



Estoril Billabong Girls Surf Festival

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The wave of surfing has finally hit the European coasts with full power, beaches are spotted with camps and schools, a Euro chick, Pauline Ado, has been ASP World Junior Champ and last May Billabong held the first ASP 6star WQS event in Europe. We went to check it out

It's 8 am and just one week after our last day on snow we find ourselves at the Guincho beach in Lisbon, goose bumps covering our winter pale skin. Next to us the horn announces the end of the heat and although we can hardly open my eyes from the 5 am flight, we're fascinated by the girls' graceful play with the waves. Hailing from the south of Germany with no beach in sight surfing has never been an option for us. Our dreamy minds imagine it would be a lot different if we'd grown up with more wave accessibility. Or would it?

Although we have a huge coastline exposed to the Atlantic swells, European surfers still don't really stand out compared to the worldwide competition. Of course you can blame the inconsistent quality of the waves, the opposite-of-textbook weather conditions or the lack of amazing spots. But maybe it's also to do with the fact that Europe has never had a deeply rooted surf culture and support programmes are still quite rare, especially for girls.

At first glance, the contest chart backs up our

theory. Although the event is held in Portugal there are only a handful of European surfers, including three Portuguese. Ana Saramento is one of them, a local teenager who was given a wild card for this event by her sponsor Billabong. The support of young talent is nowhere near as established or prominent as it is in classic surf nations such as Australia or the US, but a lot has changed over the last couple of years, and brands such as Billabong are doing a lot to support grassroots surf talent, especially on the female side.



Ten years ago, Billabong team riders Rita and Joana Rocha decided to do something for their like-minded countrywomen and launched the Billabong Girls Days. For three days, girls of all ages, backgrounds and skills come together to enjoy the ocean, the waves, the beach and each other while receiving free surf tuition. “When I started surfing, there were only about 15 other girls,” remembers Rita, who is one of the few Portuguese girls that has managed to make a living out of surfing. If you look at the 150 girls that occupy the Carcavelos beach now, that seems a long time ago.

Up and coming talents such as Ana prove the value of such events. “I went to the Billabong Girls Days when I started surfing. It opened my eyes to the surfing scene and all the good vibe that surrounds it. Events like this offer an opportunity that many girls need to take the first step into surfing.” It’s not just that girls are intimidated to learn a new sport, especially when it’s in a traditionally macho domain such as surfing. Girls are very social beings who sometimes just function better when they’re together, and trying to catch your first waves is definitely more fun if you’re surrounded by mates who half-drown with you, rather than spitting out lungs of salty water by yourself, while keeping a desperate eye on the lifeguards.

Just getting girls into surfing isn’t enough though. For Ana one of the reasons why Europe is still lagging behind so much in the worldwide competition is that only a few Euro girls take surfing seriously. Bringing major events like the Estoril Billabong Girls Cascai contests to Europe is the first step. It’s the only World Qualifying Series event in Europe that the ASP awarded with 6

stars and a major step towards the World Tour. Again the driving force behind this was Joana and Rita. “Most girls don’t have a big travel budget to compete at events in other countries and only surf national circuits. So we thought ‘If the girls can’t go to compete in an international field, we will bring the field here,’” explains Rita.

It’s a crucial point, as while it’s good to surf with friends and learn new stuff in a comfortable environment, progression also needs role models that tear away from the masses. Being shown what else is possible is always a great inspiration and motivation. Despite having an amazing time at the contest and enjoying the super-cool and positive vibe, Ana says that she learnt a lot as well. “I’ve never seen so many girls surfing so well and it was great to surf with such big names as Silvana Lima or Bethany Hamilton.”

After admiring the pro girls hitting one wave after the other, playing with cut backs and airs, we’re drawn back to where the beginner girls are playing at the beach. But once the afternoon yoga lesson is over, it suddenly doesn’t look like playing at all as a mob of screaming girls, carrying longboards in between two or three of them, run down to the waterfront. Without any feeling of embarrassment they repeat the coaches’ funny exercises before they jump into the water to help each other catch waves, stand up on the board and fall down again. Frozen into place on our sarongs at the beach, eyes fixed on the tiny figures in their black wetsuits, we wish we were them and that we hadn’t grown up so far from the sea. And our mind wanders again, if only we’d discovered these girls days earlier, we’d surely be surf goddesses by now too, though we’re aware that could just be the first hint of sunstroke talking.