Surf's Up…in Iran!

In a remote part of Iran, Marion Poizeau teaches Muslim girls how to surf.

By Siobhán McGowan

Women in Iran are learning to surf.

Diehard surfers live by one rule: follow the waves. They'll journey to the farthest corners of the globe to ride the gnarliest ones. French filmmaker and surf fanatic Marion Poizeau is no different. When she found out that Baluchistan,

a remote part of Iran on the Persian Gulf, had some of the best waves in the world, she knew she had to go there. But when she learned that many of the young girls who live in the region had never surfed, her reasons for going changed. Now, Marion was determined to share her passion with the young locals. She would teach them how to surf and make a documentary movie about it.

However, Marion needed to consult with authorities first. Iran is a conservative Islamic country, so she didn't want to do anything that would be disrespectful to the people's religious beliefs. To her relief, a religious authority known as a mullah gave the thumbs-up to her project. "The mullah said that Islam encourages sport for women because it's good physically and spiritually," Marion recalls.

Surf Squad

Now that Marion had approval, she could assemble her team of instructors. First, she asked Irish pro surfer Easkey Britton to come along on the trip to Baluchistan. Next, she contacted two Iranian female athletes: snowboard instructor Mona Seraji and swimmer Shalha Yasini. Neither had ever surfed before.

But when Marion told them about her idea, they didn't hesitate to take the plunge.

Testing the Waters

With her surfer girl squad in place, Marion was all set to start teaching. People were "very, very welcoming," she says. But they were surprised. They had never seen surfing before. "Because we were only women in the water, they thought it was a sport for women," she says. Some fathers asked to get their daughters involved. Some husbands asked the same for their wives. At first they didn't realize that boys and men could surf too.

Next, Marion tackled the issue of surf clothing. Traditional wetsuits do not meet Islam's religious requirements. So, students had to wear their street clothes in the water—including the traditional headscarf called the hijab. At first, Marion was concerned that the clothing would make them feel uncomfortable. But she quickly learned

Marion and Easkey teach a young girl how to keep her balance on the board.

otherwise. For girls who had very sheltered lives until this point, soaked clothes were worth the freedom they felt while surfing.

So how did the students do? Terrific, according to Marion. They began the day by practicing how to pop up and stand on the surfboard. Soon they were practicing their skills in the water. By the end of the day, many students were able to ride waves. Each thrilling moment was captured on film by Marion.

Media Attention

In 2015, Marion released *Into the Sea*, the documentary that chronicles the experience. The film received a lot of praise from movie critics. However, that's not what matters most to Marion. For her, it's about inspiring others. A girl in Tehran might be inspired to pick up a surfboard after seeing the movie. Meanwhile, a girl in Southern California might be curious to learn more about Iran. "It feels great to imagine we are spraying the beauty across cultures," Marion says with satisfaction. "Once again, we proved the amazing potential of sport and surfing to break down barriers."

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