

SOULSISTER

INTERVIEW: DEB PINNIGER

ARTICLE BY JASON SMITH. PHOTOS BY JASON SMITH (UNLESS OTHERWISE CREDITED)

Deb Pinniger is quite simply the best female whitewater paddler in the world. In fact she's one of the best whitewater paddlers in the world, period. Her small frame and quiet manner mask an inner strength few could match. She is determined to travel her own path and has seemingly endless enthusiasm for her sport and for the people she meets wherever she goes. A few years ago, I shared a house with Deb and some friends. It was all we could do to keep up with her, such was her energy. We would paddle at Shepperton Weir before work and Hurley Weir after work, (usually in the dark). It was a tiring but fun time. I jumped at the chance to meet up with Deb for a chat on one of the rare occasions she's in the UK.



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It was way back in 1996 that I first met Deb Pinniger. She was paddling a purple Prijon Hurricane and working as a river guide in the French Alps. Despite only being 17, Deb was already a rock solid river runner and was beginning to display the smooth style that she is famous for today. Apart from bumping into her once or twice on the Dart that winter, I didn't really meet up with her again until the following summer, when I dropped into the Rabioux Campsite in France, where she was working as a guide.

By now Deb was in a Kendo and had begun to master the cartwheel - no easy feat on the Rabioux wave, especially in a long boat. We drank vino, talked shit and went for a mellow paddle on the Lower Durance, practising tail squirts and rock splats on the way. Deb went on to spend every spare moment that season honing her playboating skills and by the end of the summer she had been invited to join the fledgling French Freestyle Team at the World Championships in Canada.

Deb made the trip to Canada but was not allowed to compete because she wasn't a French national. But despite the disappointment Deb just did what she always does, she went paddling. Her time on the water came under the perceptive eye of industry wild child and then owner of Wave Sport Kayaks, Chan Zwansig. When Deb finally returned to the UK she brought with her a shiny new Wave Sport Stubby, with Chan's compliments.

Early in 1998 she took a job as a Post Lady in her hometown of Chippenham, Wiltshire. It was an occupation that not only paid the bills but allowed her to paddle at Hurley Weir every day. Her dedication paid off and she blew away the Ladies' class at the next Hurley Rodeo, and ended up in the Men's final as well!

Deb spent that summer safety kayaking in Turkey, working for Dave Manby, and took time out to represent Great Britain in the Camel Whitewater Rafting Championships in Costa Rica. The same year she flew out to New Zealand as a member of the GB squad to take part in her first ever international kayaking event, the 1998 Pre-World Freestyle Championships. Now paddling an Wave Sport X, Deb won the Ladies Class with ease and found herself catapulted into the strange world of pro-kayaking. A year later she returned to the same wave and once again took the gold medal to become the Ladies World Whitewater Freestyle Champion. I asked Deb if she had set out with the intention of becoming such a big name in freestyle, and she answered in her usual modest way. "None of it was planned at all, it was just the way things happened. I didn't even know I was going to New Zealand originally and flew all the way back across from Costa Rica to the UK only to fly to New Zealand a few days later for the Pre-Worlds. I can't imagine doing that now to be honest."

It is almost unheard of for the person who wins the Pre-Worlds to go on to win the Worlds. So did Deb find this an added pressure? "No, not really. The Worlds was a pretty good time for me. I had been in Africa on the Zambezi with Nico Chassing for two months, so I was on pretty good form when I went to New Zealand. I was feeling fairly confident, so I never felt uptight or pressurised by other people or my sponsors. Maybe I felt a little bit of pressure from myself though, because I'd put in all that effort. Actually, the funny thing is I never expected to be in the situation I'm in now, so things like the Pre-Worlds and the Worlds were a bonus to me. Although it sounds a little contradictory, I didn't set out to achieve those things and it kind of all fell into place and was just like being on a big happy bus somewhere. You just kind of jump on the bus and ride along with it and everything kinda works out."

This laid back approach is a refreshing change from the world of pro-kayakers, where paddlers will sell their grannies for sponsorship and a chance to be a pro. Deb has risen to the top of the heap by simply getting in her boat and kayaking. When asked if the competition side of things is a means to an end, she shrugs her shoulders and says,

Photo Deb Pinniger Collection



SOUL SISTER

"Yeah definitely, there's no doubt about that. But I also really enjoy freestyle paddling. It's not a question of only doing freestyle because I want a certain lifestyle. I really enjoy it. I've been to the Zambezi a couple of times and it's almost just freestyle paddling. But I kinda enjoy it as much as creaking. When you feel that good and confident in a boat, you've got a lot of strength and you're just right on top of it. Boating is an athletic sport and it's a really good feeling to be that much in tune with something, whatever it is. It doesn't have to be freestyle paddling, you could be playing hockey. Basically what I am trying to say is that I would playboat anyway, even if I didn't compete, because I really enjoy it. The feeling that it gives me to charge a move is great. You put so much energy into it and then ba', ba', bang, you nail it! So yeah, it's good but it's hard to explain."

