

# SURFING'S NEW WAVE

The sport of surfing can have a macho image, but in Cornwall, Rachel Murphy and Tassy Swallow are determined to change that, giving girls and women the confidence to ride the waves with skill and zest

WORDS ALICE WRIGHT



Tassy Swallow at Boardmasters 2018 surf and skate festival in Newquay



The wind was howling off the sea early one autumn evening, as a group of women huddled on the sand at Newquay's Fistral Beach. They had gathered for the inaugural Women + Waves Surf

Club session, but as organiser Rachel Murphy eyed the foaming waves she was having second thoughts. 'It was blowing a hooley,' she remembers, 'and horrible to the point where I was thinking, what am I doing? I'm telling all these women to go surfing and I don't even want to go surfing.'

Determined not to bail out on the first session, Rachel plunged in regardless. 'We just went for it, and everyone had such good fun.' The women emerged feeling exhilarated by the salt water and sea air. It didn't matter that the conditions were less than perfect – the experience left them elated and eager for more.

'There really isn't a feeling like it,' Rachel says. 'Every surf you have will be different. But you always come out feeling glad to have got in.' The physical benefits are self-evident but Rachel believes surfing has a positive mental effect too. She talks about the dopamine released into the brain just by being in the sea. The focus required to master the waves means other concerns must be put aside too, at least temporarily. 'The sea is so unpredictable,' she says. 'There's so much to take in – the waves, the conditions, the tides – that you don't think about anything else while you're out there.'

## LIFELONG LOVE

Born in North Cornwall, the sea has always been part of Rachel's life. 'I grew up going to the beach every day with my dad,' she says. 'I started off bodyboarding then picked up a surfboard when I was about 12.' She did a watersports course at Falmouth College before moving to the surf town of Newquay, where she worked first for Newquay Activity Centre and then a surf travel company.

While her job involved arranging holidays to far-flung destinations, Rachel's first love is the Cornish coast, especially around Newquay. 'We've got the best weather and great waves and you've got such a good community out there. Living in a town like this, you can't walk down the street without someone mentioning the surf.' But despite feeling part







of that surfing community herself, Rachel realised that many other women lacked the courage to get out into the waves. Surfing can have quite a macho image, and while Rachel has never encountered negativity from male surfers, she does recognise how daunted women can feel paddling out into a sea full of surfers 'shredding all over the place'.

## WOMEN TOGETHER

So in September 2017 she set up Women + Waves, providing a safe, supportive environment for women who want to surf. By the end of that October, when the club paused for winter, more than 50 women were regularly heading to Fistral after work on a Wednesday. Some signed up for lessons, which are available from local trained instructors, others just wanted the reassurance of surfing with a group.

The club returned the following spring, and Rachel also started organising some regular women-only surfing weekends in partnership with Newquay Activity Centre. Spaces quickly booked up, with women of all ages and abilities coming from around

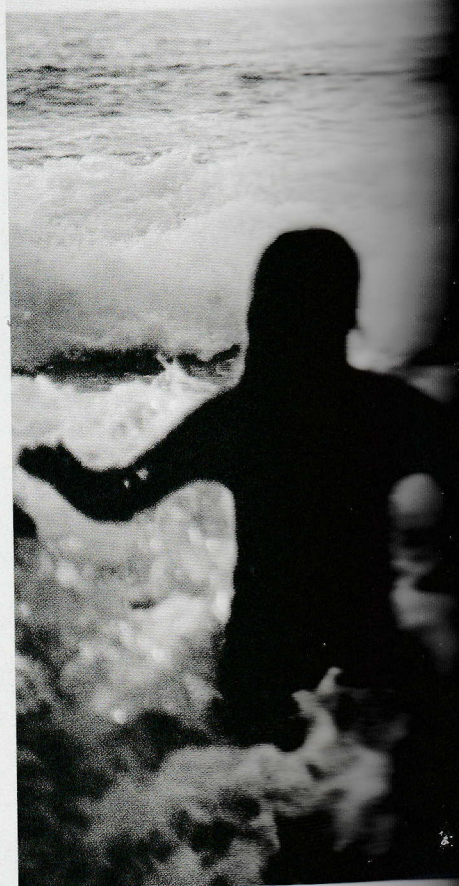
the country. 'Some people will only get up to their hands and knees and that's fine,' says Rachel. 'They'll be happy because they've been in the sea and they're buzzing afterwards. You can see it in their faces.'

