

Interview Simon Westgarth

One of the early figures in freestyle kayaking, Simon Westgarth has turned his love for kayaking into a full-time profession.

Through owning a company, making kayaking films, and teaching, Simon is all about introducing more and more people to paddling. With a main operation on the Soca River in Slovenia, he still manages to get away and take paddlers on trips throughout Europe and to many exotic locations all around the globe. He's a hard man to track down, but somewhere between paddling and editing sessions we managed to have a chat with the man on the move!



Words - Stan Ricketts
photos - Courtesy of Simon Westgarth

Cup of tea I say!
Photo - Satu Vanska-Westgarth

Born to an English mother and Irish father, Simon grew up in the quaint countryside of Somerset in England. After working out a few of life's fundamental lessons the hard way, Simon realized his love for the outdoors and spent the rest of his youth playing rugby, getting involved in Scouts and going on adventures in nature.

It was during his early years in the Scouts that Simon fell in love with kayaking and became apt at rock climbing. Various trips across the English Channel to the French Alps helped Simon further develop these skills and opened up for him a whole new world. It was the next year, however, when he went for a summer of raft guiding in the Canadian Rockies, that he really awakened to the possibility of a life of adventure travel.

For the time being though University brought him back home, and even with skiing, snowboarding, mountain biking and climbing taking up a lot of his spare time, Simon became a keen competitor in slalom kayaking and the rodeo circuit. He competed at all major freestyle events with many wins to his name, including two Euro Cup titles and a European Championship Title.

During this time Simon reconnected with his father's roots in the green hills of Ireland, and in 1997 Simon was invited onto the Irish freestyle team. That year he travelled to Canada to compete at the Worlds on the Ottawa, and with that his life of global kayaking adventure had begun.

These kayak trips have turned into a successful business venture in which Simon has combined his kayaking skills, love for the outdoors and strong personality to maintain a lifestyle in which he can still travel to all his favorite destinations. Of equal importance, through his work Simon is also able to introduce people to the world of paddling, and to do it in a unique way, through professional instructional videos and a dynamic approach to coaching.

KS: Your main gig now is teaching kayaking and running guided paddling tours. How did this evolve?

SW: Running Gene17kayaking is now my main job, although I shoot and edit video for Westgarth TV, but the time spent on this is becoming increasingly squeezed.

KS: So what is Gene17kayaking?

SW: Gene17kayaking, is a high end whitewater kayaking trip and paddling adventure provider, where we offer paddling at some of the best destinations, at their prime times, with the programmes being taught by some of the best kayakers and teachers around. It's a low ratio, high quality, maximum added value concept that has proved highly successful over the last 5 years.

KS: You have developed Gene17 into a solid project. What inspired you to do your own thing?

SW: During my time competing, I also had a job as the Technical Representative for Dagger Europe and Palm Equipment. This meant whilst traveling to events across Europe, I got to see many new places and meet numerous paddlers. I soon realized that there were numerous paddling locations beyond the famed French Alps for so many UK paddlers to venture to. After some years, I saw the possibility and market for a high-end coaching provider, where staff, location and product were at the core of the paddlers experience.

KS: Why Gene17? Where does the name come from?

SW: I had been looking for a name for the kayak trip concept for sometime. I wanted a neutral name that implied an inquiry, so something like White Water Europe or Westgarth Kayaking was a no go. One morning after a party, I was making breakfast with a friend, Jack Russell, one of the UK's leading Personal Development Coaches and motivational speakers, and we were talking about the discovery of the D4DR gene, that had been dubbed the 'adventure' gene, and it was found on Chromosome 17, a location of our DNA where numerous genes occurred that had an effect on our personality development. Well, D4DR was too complicated for a company name, and Chromosome17 sounded like a medical research outfit, so Gene17 it was, plus it had a certain ring to it and was certainly neutral.

KS: Your approach to teaching is very personal, but surely you can't run all your programmes single-handedly. Who are the people you work most closely with?

SW: Gene17's top team are Deb Pinniger and Dave Carroll, both of whom are amazing individuals and great paddlers. As the business has expanded, Olli Grau and Matt Tidy have joined us for specific programmes. Starting next year, Leo Hoare, a highly regarded UK coach trainer will head up our Instructor Training Programme (D4DR WW) based in Slovenia.



Personal instruction on the clear waters of the Soca.
Photo - Deb Pinniger

KS: Are there any paddlers in particular who you look up to for inspiration?

SW: I am very lucky in that I have paddled with most of the player's of my generation and with the old guard. Mick Hopkinson is iconic, a new school paddler in his late 50's, always moving forward. I enjoy time with Olli Grau for the straight talking and plain action, a long time friend Cody 'the outlaw' Boger from Canada, who is a pure lifestyle and Dan Gavere for showing that you can always keep learning no matter what you're doing.

KS: Let's go back in time a little...What are your memories of when you were learning?

