

INNOVATORS: TOM KAY

Office life in London held scant appeal for marine biologist, lover of the sea and cold-water surfing enthusiast Tom Kay. He quickly gave up a job in commercial property investment, convinced that he could not be the only person to covet cold-water-specific clothing for surfers, that there was a gap in the market and that he might as well be the one to fill it. So 12 years ago he moved to Cornwall and founded Finisterre.

A new beginning where land ends

Tom Kay could be an inspiration to many in the outdoor industry. Having spent almost his entire life by the sea, he found himself, after completing a degree in marine biology at Bristol, in a desk-bound job in commercial property investment in the City of London. Earning a living among the bankers, traders, hedge-fund administrators, analysts, economists and venture capitalists of the Square Mile held no appeal for him whatsoever. If, at the time (2002), there had been a clothing brand catering to his real passion in life, cold-water surfing, Mr Kay would probably have written to it to ask for any job going. "There was no product available for cold-water surfers at all," he says. So he moved to Cornwall and started his own business, Finisterre, in a flat above a surf shop, with the products he completed piling up in a corner.

Finisterre is a name claimed by a number of places in Atlantic Europe, which is logical, if a little Euro-centric, as it means "the earth's end". It provided a new beginning for Mr Kay. "I was in an environment in which I knew I wanted to spend as little time as possible," he says of office life. And even though he started small, with a dial-up modem to connect to the internet, onto



Finisterre founder, Tom Kay, found that no one was making clothing for cold-water surfers and decided to fill the gap in the market himself.

 Finisterre

which he had to place a shoe so that it would connect correctly, it worked. "Cheques just started coming through the door," he says, making it sound easy. In fact, though, he confirms that "being taken seriously" when you are just starting out and don't yet know the industry. Conviction, passion and being surrounded by those he calls "the right people" were enough to carry him through, he says.

New wetsuits needed

The brand's main focus has always been on making warm garments for cold-water surfers to wear before and after they take to the sea. However, a new and improved wetsuit, which Finisterre has been contemplating off and on for some time, is back on the agenda. The company says it believes wetsuit design and innovation is "stagnant", focused more on what's marketable than on what's needed, and that it can do much better in offering cold-water surfers durability, warmth and dryness. Fifty sample suits will arrive at brand headquarters in St Agnes later this year. It has hand-picked skillful surfers "from nations with some of the coldest and harshest surf conditions" to test the suits and drive further improvement.

What's available now includes everything from socks, baselayers and underwear to outerwear, including jackets such as the Nimbus and Cirrus with baffled stitching and the Ekman waterproof, windproof, breathable jacket, made from a three-layer shell consisting of a durable nylon ripstop outer, laminated to a highly breathable membrane and a brushed inner surface. There are shorts and T-shirts for beachwear in better weather and, in the women's collection, skirts, dresses and leggings too.

Sheep that count

Perhaps his marine biology background helped Tom Kay build sustainability into the core of his brand long before it was fashionable to do so. Within three years, Finisterre was on the way to helping set up a remarkable conservation project that continues to this day. In 2005, the team made a commitment to put wool at the centre of its fabric development and, after a bit of a search, established a strong link with Westcott Farm, near Tiverton, in the neighbouring county of Devon.

Westcott is an unusual place because it became the home of the last surviving flock of Bowmont sheep, bred in Scotland in the 1980s as part of a failed project to capture a slice of the success that Australian and New Zealand sheep farmers have had with merino wool. The herd has thrived in Devon, growing in number from 28 animals when Finisterre first got involved to around 200 now and the Bowmont name is synonymous with superfine merino wool. Superfine wool is defined as being finer than



18.5 microns, but still with softness, durability and warmth. Finisterre says its ambition from the start of this partnership was to secure supply of fine fibre from as close to its own backyard as possible and take its local wool to the masses.

Cold facts

The masses may be a slight over-statement. Surfing is most usually associated with warmer waters, of course, which is why the most popular and most famous surfing locations around the world are in places such as Australia, Southern California, Hawaii and Tahiti. But a smaller number of passionate people in colder climates, such as Mr Kay's corner of south-west England, refuse to be put off by weather. Access to adequate clothing can make cold-water surfing a year-round sport for those who are tough and enthusiastic enough. And those who love it, it seems, really love it. In many parts of the world, the best swells arrive in the coldest months and, provided they have the right protection, this is often when cold-water surfers are at their happiest.

Products that can stand up to this treatment have to be well made, but Finisterre insists that they have to be easy to repair, too, to help them stand the test of time. Twelve years on, Tom Kay admits to being proud of what Finisterre has become and proud that it has remained faithful to its commitments to sustainability and to his passion for the sport. 

The brand's focus is warm garments for cold-water surfers to wear before and after they take to the sea.

 Finisterre