board again facing the sea. Ahhh...life is good!

The only real catch to catching winter waves in Northern Spain is that you have to try it. Surfing doesn't discriminate against age, race, religion, or gender, so whether you've never done it in your life, or have never not done it every day of your life, these Iberian tide waters are sure to provide one *swell* of a time.

The Lookout Young Journalist of the Year Award was instituted to encourage young writers, aged 25 and under, living in Spain. This is one of the three entries selected for the final. Other finalists were Monica Bell (whose article was published in the September 1996 issue) and Eric Roylance, whose story appeared in last month's issue.