

IN CONVERSATION WITH NATASHA SONES

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(VIMA PHOTOGRAPHY)



ABOUT NATASHA

Natasha recently became the first paddlesports winner of an Adventure Queens Grant, a not-for-profit women's adventure community. Their support will allow Natasha to fulfil her dream of exploring Finland on her paddleboard this summer. We caught with Natasha for the lowdown.

Before we start, Let our readers know a little about yourself, your background, your family, etc.

Hi! I'm an adventure blogger and married mother of three who loves getting outside and having adventures. I live in the coastal village of Hollesley, in Suffolk. I moved here four years ago, although I grew up in Suffolk and am lucky enough to live near the forest, river and beach. My friends and I regularly swim, go to the beach, catch up, and get outside.

Tell us about the start of your SUP journey.

I started SUP during the Covid pandemic three years ago. I had a lesson on holiday in Dorset between lockdowns in July 2020, when everything re-opened. I was made redundant during the first lockdown, and I decided to use the redundancy money to buy myself something just for me, so I bought a paddleboard! Since then, I paddle all year round, and I have inspired many of my friends through my photos to try my board and take it up themselves.

I regularly paddle the rivers and seas of Suffolk. Having three children and three dogs means I don't have much time. I love SUP because it is my time, no one can reach me, and I can drift away and be calm and serene.

How did you become an ambassador for This Girl Can Suffolk?

I am passionate about inspiring women and girls to get outside and be active. I joined This Girl Can, a Sport England campaign funded by the National Lottery, when I moved to the country and became more outdoorsy. The This Girl Can Suffolk campaign, supported by Active Suffolk, inspires and empowers women to participate in sports and physical activity, regardless of their shape, size or ability. The other ambassadors and I help to support the campaign locally by telling our own stories about how we fit exercise into

our busy lives, the barriers we have faced and the positive impact that exercise has had on our lives.

Congratulations on being the first paddlesports winner of an Adventure Queens Grant – who gave you the idea or inspiration to apply for the grant?

Thank you – I am delighted to be the first paddlesports winner of the grant! Adventure Queens is a free, not-for-profit women's adventure community run entirely by volunteers. They help delicately smash down barriers that prevent women from going on outdoor adventures and help them realise their full potential.

The Adventure Queens Grant is the group's way of helping women take on their first boundary-pushing, life-changing adventure by providing funding, kit and mentoring. To date, the group has supported eleven recipients of the grant.

A gem of an idea had been in my heart for a long time of doing a multi-day SUP adventure. I went along to an Adventure Queens camp out in the summer of 2022, and after hearing other Queens talk about their experience of the grant, I decided to enter it myself. I applied in October 2022 and was over the moon in February 2023 to be told that out of almost 200 applications, the judges chose me to be one of three winners!

The adventure needed to be primarily human-powered and push you out of your comfort zone. Carrying all my equipment on my paddleboard, I will paddle and wild camp around several different islands, exploring the gateway to lush green forests, sandy beaches and coastal nature as a contrast to the bustling city of Helsinki. I will be powering myself away across the Baltic Sea - aided mainly by adventure spirit and chocolate. I can't wait to show that adventures don't have to be done only through hiking, cycling and running.



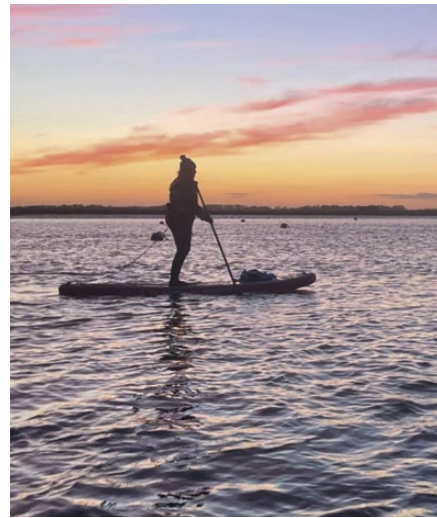
So the grant allows you to explore Finland - why has Finland always been your dream?

I have always loved Finland, and only ever been in winter. I've also yearned to go there in the summer months across Finland - known for their 'nightless nights'. While everyone I know is sleeping, I hope to paddleboard or hike under the phenomenon of the midnight sun, experiencing the incredible change in the nature of the light and the warm and bright light you get, usually only at sunrise or sunset.

I also love combining my adventure with my love of nature and hygge. The whole appeal of SUP for me is the peacefulness and calm it brings me. It would be a privilege to experience Finland from the water in a truly mindful way.

I plan to explore and wild camp in the Eastern archipelago around Helsinki, which comprises 330 islands. These beautiful islands boast fantastic scenery that can only be reached by boat or watercraft.

