

MIXING IT UP: THE COOKIE INTERVIEW

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WHILST ON HOLIDAY IN VASSILIKI, GREECE LAST YEAR IN EARLY SEPTEMBER I HEADED TO THE COSMOS HOTEL TO GRAB A COFFEE WITH COOKIE (SIMON) FROM NEILSON, A LONG-STANDING, PROFESSIONAL SEASONAIRE. I wanted to find out about his windsurfing journey and the eye-catching stunts that I had seen filtering through the social media channels all season. The temperatures were lovely, beginners were progressing in the early morning light onshore winds and the week had delivered reasonably strong cross-shore winds every afternoon, filling the bay with good energy.

Hey Cookie, thanks very much for agreeing to the interview. To start – how long have you been into windsurfing and what got you involved in the first place?

A pleasure. It's been about 15 years. I started dinghy sailing on the South Coast when I was at college. I then went to work for Sunsail at Club Vounaki (now Neilson) in the Kirki Bar in the evenings. I worked late, slept in, windsurfed then worked late again. That gave me loads of on-water time. I just loved windsurfing and I've done it ever since.

Do you do much in the UK now?

No I'm overseas all the time – visiting the UK for a week at the most between seasons. I can't even remember the last time I windsurfed in the UK actually. I don't even own a wetsuit!

That's awesome. So when you're out here in Vass what's the main style of windsurfing that you're into.

You know I'd love to say it's freestyle but it's not actually been regularly windy this year, as in really windy. It's been more like steady 6.5, 7.5 weather so we've been doing big sail blasting/freeride things and the old school stuff has come back in. I'm loving back-winded gybes, donkey gybes, Essex ducks, all the stuff that you can do happily on a 6.5-8.0m sail and a big board. People are looking and going, "Wow that's cool." It feels great and the guests can relate to it.

Perfect – we could almost see resurgence in that kind of stuff. Tell me about your role as Resort Manager with Neilson.

My job is to make sure that everything runs as smooth as possible. Everything from transferring and rooming the guests to equipment, structure of sessions, safety and instruction. Developing my team is key. I take great pride in helping them to get better at their personal stuff and that reflects directly into their teaching and customer service.

That sounds like a dream role for someone who has a passion for running a hotel whilst still being able to get out on the water loads.

Yeah we work right alongside the hotelier Stelios who takes care of hospitality, housekeeping, kitchen and bar. We sort the operational side of things and there's 16-22 of us depending on the time of season.

Your journey with Neilson, what year did you start and how did you get to the position that you're in right now?

I started with Neilson in 2006 in Lemnos. I arrived with the incoming guests on the opening day of the season – and was ushered down to the bar, told to quickly put on my uniform and stand next to a wall. I was instructed to smile, welcome the guests and ask them to keep walking. I later found out that the wall I was standing in front of had got wet paint on it! I loved that season and I kept switching between beach,

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bikes, kids club, tennis, waterski and doing random stuff. I used to think, *"You want me to do what? Cool – I can do that, let's give that a go,"* – and it was great. I did the same thing for the next five or six years – officially a beach member but happy to do anything. Through this I became experienced and multi-qualified and the knowledge grew as I trained. Ultimately, after about five or six years, it made sense to move me into a beach manager role.

I think that a lot of people aim for that a bit earlier don't they, so they maybe don't explore all those roles that you've done?

Yeah, a lot of people get involved and aim immediately to become a manager. I had no aspirations to do that when I started as I was just enjoying training with people that were more experienced than with and having a management team that I could look up. So when I actually stepped into the role

I was fully ready for it. I did a couple of years as a beach manager in a range of resorts across Greece and Turkey as well as Dahab. Then I spent five years as an activity manager in both smaller and larger resorts. Coming to the Cosmos Hotel in Vass this year has been a case of taking everything I've known from the larger centres and just making it more personal – perfect for getting to know the guests really well.

Now, a while ago I started to see some spectacular photos of you doing stuff on the water that was pretty different so let's talk about that.

Indeed! Almost every day when it's windy we have the Protography guys out on the water snapping away. But once you've got a nice picture of you blasting along, dragging a hand, sticking your tongue out, etc, you start thinking about what else you can do. So we just started trying to make some silly pictures for a bit of fun. From body drags to sitting



on a board fully planing and that's how it started. One day I wondered if we could get a photo of me reading a book. So we grabbed a novel from the book-swap rack which happened to be a classic: *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen. It stayed in the photographer's bag for two weeks until we decided to go for it. I've never had so many people giving me strange looks on the water blasting up and down trying to hold this book! Blasting was fine but trying to tack or gybe using two fingers without dropping it was interesting. I've never read the book yet I have read one particular sentence 10 times at least.

Yep I love that photo and the pondering-beard-stroking-thing you've got going on. What else have you done?

We took a kids buggy out on a Gemini Tandem with a member of staff. I originally strapped a doll into it to see if it

would work and to wind up the kids club manager to make it look like I had taken a baby windsurfing (she went a bit mental!) Another time I was teaching some kids and it got too windy for them to hold on. I wanted to give them, one at a time, a full-speed experience so we tied a rope to the front with a wake boarding handle and I stuck a big sail on the back. It was pretty exhausting and really hard work to control it but great fun – the kids were buzzing as we were overtaking so many people. On the Gemini our yoga instructor did a headstand and a wheel at full speed!

I saw a recent photo in a suit!

That was supposed to be a James Bond thing and I had a Martini glass in one hand. It was working well and I was approaching the camera boat at full speed holding the empty glass. Then, suddenly, I thought that it would look much

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better if the glass had something in it. Honestly I don't know what I was thinking as I went to dunk the glass in the water at 20 knots and of course the glass just got ripped out of my hand. So in the photo I looked more like a random guy in a suit than James Bond. Actually, if you look closely you might see that my tie is made from a cut-up Severne sail bag!

Future stunts?

I wanna get someone on my shoulders - one of the smaller female members of the beach team to see if that would work. It's gonna be hard to hold on - she's gonna need some abs and to hook her feet under my armpits...

That would be amazing. It's almost like going back to the days when people were rail riding, doing the splits and smashing out body rolls inside the boom. But that was at slower speeds. Putting the fun back into it is what I can see happening here.

Absolutely. I can do a lot of carving stuff in windsurfing so I thought about how I can make it entertaining for me and break the cycle of just doing the same gybe over and over. This was my way of making it fun, making it silly.

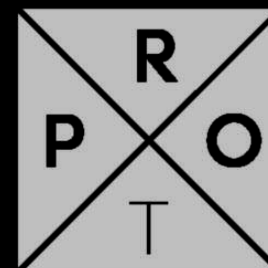
Is that the secret to keep people engaged with windsurfing so they're not going off and finding other things to do...just keep pushing?

Yeah. It doesn't need to be specifically pushing the limits though, rather doing different things. I teach skiing a lot in the winter and it's the same thing - how can you break the cycle of doing the same old routine? How can you make it fun? Let's do something a little bit different. I'm not taking about windsurfing in a 3.0m storm or skiing off a cliff but just breaking the habit, breaking the cycle. I get my team to think about how they can keep their seasons fun and interesting. Maybe they can start getting into biking, fitness, something different so it's not the exact same thing over and over again.

And that keeps the connection to the sport I guess, helping us to stay focused...

...and fresh and new and interesting, not getting stale doing the same thing.

I like that. Last question. In just one word, what's the secret for longevity in the windsurfing business?
(a pause, a smile) Variety.



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