



M O D E R N
ECCENTRICS

The longboarders

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IN A WORLD THAT CAN FEEL INCREASINGLY **UNIFORM**, WE'RE **CELEBRATING** THOSE HAPPILY DOING THINGS *a bit differently*. Meet the PEOPLE WHO ARE *seriously PASSIONATE* about their pastimes. PERHAPS THEY'LL **PERSUADE YOU** TO TRY *something NEW?*

Surfing burst into popular consciousness in the 1960s. It was listening to the Beach Boys and Dick Dale, and riding a wave of iconography that, decades later, is yet to subside. We're talking orange-hued chaps in orange-hued Bermuda shorts, clasping outsized boards to their sides, setting granite jaws against the wind and striding purposefully into the ocean, only to return, arms outstretched, languidly gliding across the curling face of a towering wall of water before scuttering up the sand and holding the pose.

That popular image began to drift away from reality even before the 1960s were out. That's when shortboards were introduced, supremely agile apparatus allowing riders to cut back and forth through the wave like giddy puppies chasing butterflies. They remain by far the most popular modern mode of surfing.

Though not with everyone. "I personally prefer longboarding," says Kate Czuczman, in-house photographer at Surf Sistas, which runs women-only, board-related courses. "I love that old-school feel. It's really graceful, like dancing."

And when she says 'old school', she really means old: though the exact age of surfing is lost in the depths of the Pacific, it dates back thousands of years in Polynesian culture. When tourism took off in Hawaii at the end of the 19th century, visitors were introduced to the art of *he'e nalu* or 'wave sliding' – all done on wooden 'longboards'.

As its impressive history shows, it's a way of connecting with something quite thrillingly elemental.

Surf and girth: longboards are typically longer and wider than modern surfboards, and offer greater stability when riding the waves



"What makes the feeling of surfing so good and addictive is that you are becoming part of the energy of the wave - it's humbling," says Kate.

"Being in the sea takes you out of yourself, stops you thinking about all the other little things in life. Also, when you're an adult, you always come back to how you felt when you were younger – it's really important that we revisit that inner child."

When it comes to making that connection with the sea's awesome power, it isn't only elegance that makes the longboard an advantageous option. Its length (some 9ft, compared to a shortboard's 6ft) makes it more stable, so standing up is less troublesome, and waves can be ridden while barely a twinkle in the tide's eye.

"You can catch them from further out, when they're still a little bump," says Kate. "A shortboarder needs to catch waves when they're jacked up, which makes them slightly more scary. Longboarding feels more accessible."

Accessibility is a key watchword, with Surf Sistas established partly in response to the fact that one aspect of that 1960s portrayal of the sport – the surfer as an emblem of macho, rugged individualism – has proved more widely enduring than the board 'he' once »



exclusively rode. Kate's own back story is a case in point. She had been "wanting to surf for years" before finally trying it, the interregnum even including hitchhiking with a friend to Cornwall with the express intention of trying to catch a wave.

"It didn't seem like any girls were doing it and we didn't know anything about it," she recalls, "so we just hung around." It was only when she signed up to surf school with an adventurous skier friend that she finally took to the waves and became completely addicted: "I wouldn't have known how to go and do it on my own or been gutsy enough to do it by myself."

Thus, the kind of all-too-common experience behind Surf Sistās' offering women-only surfing clinics.

Kate explains that while the lineup – the area beyond the swell where surfers wait to take their turn at catching a wave – "has become much more female; it can still be

quite male-dominated and intimidating. Surfing can be quite individualistic, but when there's a group of women, there's generally a positive vibe and everyone's supportive – there's a camaraderie there, whether they've arrived there by themselves or not.

Surf Sistās runs courses all over the world aimed at encouraging women to learn and improve their surf skills, and to find a surf style that's natural to them

Aspiring longboarders begin with an introduction to some necessary techniques, such as walking along the board to manage speed, or making your way to the lineup.

Yet while the longboard discipline is one of finesse and refinement once you've actually caught a wave, getting there can be a different matter. "The flip side is that you're in the water with a much bigger board – there's more to deal with," says Kate.

Beyond merely staying upright, it's all about "finding your own style," she adds. "It's really just encouraging people to relax. Everybody has a style, and you can't copy someone else's. You just need to find what works for you."

Finally, a note of reassurance for anyone whose piqued interest is tempered by fear of, well, just not being very good. "I'm a mediocre surfer," says Kate, who, let's recall, is a snapper, not an instructor. "It took me a year to stand up. Everyone is continually learning, but the more you do it, the more you'll understand."

And there is no such thing as a typical learner, says Kate, in terms of either age or background. "We've got two ladies in their sixties with us this week, and we've had older than that. You feel like everyone's the same age when you're in – the ocean is a good leveller." surfsistas.com/longboarding