My original plan was to do it in the UK, but I was inspired by Adventure Queens, who were planning travels in France, Scotland and further afield. SUP-ing in a different country would add an extra layer of awesomeness to the trip! (and a whole lot more scariness). Plus, where better to do an awesome adventure than in perhaps the happiest country in the world?



According to British Canoeing, SUP has seen a surge in participation, with just under 600,000 people regularly getting out on the water

What aims do you have for your Finland expedition?

I applied for this grant as the push to do something completely alone and be selfish in a way I never get to be in normal life. I battle with mental health as I have children with additional needs who have struggled. Their needs can be so overwhelming that I started SUP to give me much-needed peace. I love being in nature and how it makes me feel.

Solo adventuring will give me such a feeling of accomplishment and elation, and I hope to gain so much new confidence that I will be able to inspire others too. Especially busy mums like me. I also want to progress my SUP skills and become more knowledgeable in navigation.

I would be proud to inspire people, particularly women, to follow their dreams. I would especially love to encourage greater participation in paddlesports, particularly SUP. According to British Canoeing, SUP has seen a surge in participation, with just under 600,000 people regularly getting out on the water. It would be fantastic for people to realise that SUP adventures are right there, ready to be had!

There is tremendous enthusiasm amongst women for SUP – why do you think that is?

SUP is very accessible and easy to get into. With a big range of affordable boards on the market, the sport has become accessible for anyone who lives near water. Inflatable boards also mean you can take them anywhere.

There is an increase in spending time around blue spaces, waterscapes, and their surroundings. Experiencing time spent in one of these blue spaces, especially participating in an activity or hobby, can benefit us. It connects us to nature and a sense of belonging, especially if part of a community such as a SUP group. It is excellent for physical and mental health, skills, and knowledge. It can also increase our spirituality, care ethic, and environmental responsibility. A lot of women relate to this.

So what more can be done to bring even more women into the sport?

Kit is an issue for many women, particularly a lack of comfortable kit that fits appropriately in various sizes. Previous This Girl Can research has highlighted key barriers to women's participation, which fall into three main areas: fears around appearance, fears about their ability and fears about what women's priorities should be. An issue I have personal experience with is a lack of inclusive sizing – finding a wetsuit that fits has been very challenging.

Female instructors and leaders, as well as some women-only environments, may be more appealing to women. I am also



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motivated by female paddler friends who have taken the time to help me develop as a paddler, such as my friend Jess who helps to administer the East of England Paddlesports group and has been helpful.

We need to ensure a visual representation of a diverse range of women in the sport and ensure opportunities for access to all. Introducing disadvantaged, differently-abled and vulnerable families to paddlesports must be a key aim. The #ShePaddles British Canoeing initiative is helping with this. More funding and training opportunities to get more women and girls into paddlesport and keep them progressing to where they want to be would also help.

Seeing female role models doing amazing things in the sport makes it easier to be inspired and give it a go. I get inspired by other paddlers I see on social media, read about and listen to. I follow people like Lizzie Carr, Cal Major, Samantha Rutt, Jo Moseley, Shilpa Rasaiah, Sarah Blues and Fiona Quinn.

How do you see SUP development? Do you think even more growth, for instance?

SUP has become very popular; this is only the beginning. There is a strong SUP racing scene in the UK, and it would be great to see younger people getting involved. With this increase in the sport's popularity comes a need to promote safety within the sport. We need more awareness of the dangers of water and the safety aspects of SUP.



How do you keep the SUP stoke going and motivate others to get involved?

I have an adventure blog, and I regularly post here and on social media (follow me @natashastarseeker) to hear more about my adventures. Many people have been inspired to try SUP, and I am always happy to help people get started.

Sunrise and sunset paddles encourage people to want to give it a go; you can get some amazing photos!

Have you got any personal SUP goals after Finland?

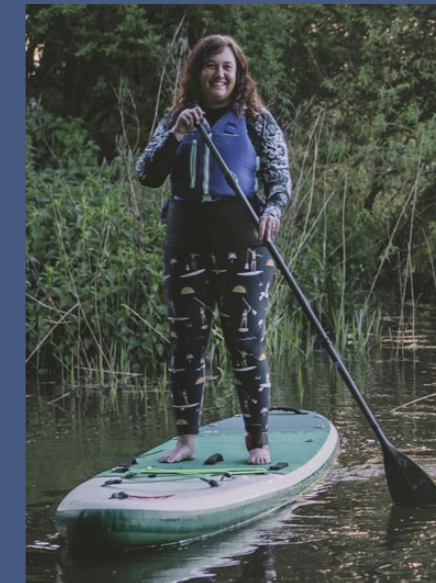
I'd love to try to beat a world record in SUP. If anyone has any ideas or wants to attempt something with me, let me know! I'd also like to get a SUP Leadership/Instructor qualification and see where that will take me. I would love to continue to be an ambassador for SUP and to keep encouraging women and girls into the world of paddlesports.