Staying healthy is important to Deb but she spends so much time travelling that eating well and maintaining a good level of all round fitness is hard. While you may find many of Deb's fellow pros in the bar or the pizzeria, it's not unusual to find her out running, swimming or playing the occasional game of squash. "There's no denying that I like to drink and party as well", she says, "but on the other hand I

know that if you keep doing that for ever you are gonna burn out sooner or later, and that can lead to problems. In the end you have to respect yourself and leave the bad stuff alone. That's my own belief, you know. It's like wearing clean clothes or brushing your hair or something. In the end no one else is going to do it for you, so you have to put a little bit of effort in yourself. Anyway, I get the same buzz from running as I do from paddling freestyle. Throwing ends, charging a wave, it gets the blood flowing in your body and I get an awesome feeling from it. I think part of it is an addiction and part of it is self awareness. But it's hard to keep really fit if you're travelling all the time. You can't get into a routine. That's why when I come back home or I am in one place for a while I will really make an effort to run or do a little bit of stretching. If I am at home or in a place where I can cook, I will try to use it to my advantage and eat good fresh food. I get sick of eating crap on the road."

To most of us, travelling the world seems very glamorous and Deb has visited a list of countries as long as your arm. But in reality, constantly living out of a rucksack can be hard on both body and mind. "You make a lot of sacrifices when you travel a lot and I often feel I'm missing opportunities by not being in one place. Simple things like not being able to read through my emails properly mean I miss

out on things I could get involved in. It's a shame really."

With all her travelling, does Deb feel it important to have somewhere to call home? "When I'm in the UK I always base myself at my family's home in Chippenham. I like it there, it's where I grew up. I can walk down the street and meet people I know. It's where my roots are. But ultimately, it's my family's home and I'd like to make my own base somewhere pretty soon. It's nice to have somewhere that's yours and you can go and do whatever you like and not live out of a bag in the corner of someone else's house."

And Deb's heart will always be in the UK. "A lot of people are cynical about the UK but I like it a lot. Many of the people I hear dissing the UK have never been here, so it kind of guts me to

Photo Deb Pinniger Collection



hear the stuff they say about it. Honestly, I know it's a bit of a cliché but some of the nicest people I know are here and the British sense of humour takes some beating. It's always cool to come back and see your friends and have a lot of fun. In the end it might not be the best whitewater in the world but everyone kind of sticks together and has a good time, so it's cool. And we can surf ocean waves, which you can't do in central Europe. And surfing is a bloody nice thing to do!"

The thing with Deb is that she can be kind of like a river herself. On the surface things are calm and quiet but underneath there's a lot going on, with deep currents running through her. In her life, as well as in her boating, Deb's creative side shines through. She enjoys writing, is a talented photographer and runs her own jewellery company. If Deb decides to do something she does it well, whatever it is, and she doesn't mind if she has to put a bit of effort in to get there. It's not about having stickers all over her boat. It's not about being sponsored. If all Deb had was that old Hurricane and a battered pair of wooden paddles you just know that she'd still be out there on a beautiful river somewhere, running sweet lines and taking great pictures. "Yeah, for sure. Like I said earlier, everything has been a bit of a surprise. When I was at school I was bored and a little bit naughty. I came out of school with not very good grades but then suddenly I found something I was good at and it all fell into place. Now I pretty much

take it as it comes. I'm just grateful for the opportunities kayaking has presented me with.

It's this humble approach to life that marks Deb out from many of her peers. You'll never hear her bitching about this and that and you'll never catch her bad mouthing her fellow paddlers. "I like people and I like life too much to waste it being an asshole."

There's no doubt that Deb will be kayaking for a long time to come but I asked her what she would imagine herself as if she hadn't discovered boating? "Hmm, I used to play a lot of hockey and I really enjoyed that. I did Outdoor Ed for two years at college, climbing and teaching climbing, taking people outside and giving them a good time. So maybe I'd be doing that. The other thing that really appeals to me is the emergency services, maybe being a paramedic or a fire fighter. I couldn't imagine myself doing a job that has no point to it and I couldn't do a job that didn't help people directly."

