

Emma coaching



Photographer: Graham Woollven

# Kate Simmons



Katie describes SUP touring as a constant balancing act of fear of the unknown with a burning desire to explore. In this interview, Katie discusses how her paddling journey, which started at the age of 15, has led her to plan her most demanding adventure yet – a 1000km circumnavigation of Wales.

Photos: Tom Furey

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# #ShePaddles INTERVIEWS

**Interviews:** Emma Love

After receiving over 150 applications from around the country, British Canoeing, Canoe Wales and the Scottish Canoe Association were excited to announce the #ShePaddles Ambassadors for 2022. Sixteen inspirational women chosen to promote paddling and encourage more women and girls to get on the water. In this series of interviews, Emma Love chats with eight of the ambassadors about all things SUP!

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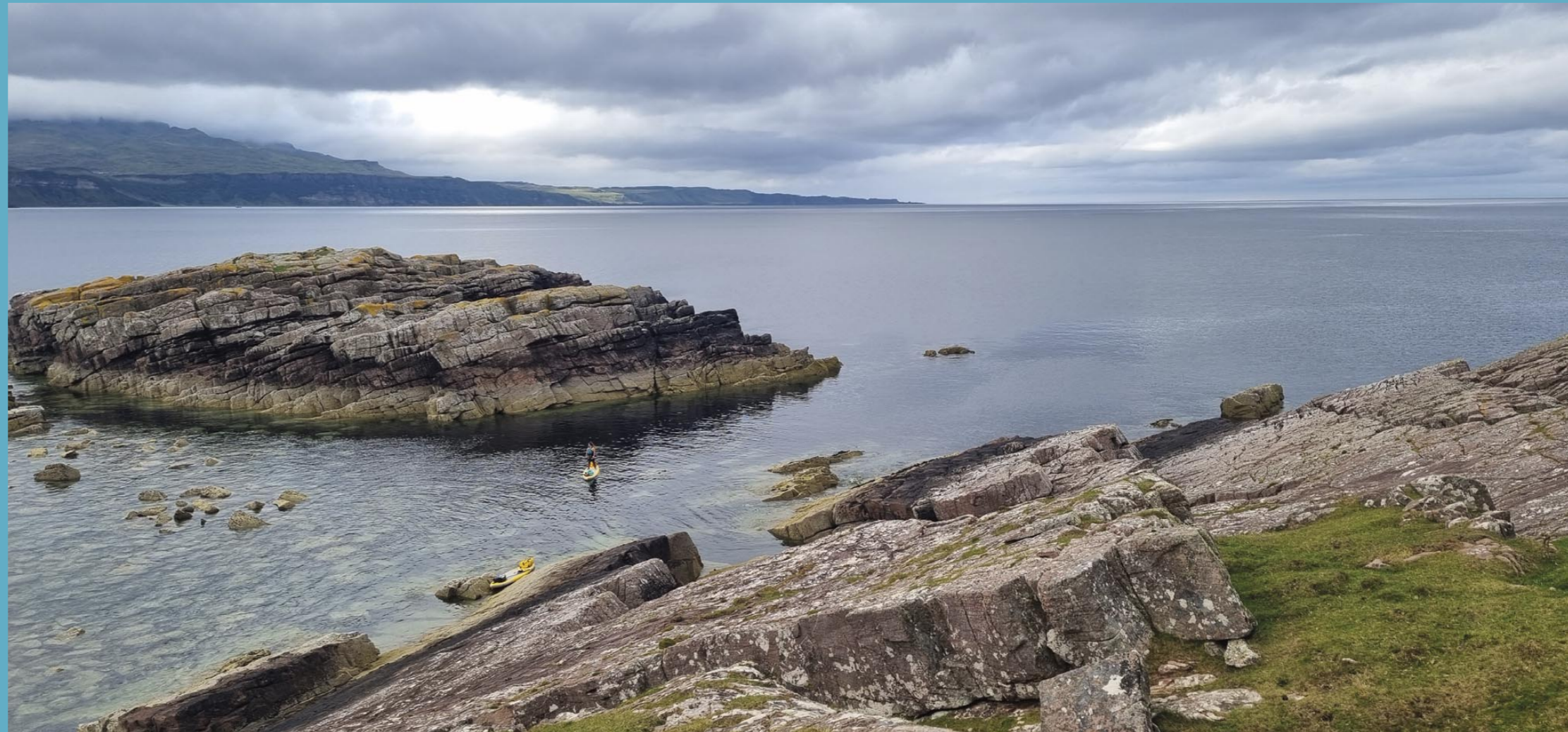
## How did you discover paddling?

I was quite a wild child! When I was fifteen, my mum and dad decided that I needed to get organised and have discipline in my life, so they made me join the Air Cadets - which I loved. Suddenly I was camping, learning about bushcraft, climbing, canoeing and kayaking. After my GCSEs, I completed an adventure training course that led to becoming an outdoor pursuits apprentice. This enabled me to complete my raft guide training and coaching qualifications. I then worked as a raft guide on the River Dee and the Tryweryn. Later on, I moved to South Wales and worked for the Cardiff International White Water Centre, where, at the time, I was one of only two female raft guides.