SW: After not having so many coaches at the club I was in, I remember reading all the available books on technique at the time, and when I first got on a WW river, some of the self taught techniques worked and other parts lead to some fine swimming action. During this time there were a few leading coaches around, yet most of them were coaching slalom, so unless you raced you were not going to get coached. So racing I went, and even though I still did not get a coach, I learnt from others and my mistakes, to eventually climb the Slalom ranking to Div 1.

KS: Do you think now that kayak instruction was good back in the day?

SW: There are always good coaches within any generation of paddling. These days there is far wider accessibility of ideas and techniques that has moved the sport forward and the general quality of coaching is improving all the time. An observation of coaching is there is a certain amount of power play for some coaches to be in a leader's role, where inflated ego projection of being in charge is all about keeping the learner in their perceived place. When confronted with this situation I was motivated to learn from observation and not the instructions of the ego coach. I remember these instructors busy telling me to perform to very fixed forms, and making rigid statements about technique, most of which proved counter productive on the river. Although my early learning was a long time ago, I think that these scenarios are still not uncommon.

KS: What are the primary differences between instruction or coaching then and the way kayaking is taught these days?

SW: Modern coaching is about added value for the learner, where specific learning is targeted for an individual, so the experience is productive and personal. The current trend in modern paddling is towards a more dynamic style. This style is best summed up as the paddler using the river's energy to maximise their charging arcs, mirroring the downhill terrain by dynamically adjusting their body tension and retaining pressure on the paddle's blade face to have dynamic stability and instant feedback. Gone are the days of boof 'n' brace or drifting to the lip of the drop for the glory stroke; a passive style in a dynamic situation often means the energy demands of the environment are not balanced, meaning upside down and out of control paddling!! Lastly a greater comprehension of the river's shapes and forms and how a paddler can use these has taken us a long way forward in a short span of time.

ferent countries' teaching methods?

SW: Any paddling communities that have learnt in isolation are likely to have some gaps in technical development, thankfully this is less and less likely to happen as globalization of coaching ideas, traveling coaches and paddlers, plus the wider distribution of DVDs, heightens excellence and avoids the promotion of poor coaching.

KS: How do the levels of certification compare to other organizations, and is there an international standard that is accepted universally?

SW: Within kayak coaching, there are several highly regarded national level awards, with the British Canoe Union and the American and NZ Canoe Association's, plus the French Federation, all having instructor certification with reputations beyond their national borders. The only whitewater standard that is fully recognized internationally is Rescue 3, a Californian based Safety and Rescue training programme. There is certainly scope to an Alpine Guide Qualification, not too unlike the award within climbing. However, with so

is moving even faster. It is clear that what the very best paddlers are doing right now needs to be accessible in terms of concepts and resulting technique, and not wait for a generation.

KS: There seems to be a massive industry trend to introduce the masses to this sport we love. What is your recipe to bring more people to kayaking?

SW: For the recreation market it's all about lifestyle, accessibility and ease of use. The paddlesports industry is light years ahead of the national federations with getting a wider range of people onboard and into boats. Still there is huge scope to really getting very high participation numbers, especially as recreational paddling is a low impact sport with little demand for high levels of fitness or ability. Education of where to go and how to paddle safely is needed, and it's perhaps where the industry needs to focus some efforts, or perhaps the national federations need to partner the industry. Once people enjoy recreational paddling it's an easy step to sell wider paddle-sports including white water kayaking.

"After some years, I saw the possibility and market for a high-end coaching provider, where staff, location and product were at the core of the paddlers experience."

are popping up everywhere for the promotion of the sport, don't you think? Look at the incredible amount of parks – in Colorado, in France, in Charlotte, North Carolina... They may be pricy, but then so are ski passes. Do you still think that these parks are over-rated?

SW: Increased accessibility on any form is welcomed, and the low scale and low priced regional developments like in France, UK, Czech and the USA are excellent additions. Yet if you are going to spend millions on a show piece whitewater park for the Olympics

KS: How do you feel about the trend towards Boater-cross and extreme racing?

SW: Bluntly put, not too unlike rodeo in its early days, the lifestyle creates a scene and then comes the competitive heads with all its mixed outcomes. Boater-cross is certainly way more TV friendly than freestyle, but once you have seen a few races it's all a bit the same and, unlike straight racing, there is a large element of luck, and thus I do not believe it will make whitewater kayaking mainstream. We're just too specialized, and it takes too much personal effort to

ples of the subject, animated overlays, text boxes and very little audio commentary. The focus is addressing different leading styles through a wide range of visual and conceptual tools, rather than talking to the camera.

KS: You run kayaking camps across Europe and around the world, but you are based in Slovenia. What made you fall in love with this area in particular?



Charging off lip! Simon displaying fine style somewhere in Norway
Photo - Nick Horwood

"In the end the race is only with yourself, and it is only you who can truly win, if only for a moment in time"

KS: Would you recommend to try all disciplines of paddling and to learn from each, or are you more inclined to just stick with river running?

SW: Paddling is a wide experience sport, there are many different disciplines and as such it's important for developing paddlers to try a slice of everything before focusing on narrower elements. There is much to be said about the French Kayak Club model, that encourages paddling through numerous different disciplines, where specialization is not encouraged early on, and to some extent the UK's national body is looking to implement this approach.

