



TWO OF US

STORY BY Rosamund Burton | PHOTOGRAPH BY James Brickwood

Former world surfing champion Pam Burridge, 51 (left), and Roz Johnston, 50, share a passion for the surf. Through their classes and retreats on the NSW south coast, they have also instilled a passion for wave-riding in many other women.

ROZ: I went to the beach a lot as a teenager in Wollongong. That was the era when boyfriends surfed and girls sunbaked covered in baby oil. I always sat there thinking, “I want to give surfing a go.” I bought a board and tried to ride it, but was terrible because it was the wrong length for me.

A group of us were at a surf comp in the mid-’80s. This surfer dived into the water to start her heat. “Far out,” I thought, “that’s the Pam Burridge chick I’ve seen in magazines.”

My family and I moved south from Wollongong to Mollymook in 2001. I knew Pam lived in the area. I saw this woman skateboarding along the footpath while waiting to pick up her kids from school and realised it was her. Then the school newsletter had an advert for kids’ surf lessons with Pam Burridge. Sitting on the beach watching my daughters, I’m thinking, “I never got to learn how to surf and they’re out in the ocean with this Aussie legend.”

One day, Pam suggested I come to her Friday women’s classes. I turned up star-struck and overawed. I was a terrible student – unfit and

not the best listener – but with Pam’s encouragement I persisted. I never missed a lesson, was totally addicted, and we became friends.

Growing up, I was a tomboy through and through. That’s why I click with Pam. When I read her autobiography, I went, “That’s me.” She can kick a footy and change a tyre. We’re similar in many ways.

After the lessons we’d all have coffee. One day, everyone else had left and Pam said, “Would you be keen on becoming an instructor?” I’d only been surfing three years, but I jumped at the chance. I’m her main instructor now.

We’re both stubborn, but she’s usually right, so I do back down, especially anything to do with the ocean and the surf school. We’re both fairly easygoing, to a point. If she wants to be organised, everything’s to a tee. But otherwise she’s pretty bad. Her van’s messy. I like to be organised, so I repack it neatly. A week later I’ll open the door and all the wetsuits will fall out.

I had the idea for women’s surf weekends. Pam said, “I’m in if you do the organising and I just conduct the lessons.” I was working in real estate and gave that up to concentrate on the

retreats. We had our first retreat in 2014 and now we average between eight and 10 a year.

Although she’s a sporting legend, Pam is also very much a quiet achiever. She is one of the most genuine people I know, has a massive heart, and rarely says a bad word about anyone.

Whenever I’ve asked Pam what she wants to do when she gets older, she always replies, “All I want to do is surf.” She’s like a kid. There are no airs and graces. She’s a bit of a dag. I feel really relaxed around her because I can just be myself, and I’m getting daggier. Since meeting Pam my life has changed completely. If it wasn’t for her I’d be still sitting in a real estate office.

PAM: Initially, Roz and I would see each other picking up our children from school. Then I got to know her when she came along to my Friday women’s surfing classes.

I started surfing when I was 10. There were about eight girls on the whole of Sydney’s northern beaches who were surfing regularly, but I loved it so much I didn’t care. I was state champion when I was 15, 16 and 17, then national champion about the same time. I was travelling the world on the pro tour at 16. I came second in the world titles at 17, but then it took me until I was 26 to win it.

My husband and I moved to the south coast in 1994. I started the surf school in 2000, and for about six years had been operating it in two locations, and running myself ragged. Once Roz became a keen and proficient surfer, I talked her into becoming a coach. I think she was a bit shocked. I’m glad she said yes.

We’re similar for sure. We can both be really chatty, or just not bothered. When Roz read my book, she said she related so much to my life. My husband calls me Not Roz sometimes, and she gets called Pam all the time. Occasionally at surf lessons Roz gets asked for an autograph. She doesn’t always have the heart to say she’s not me.

On International Women’s Day, Roz and I were presented with an award for our contribution to women’s health and wellbeing through the surfing groups we teach. We complement one another. She’s helped me out a lot running my surf school, working for me in terrible weather, and picking up the slack when she sees that I’m exhausted. She’s very supportive. I always try to do too much and spread myself a bit thin. She likes to think things through and is organised. Her attention to detail is one of the things people mention most on the retreats. Detail’s not my forte.

She has a stubborn streak. Sometimes you can’t tell her anything because she thinks she already has it figured out, so doesn’t want to hear it. But she’s got a good sense of humour and takes the mickey out of herself. I pay out on Roz because she can take it, and she’s a bit of a stirrer herself. She’s a terrible speller. She always uses the incorrect word in a text. If she’s writing for me, I get the shits: “It’s ‘we are’, not ‘were’.” I’m more of a reader than she is.

Roz loves organising the retreats and she’s so true to her vision of making them work. One of our friends is making her do a business plan. I’ll have to see if I’m still on it after five years, that it doesn’t say, “Replace Pam with younger version who answers my phone calls.” ■

66

This young surfer dived off the rocks into the water to start her heat. Far out, I thought. That’s the Pam Burridge chick I’ve seen in magazines.

99