Back in the early 1950s, when I started surfing, the main comment from parents and non-surfing peers was: ‘When you grow up, you’ll realise you were wasting your time when you could have been doing something useful.’ I could never figure out why golf, tennis, baseball, football or being a cheerleader was ‘useful’ and surfing wasn’t. What became a ‘lifestyle’ later was just how we lived without giving it much thought. We knew we had to live by the ocean and needed to figure out a way to make a living there. Hobie made surfboards, Gordon Clark made foam blanks, John Severson started Surfer magazine, I started making movies. Whatever we did, the main focus was how it would affect our surf time. Getting rich wasn’t important. What was important was having the freedom to do what we wanted. (Bruce Brown, producer and director of The Endless Summer, Kampion, 1997: 21)

As a production, marketing and consumption system, [culture] exhibits many peculiarities in the form its labour process takes, and in the manner of linkage between production and consumption. The one thing that cannot be said of it is that the circulation of capital is absent, and that the practitioners and agents at work within it are unaware of the laws and rules of capital accumulation. And it is certainly not democratically controlled and organised, even though consumers are highly dispersed and have more than a little say in what is produced and what aesthetic values shall be conveyed. (David Harvey, 1990: 346–7)

Surfing is far more than a physical recreation. For millions of people surfing defines their way of life, their manner of living, in short, their culture [Jenks, 1993a: 5; Jenks, 1993b: 156, 157]. Surfers organize
their lives around the rhythms of the tide and the seasons that determine when, and where, the surf is running; they follow their own fashions, and speak their own language. Yet, irrespective of its social, artistic or spiritual content, surfing, like all cultures, has material dimensions. Cultures involve separating, combining, transforming and presenting material objects; they involve technologies of reproduction and circulation, the organization of markets for trading, expansion and profit; and they involve a range of social relations between those who give and those who receive, between those who produce and those who consume, and between those for whom the culture is their livelihood and those for whom the culture is a religious experience. Tensions invariably arise in these social relations as different groups compete for ownership of, and access to, resources, or as they seek to control technologies or the diffusion of ideas. (Williams, 1995: 87, 89–118)

This chapter analyses the material bases of surfing culture (including surfboards, wetsuits, clothing, accessories, magazines, books, memorabilia, videos, competitions, tourism and surfing schools), which is worth an estimated US$4 billion each year (Gliddon, 2002: 20). In particular, it investigates the paradoxes of a culture that celebrates social freedom, escape from drudgery and a harmonious interaction with the natural world, and which simultaneously propagates capitalist accumulation, competition and exploitation in its modes of economic and political organization. Most surfers are only too well aware of the paradox; but how do they reconcile the contradictions?

Accumulation, appropriation, acculturation

The surfing industry began as a series of backyard operations in the early 1950s, concomitant with the invention of lightweight fibreglass Malibu surfboards. Jack O’Neill, the founder of O’Neill wetsuits, conducted a surf business from his San Francisco garage where he shaped surfboards, sold accessories like paraffin wax (rubbed on boards to prevent slipping) and glued strips of neoprene rubber into wetsuit vests (to insulate surfers against extreme water and air temperatures) (Kampion, 2001). When Brian Singer and Doug Warbrick decided to manufacture Rip Curl surfboards, they converted a home garage at Torquay (Victoria, Australia) into a shaping bay and glassing room and then put up a sign (Jarratt, 1998b: 67). Champion surfer Terry Fitzgerald established Hot Buttered Surfboards in a two-bedroom weatherboard cottage in Sydney.