Wherever she travels, Deb nearly always knows someone there. The kayaking world is a small place and it can seem that everyone knows everyone, kind of like one big happy boating family. Are Deb's friends important to her? "Yeah, for sure. I have a lot of really nice friends from kayaking. Through paddling you can end up letting some friendships go, like school or college friends, and that's sad. But I guess that's life. My friends are super-cool in kayaking. Wherever I go there are people I know really well. It's awesome. These people would do anything for you - pick you up from

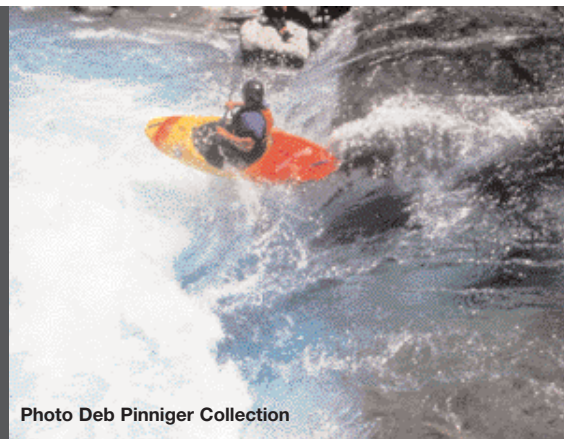
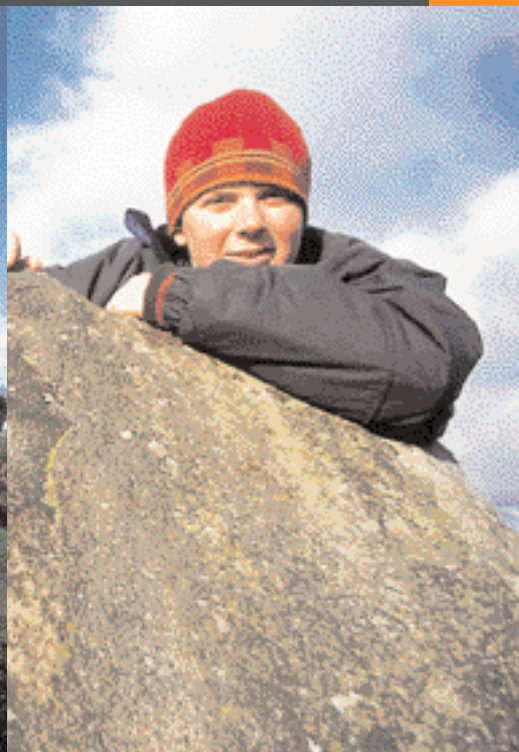
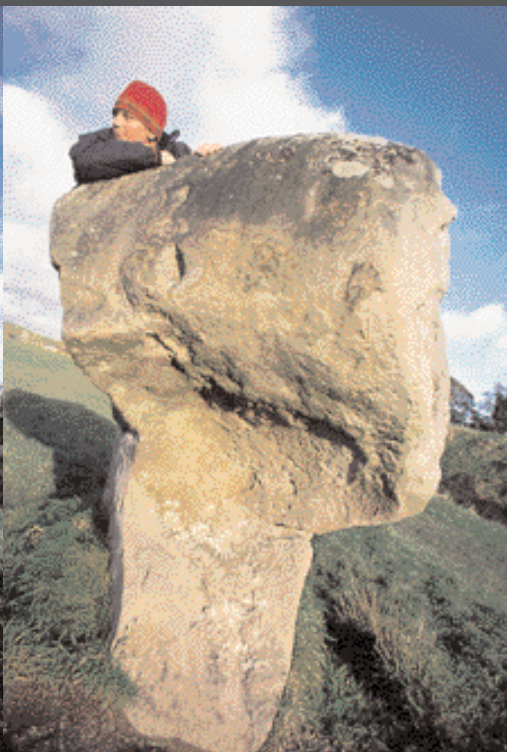


Photo Deb Pinniger Collection

the airport, let you sleep on their floor, drive you to the river - people are just super-kind. I don't know if stuff like that happens in normal life but it seems like in kayaking it happens all the time."

Deb and I spoke for many hours on subjects ranging from America to adventuring and Deb's answers to my questions were all thoughtful and incisive. For one who so enjoys finding little pearls of wisdom in the books she loves to read, she is full of a kind of quiet wisdom herself. After we finish talking, we headed off to Avebury Stone Circle, in Wiltshire, because Hurley was too low to paddle. The light was perfect at Avebury and Deb was really excited as she started to take pictures. Any other freestyler would have been pissed off and miserable at the prospect of a day spent off the river but Deb just gets on with enjoying life. Because for her, whether it's on or off the water, it's all good! ²¹



**"There are my two drops of rain waiting on the window pain.
I am waiting to see which the winning one will be.
Both of them have different names, one is John and one is James.
All the best and all the worst comes from which of them is first!"**

(A.A Milne, Winnie the Pooh)