## FEEL-GOOD FACTOR

Pro surfer Tassy Swallow is equally evangelical about the transformative power of paddling a board out into the sea. Now 25 years old, Tassy was surfing by the age of seven and has represented Great Britain around the world. Surfing is her lifeblood. 'More than four days out of the sea and I'm crazy,' she says, laughing. She finds it almost impossible to put her passion for it into words. 'It's just a feeling that you will never have had unless you've been in the ocean and surfed a wave. And after you've done it, it's something that will have changed you.'

In 2012 Tassy started Tassy's Surf Ratz, a girls-only surf club in her Cornish hometown of St Ives. 'When I was young there were no other girls to surf with,' she explains. 'And as soon as I set it up I saw the benefit of having all girls in the

THIS PICTURE Women + Waves members finding their confidence in the water LEFT One of Tassy's Surf Ratz catching a wave



water – the positivity and the way they pushed each other on. Just being there for each other.' She coaches girls aged from five to 16 and the club runs all year, only pausing when Tassy herself is away competing. In the summer she teaches after school and as the nights draw in the sessions move to the weekend.

Classes are held around St Ives location and time will change depending on the conditions. 'I work a lot with the tides and the surf forecast to make sure that every time we go in it's ideal for the group that I have,' explains Tassy. 'And it's super big and windy on Portmeor, for example, I'll take them into the harbour and there will be really small, clean waves. Details are all available on her Facebook page, Tassy's Surf Ratz.'





The Women + Waves Surf Club, with Rachel Murphy centre front in the black wetsuit





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ABOVE Tassy Swallow and the girls from Surf Ratz having fun in the water LEFT Women + Waves members carrying their boards into the sea on Fistral Beach in Newquay

## INSPIRING CONFIDENCE

The challenge of encouraging girls to participate in sports is well documented, and through the Surf Ratz Tassy hopes to get more girls active outdoors. But her club is about much more than exercise – it's a place of sanctuary and inspiration.

The harbour town of St Ives is famed for its charming fishermen's cottages and beautiful seafront location, but for young people it can be a challenging place to live at times. In winter it's deserted, with little to do, and in summer it's crammed with tourists, leaving the residents feeling pushed out. Surf Ratz gives local girls a year-round space of their own.

Perched on a grassy peninsula, their clubhouse is a safe place where the girls can meet, learn and have fun. Through surfing, Tassy also hopes to set them up with some good skills and aspirations for

life. Surfing is all about individual style, she says, and honing that helps the girls to develop their confidence both in and out of the water. 'With surfing I finally felt confident in my own skin and sure of what I was doing,' she remembers. 'And I can see that now in a lot of the girls who join the club. Within a week they've come out of their shell.'

Tassy has great visions for Surf Ratz, expanding what she can offer at the clubhouse and getting even more girls involved. Meanwhile Rachel is planning a series of surf weekends throughout 2019. Their advice to anyone thinking about that first surf? Just take the plunge. 'You're going to feel better afterwards,' says Rachel. 'That I can guarantee.'

For more from Rachel and Tassy, see [womenandwavessociety.com](http://womenandwavessociety.com) and [facebook.com/tassyssurfratz](https://facebook.com/tassyssurfratz).

## OUR FAVOURITE SURF SPOTS

- **Fistral, Newquay.** Rachel's 'go to' surfing beach which is safe, with a great community. 'There's no surf like it when you paddle out and all your mates are there.'
- **Porthmeor, St Ives.** 'The dreamiest beach ever and the best waves too,' says Tassy.
- **Jam Jar Café, Newquay.** 'The best place to meet people for post-surf grub,' says Rachel. She recommends the bagels and the cake ([jamjarcafe.com](http://jamjarcafe.com)).
- **Surfing Life, Newquay.** 'Friendly, with loads of great equipment and they give good advice too,' says Rachel (01637 859400, [surfinglifestore.com](http://surfinglifestore.com)).
- **The Stable, Fistral Beach.** This beachfront pizza restaurant has some of the best views in town – and it's where the Women + Waves members head after a club session (01637 878311, [fistral.stablepizza.com](http://fistral.stablepizza.com)).