KS: You have been traveling and kayaking all around the world. Are there major differences between dif-

ferent national federations at different levels in coaching provision and minor politicking, it is unlikely to gain any momentum for some time. For example to gain national qualifications is pretty straight forward, however if you wish to run qualification courses yourself, it's a minefield of protectionism.

KS: In what way do you see yourself bringing a fresh style to kayak instruction?

SW: At Gene17 we are looking to develop concepts and themes within modern paddling. What this means is that there is no absolute definitively correct technique. This is counter to past beliefs of promoting prescribed technique, as if we were converging on perfection. The front line of paddling technique is developing all the time, and how we coach these concepts at present

KS: On that trend to develop the sport participant numbers, do you think that whitewater parks are a good way to go?

SW: Whitewater parks in destinations where there is no or little WW must be a good thing. Still the Olympics have brought very little or no general access to these specifically built sites. As well, places like the new privately funded spot in Holland have crazy prices - thus as ever you move forward, you also move backwards. Clearly there is momentum, but in what direction?

KS: Yes, but the parks are rather useful tools when it come down to teaching the sport, especially in places like you said where rivers are few. White-water parks are not only reserved for the Olympics... they



Going big! Photos - Graham Genge

Games, as in Athens, Atlanta and Barcelona, it would be far better if these facilities are accessible to all afterwards. Yet to date these venues are rarely open to the public, if open at all.

KS: Give us your thoughts on the competitive side of the sport?

SW: In the end the race is only with yourself, and it is only you who can truly win, if only for a moment in time.

KS: What do you think about Freestyle and the way it is going?

SW: I really like what the young bucks are doing, it looks great. Yet for myself with all the flat wave butt bouncing I have been left behind due to lack desire for this direction. I like the dynamic feel of charging on a rail to the lip, call it old school, I say it's all play anyway.



Keep the balance right. Photos - Graham Genge

get good enough. As I say, "If it were easy everyone would do it".

KS: Going back to another facet of Gene17 kayaking... You have released several instructional videos which proved very successful, and rumour has it you are in the process of releasing a new one. Tell us a bit about what's in store?

SW: The next DVD project is "Genotype 2," delivering the fundamental core skills for WW paddling. Unlike the first version that followed a prescribed approach, the new production in HD looks at concepts and themes for modern dynamic technique, its skills and river tactics. To date, the Steep Creeking DVD, "Genes" has been the most successful, due in the most part for hitting a niche market where there was a demand and need.

KS: How do your instructional films differ from all the other ones out there?

SW: The main difference between the productions I have tried to make, is that there are numerous exam-



Using the rivers energy for maximum performance. Photos - G. Genge

SW: We run a number of programmes to different destinations including Slovenia, plus to Italy, Norway and beyond. Part of the aim for Gene17 is to deliver the best product, and for most paddling that is about being at the best locations at their prime times. Still the Soca River in Slovenia is an amazing place, easy access, and compact and consistent action. When you go there time simply melts away - it's very relaxing. As we got established, I was offered a house in Slovenia, it was too good to turn down, so I purchased a ruin, and have been renovating since. The aim of this project is to host Gene17's programmes along with a new instructor-training course, "D4DR WW". Thus I would not say our base is there - we're a highly mobile product in that the G17 staff can turn and deliver anywhere.

"There is no absolute correct technique, as the front line of paddling technique development IS moving forward all the time, and how we coach these ideals is moving even faster"

Life on the road. Photo - Nick Horwood



It's a tough life but someone's gotta do it! Photo - Nick Horwood

Adjusting your body tension is just a part of it. Photo - Deb Pinniger

KS: Kayaking (or canoeing) is a big sport in the UK and some of the best paddlers in the world come from there! For a country with few big mountains and a reputation for bad weather, why do you think this is?

SW: Historically from UK climbing there has always been a vision and passion for adventure. As the UK has little in the way of mountains, adventurers looked beyond the island to far and away places. The original Everest Kayak Expeditions is a great example, Dr Mike Jones and team bought a van and drove with 2 kayakers each to Nepal, overland from the UK. It's amazing to think of them arriving in Nepal mid-monsoon as they thought that's when the water would be in the rivers - not too unlike the situation in the UK.

KS: And last but not least, you organize an annual meet on the Dart River that is becoming one of the biggest gatherings of paddlers in the UK. What is this all about and why the Dart?

SW: In the early freestyle events, paddlers met, went boating and socialized. The now annual Adventure Paddlers Weekend at the River Dart Country Park, is such a meeting point. There are various presentations, films and lectures from recent notable trips in the evening, and the days are left to paddling with your friends. During the weekend there are no formal paddling events, so it's very relaxed and highly enjoyable with so many paddlers around. Last year we had an

informal team race on the local home run, all amongst friends, and it was a huge success.

KS: What is the most attractive thing about kayaking to you?

SW: Adventure, no matter what size!

Thanks Simon and see you out there!



With Dave Carroll it's all smiles. Photo - Nick Horwood

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