Work, Rest & Play

Exmouth is a town where the one-mile wide, eight-mile long River Exe Estuary feeds into the sea. Here old-fashioned seaside charm blends in with the emerging gentrified cool. One thing that draws the strong community and visitors to the town is their love of the water – whether to work on or play in. Harriet Mellor meets just some of them.
Photos Andy Lloyd

Steph Bridge

At 4pm on a sunny weekday, the sky and sea are filled with at least 30 kitesurfers swooping, whirling, turning and flipping in and above the waves. They've either knocked off work early or the younger ones have come straight from school.

A prominent presence among them is Steph Bridge – three times world kite surfing champion, Guinness Record Breaker who spent Sir Richard Branson's 60th birthday kitesurfing the English channel with him, and category ambassador for the 2016 Olympics.

Steph is Exmouth born and bred to a family of boat builders. She's married to another champion, Eric, and together they have spawned more wave-riding winners – the 'Bridgelets': Tommy 10, a European junior champion, Guy 11 and Ollie 13. All the Bridges are bronzed, blonde and lovely, and extremely down to earth with it.

Steph and Eric have been together since she was 18. After starting Spinnakers, a successful sailing business aged 20, they then set up Edgewatersports teaching, hiring and selling everything related to windsurfing, paddle-boarding, kayaking and kite-surfing.

Far from being sports for lithe lovelies, community clientele are aged from 6-74 and include the local-based Royal Marines, Army, schools, hospital units and lifeguards.

"With the estuary and the sea to choose from, there's so much scope for watersports. There's no such thing as a bad day on the water here."

Steph was a comparatively late starter to kitesurfing but a "very passionate" one. She didn't start competing until 2004, winning her first world title in 2007. In Exmouth she says the sport has snowballed, becoming as popular as the Cornish hotspots.

"Kiteboarding has become a bit of a scene here. People have come to me for a course and then keep coming back. Some have even bought second homes here. I think Exmouth will become the next Watergate Bay."

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There's no such thing as a bad day on the water here