## How did you discover SUP?

I discovered SUP over ten years ago, so this was way before it gained the popularity it has now here in the UK. A good friend of mine, Anthony Ing (Stand Up Paddleboard UK), had returned from a trip to America and bought a few of Corran Addison's Soul SUPs. He was looking for a couple of enthusiastic paddlers for a photo shoot so, along with Peter Glyn Firth, I volunteered. Ant taught us the basics, and by the afternoon, we were paddling the Grade 2 rapids at Mile End Mill, Llangollen. I remember us spending all day running and re-running the drops, playing on the waves and constantly falling in! I just loved the challenge, and it was such great fun!





**I know SUP adventure coastal touring has become the focus for you these days. How did this come about?**

I was paddle boarding on white water, but at that time, the scene hadn't developed in North Wales – people would occasionally pop over, but more often than not, I would find myself paddling alone. This meant I didn't have anyone to bounce off ideas with apart from a few kayaking friends. So, a few years ago, I took up SUP touring. I had always been interested in coastal paddling, but admittedly, I found it very confusing and consequently off-putting – it's a process that takes a lot of time and commitment. With lots of training and practice, I now enjoy the intricacies of planning and executing these trips and circumnavigations. And I have been so lucky with my partner Tom Furey. He assists with planning the bigger expeditions and accompanies me on them. It is really interesting working together because we see journeys slightly differently. It's just great bouncing ideas off each other to ensure our successful adventures. His belief in me is fantastic.

**What is it about coastal paddling that keeps you going back for more?**

I find there is this fire that burns deep inside me, that wants to complete further exploration and equally has a fear of the unknown. Both these elements drive me to do more. I love being fully immersed in the wilderness, and I feel you have to earn your adventures. You must be switched on with your tide timings and understand where weather windows fall to allow your trip to go well. There's nothing better than getting tidal assistance or timing your arrival right at a particular headland to gain safe passage.

**What drives this passion?**

The love for the sea has always been there - from completing my diving courses to sailing across the Atlantic. I've seen the ocean in so many different ways, but SUP adds that extra vulnerability because I feel so much more connected to the ecosystems and the incredible wildlife of the British Isles. It doesn't matter how many times I see a seal, a pod of dolphins or a bazaar of Guillemots - it is always incredible and a privilege to share the water with them.

**How did your fascination for paddling the Menai Strait develop?**

The Menai has always intrigued me since I was a little girl. We would drive over Britannia Bridge, and I would stare at the water, wondering what was going on and why. The first time I SUP'd this area of water was on a course – a group of us paddled on a full spring tide, and it was incredible! From the speed of the water to standing waves to a huge peeling eddy, I was in and out of the features and playing on every element! Even now, when I paddle this water, it gives me very different experiences. I love the puzzle I have to put together to ensure the timing is right for the particular experience I am after. Whether it is understanding the times of the tides correctly, wanting to play on the Swellies or the magical experience of paddling under the bridges, it is a special place to be.

**What's on your 'to do' list?**

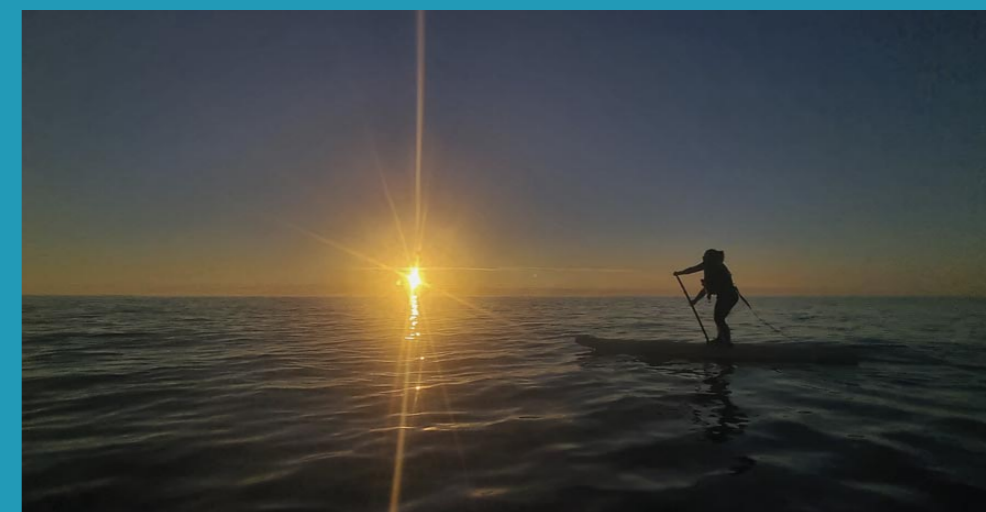
Having resigned from working full time for the NHS, I am now focused on building upon my professional accreditation. I aim to complete my Expedition Guide assessment with the Water Skills

Academy. I launched my business (Basecamp Paddle Boarding), and it's already shaping up to be a busy year, so I'm stoked about this. And I am involved in many events for #shepaddles which I am really excited about.

