

The return of rowing to the Maldives

When Guin Batten stumbled on a photo of a young Maldivian boy rowing a small raft-like boat that he had built himself, the course of Batten's life altered, sending her on a unique adventure.

Following the devastating tsunami in 2004, the Maldivian boy had gathered scrap wood and wire. But instead of making a paddle, the boy made riggers. British Olympic medallist and head of FISA's Rowing for All Commission Batten said at the time: "It was brilliant. Any other kid building a raft would have used a paddle, but not this boy. I started asking questions."

Batten finally got to travel to the Maldives in 2009 and what she found was a nation where rowing is an integral part of the culture. The advent of outboard motors, political turmoil and other factors had altered the nation - rowing had all but died away.

The idea to restore rowing was planted in Batten's mind. She resolved to revive the sport in the Maldives. First Batten needed to create an awareness and, not one to do things by halves, Batten, who holds the record for rowing across the English Channel, chose to do this by rowing across the Maldives' Zero Degree Channel, Addu Kandu. "No one had ever done this," says >





> Batten who successfully completed the 60km crossing in March 2010.

The crossing did create awareness and helped Batten secure a 40ft container full of rowing equipment donated by Great Britain's rowing community. Then James Cowley chipped in and spent 10 month coaching. In November last year the Maldives Rowing Federation became affiliated with FISA and slowly the seeds of rowing began to spread.

Being a nation of over 1,000 islands, rowing used to be the main form of travel between the islands and rowing boats were previously used for fishing. Rowing has a history of professionalism and competition, but since the 1980s it had all but disappeared. The Maldives has a population of about 390,000 and a strong sporting ethos that manifests itself predominantly in football. For Batten, coastal rowing seemed to be the ideal choice not only to bring back rowing, but also encourage women to take part in physical activity in this predominantly Muslim society.

The development of rowing has continued and recently former British national team member Rachel Loveridge arrived in the Maldives. She has been followed by Olympic rower and World Champion medallist Natasha Howard, also from Great Britain, who arrived in July 2011.

Loveridge has been developing swimming skills amongst the locals as they waited for coastal



rowing boats to arrive from Great Britain. The advantage Loveridge has is that she is able to coach women, whereas Cowley was not allowed under Muslim rules. After much delay, the boats arrived in July and Loveridge is excited about finally being able to share her passion for the sport.

Loveridge has been based in Male and working mainly on the island of Hulhumalé. She notes

that living in the Maldives in the local community gives a very different picture to the view tourists have when they see only the tourist resorts. "The Maldives as a country (rather than a holiday destination) is not paradise; they have many issues and problems and getting anything achieved here is a very slow a laborious process," says Loveridge. "However I have been blown away by the enthusiasm for both rowing and >

> swimming and the support I received from everyone involved from the Commissioner of the Maldives Police Force to all the students."

Making the sport sustainable using local resources and initiatives has been a major focus for all of those involved in the Maldives project. "It is an overarching aim to have fully sustainable rowing clubs set up in the Maldives and new ones being established by Maldivians rather than with foreign input," says Loveridge. "The Maldives have the potential to be a fantastic example of coastal rowing in a tropical country and will help spread the sport to a far wider population."

"We should be ready to launch the [rowing] club in September," says Loveridge, while Batten is planning for the first regatta to take place in that same month.

Throughout the world there are volunteer rowing enthusiasts helping to establish rowing in new spots. The dedicated team in the Maldives is just one of these examples.

[Maldives Rowing](#)

[Rowing Association Maldives](#)

[Loveridge and Howard's blog](#)

M.S.B.