Which brands do you work with, and how do they specifically help you?

The AQ Grant winners are generously supported by Eddie Bauer, Komoot, Osprey, and Adventurous Ink, providing kit and cash to help support the adventure. This has been invaluable, and I would not have been able to do it without them.

I am an ACAI Outdoorwear ambassador too, as they are a community partner with Adventure Queens, and their clothing has been great for adventuring in.

I have recently got a Red Paddle Co touring Voyager board, and I love it. I would love to work with Red in the future!



I'm very proud to be involved in the Save the Deben campaign to raise public awareness of the plight of sewage in the River Deben

Which paddling locations in the world would be on your bucket list?

Somewhere with exquisite turquoise water and white beaches, probably like the Maldives. Although I have fallen in love with Finland and would love to paddle there and other Scandinavian countries. The fjords of Norway look amazing!

Besides SUP, what else do you do in life?

I also enjoy hiking and wild swimming. I run a wild swimming group locally, part of the Bluetits Swimmers, with over 1,000 members. I also run a peer social paddling Facebook group called the Peninsula Paddlers.

I can't help but notice you have dogs - tell us a little about them, and do you take them SUPing?

I have three dogs; a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, a Cavajack (half Cavalier, half Jack Russell) rescue and a Chihuahua rescue. I would love to have a SUP pup, but unfortunately, none like being in or on the water. Although they love running around the beach, sometimes, the family walks the dogs whilst I'm paddling or swimming, and they watch.

Tell us one interesting, non-SUP-related fact that we might not know about you.

I used to drive an ice cream van as a summer job.

Is there any issue that stops you from sleeping at night?

I have sleepless nights about our school education system. There are 1.3 million children in the UK with additional needs and disabilities. Tens of thousands of these children can not attend school due to a lack of funding, resources, diagnoses and adaptations. With neurodivergent children myself who aren't able to cope with mainstream schools, I have seen first-hand how much fighting it takes to get support. The stress of this partly makes being on the water vital for my mental health, as it allows me to escape.

Name just one thing we can do as paddlers to improve our environment.

We have a responsibility to stand up for our rivers and seas. I'm very proud to be involved in the Save the Deben campaign to raise public awareness of the plight of sewage in the River Deben, my local river. I'm thrilled that the local village Waldringfield has been awarded Designated Bathing Status, but we are still fighting for Woodbridge to get the same.

Quickie questions

Who would it be if you could paddle with anyone, dead or alive?

Dave Grohl so he could serenade me with Foo Fighters songs as we paddle!

Which famous person would you like to see play you in a film?

Sandra Bullock as she is funny and a great actress.

Do you have a mentor?

I became inspired by the Adventure Queens, particularly founder Anna McNuff, Community Leaders Kate and Nadia, and Gee – my mentor for the Adventure Queens Grant. I've also been encouraged by Neil, the River Deben Paddlers group leader and Ricky from East Coast Adventures.

An ideal night out for you is?

An evening at the beach with family and friends, definitely involving food of some kind!

What one luxury item would you take with you on a desert island?

A book – or 10. I read very quickly!

What would I find in your fridge right now?

A lot of food gets demolished very quickly by the children! Plus, Pepsi Max, as I am addicted.

What would you prepare for us if we came to your house for dinner?

I would probably take you to the beach for a BBQ beside the sea with marshmallows to toast on the fire afterwards whilst watching the sunset, and then the stars come out.

Who are your SUP buddies?

I paddle and swim regularly with my friends Kelly, Emily, and many others. I didn't have many SUP buddies when I started, so I set up the peer group Peninsula Paddlers so people could find someone to paddle with. That's the good thing about Facebook groups such as the River Deben Paddlers and East of England Paddlesports.

If you could be a wild animal – what would it be?

A deer, I love them, and there are a lot near where I live. I have a tattoo of one on my wrist. They represent strength, power, awareness and energy and are so beautiful.

Any final shoutouts?

My lovely husband, Kev, for putting up with my wild adventure ideas and letting me spend money on many SUPs and kits. Plus my friends and family. My three children are my world, and I love having adventures with them.



The other two winners of the Adventure Queens Grants are bikepacker Vicky and hiker Jo. The Adventure Queens will share more info on Vicky, Jo, and my plans and adventures on their Facebook group, Instagram, and blog over the coming months, so stay tuned! You can follow my adventures on Instagram @natashastarseeker.