**Any self-goals?**

Tom and I plan to circumnavigate Wales (if the weather window allows) while supporting a few different charities. Our planned trip is over 1000km - this will test us both and hopefully not the marriage we are about to start! I am also keen to paddle around a few of the Scottish isles, but we will need an extended period of settled weather to allow safe crossings. Some of the isles have over 10km of open ocean between them. My list never seems to get any smaller!

“I had always been interested in coastal paddling, but found it very confusing and consequently off-putting – it's a process that takes a lot of commitment.”



# Vikki McPherson

Vikki's paddling journey can only be described as inspiring! We discuss how stepping out of her comfort zone has led to her supporting women in her local community and why the role of a British Canoeing #ShePaddles Ambassador is so important in celebrating the diversity of women's voices.

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## What tempted you to have a go at paddleboarding?

For a couple of years, my older children had been going SUP'ing, and I would sit watching them, thinking it looked terrific fun. At the time, I didn't want to go on a paddleboard because I didn't have a lot of water confidence or energy – this was when my youngest son was still very little. Then in May 2020, I booked a family session, and it turned out that my daughter could not come along, so we had this free space. I suddenly felt brave and decided I would take her place!

## What was your overriding memory of your first time on the water?

I remember just feeling so fortunate that we could paddle on such a beautiful and local loch. It was very tranquil that day, and I was just blown away by this fantastic feeling - of both physically being surrounded by water and experiencing nature!



Photo: Eilidh Connolly



Photo: Jim Gibson

## Congratulations on being selected as a British Canoeing #ShePaddles ambassador. How has your paddling journey influenced your view of the role?

I am just so passionate about being an ambassador because of the change I experienced. Before SUP, I would describe myself as quite shy. When you have been a parent (as I have) for 13 years, it is easy to forget your sense of self, have fun, look after your mental health, and make time for yourself. Paddleboarding has made me jump outside my box! These days I am like, where did this person come from? I want to encourage and support women to get out of their comfort zones. I

paddle with ladies in my village, with other mums, and it has become quite clear to me how important it is (as adults) that we find our passion, find our joy and just go for it!

## Can you describe what it was that made you want to continue to develop your SUP skills?

That first time I got on a SUP, I remember I was shaking, and it felt like such an alien experience. But by the end of the two hours, I was totally hooked. I think I had only two or three sessions before I knew I needed to learn more and wanted to know more, and I just wanted to be able to push my boundaries, improve my knowledge and

technique, and do as much paddling as I could. This was quite a shocker for my kids because I had previously been so scared of trying SUP!

## How do you achieve a family/SUP balance?

It's easier in the summer because the kids and I can all go and stay the whole day at the loch, swimming and paddling. The little one comes on the front of my board, and we all have a great time. In the winter, it's more challenging because it's cold and the kids don't want to go. It takes a bit of planning to make sure everyone is looked after so I can go out with a friend for a weekly paddle.



“Paddleboarding has made me jump outside my box! These days I am like, where did this person come from?”

Photo: Eilidh Connolly



Photo:  
Donald MacPherson



Photo: Eilidh Connolly

### What are your plans for this year?

There are so many local women who would like to have a go at SUP. They see my posts on social media and post comments - they are so keen and think it looks amazing. Unfortunately, it is too expensive for us to book a provider regularly, and I don't have the equipment to lend. So, I am just at the beginning stages of speaking with my local canoe club, and hopefully, we will be able to develop SUP as part of their provision, which would be fantastic. If this is not possible, my alternative plan would be to start a paddleboarding club.



Photo: Eilidh Connolly

### And for yourself?

In terms of my development, I feel I could learn a lot from watching other coaches and working alongside another coach until I'm qualified. I would love to offer SUP sessions weekly for all age ranges eventually.

### What qualifications are you hoping to achieve?

I am starting with the British Canoeing Sheltered Water Coach Award. I don't have a background in outdoor sports or coaching, but when I did my BC Core Coach course in August of last year - I loved it! It was such a different perspective from what I have studied before, and it was amazing!

### As well as flat water, I have seen some of your social posts showing you playing on white water. How did this develop?

I had my first go on white water in the winter of 2020, not long after my first time on a paddleboard. White water is my latest challenge. Some days I like a tranquil paddle on my local loch, and then some



Photo: Eilidh Connolly

days, I like some excitement, and I get on the river Dee. I am supported by Jim Gibson, a fantastic coach and pivotal here in Scotland. He encourages many female paddlers and has quite a few prodigies, including Emy McLeod and Jessica Phillip.

### What would you say to women who have watched the #ShePaddles ambassadors over the past few years, who would love to apply but are doubting whether they have anything to offer the role?

It is fantastic that there are just so many different ways to approach the role of a British Canoeing Ambassador. Passionate female voices come in so many different forms - whether it's about nature, women's rights, being a leisure paddler or moving up the ladder professionally - and they are all great to hear and celebrate. I am constantly messaging women and saying you have to do it next year because you'd be amazing, and you'd bring this or that aspect to it. If you've got a passion for paddling, then you just have to go for it.