

ADVENTURE





RISK SEEKER

Is risk-taking second nature to you or is being cautious more your game? The experts have weighed in: Taking chances might actually make you smarter and lead to more success, and nobody knows this better than life-liver extraordinaire, Karina Bensemann. We catch up with her as she tears it up at the recently reopened Wadi Adventure.

Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna

Photography by Wouter Kingma

T

➔ Ask Karina Bensemann what she does for a living, and you might be a little bit confused. Not because she doesn't give you a straight-up answer—it's quite the opposite, in fact, since she's actually incredibly direct in that extremely polite yet refreshingly honest way that means that you'll always know exactly where you stand with her, respectfully of course—but because she has done, and is capable of, doing so many different things that it's almost like she's had 100 lives rolled into one spectacular existence.

Perhaps it's because she left home at the age of 14, but Karina's attitude towards life—she's the very definition of a free spirit—is key to her very existence. After graduating from school at home at Mount Maunganui in New Zealand, where she grew up, she went straight into working life. "I went from school to working in an aluminium joinery factory, making windows and doors. My kickboxing trainer at the time—I was a bit of a badass when I was younger!—was the manager of an aluminium joinery factory, and I didn't know what I wanted to do, so he gave me a job. I worked there, then I went on to join the Navy, where I did hydrographic survey and diving," she says.

Karina's role in the Royal New Zealand Navy's hydrographic branch wasn't a combat role, but involved her studying the typography of the ocean floor using Sonar and GPS equipment. "I then became a Navy diver, until I had a massive car crash that broke my back and screwed up all of my insides big time," she says. Karina was only 20 at the time

of her accident, and the extent of her injuries meant that it took her an incredibly long time to rehabilitate. "I couldn't work full-time for a very long time [after that], so I tried all sorts. I did commercial diving, where you clean the bottom of ships like superyachts, and loads of other random stuff. It took me five years before I could work full time again, but because of my background with the military, I could always get jobs. I've honestly done so many random things!" she says with a smile. Most recently, before coming to

Dubai—where she's lived for six or seven years now—she was working for a land survey company. She had previously been working as the manager of a sports shop, and realised she just didn't want to be in a mall all day. One of the girls who worked for her at the time had a boyfriend who worked with a land survey company, so after an introduction, Karina went in to chat to them and came out with another new job that she loved, in part also due to her love for graphic design, which saw her drawing up plans and writing consents for the local

council, among other tasks. It was this path that brought her to Dubai, where she first began her life in the Middle East working in the oil and gas field.

A Natural Progression

Once she moved to Dubai, Karina joined the gym at The Aviation Club in Dubai's Al Garhoud area. She began doing Body Pump and Body Combat classes, and enjoyed them so much that she decided to become a qualified instructor, which she'd do in her spare time after work. Around the same time, she discovered the





“My whole being *was based on sport—I thought that that’s* where my life was going, professionally”

surfing community in Dubai, and became a staple at the Surf House Dubai, back then known simply as Surf Dubai. Eventually, the desire to chase her active passions became so great that Karina took a year off work in order to fully immerse herself in becoming a coach in both Body Pump and Body Combat, as well as coaching at the Surf House.

After her year off, she went back to work, and discovered a new love for CrossFit, purely by accident. “There was a fitness competition on, it must have been in 2013, in Dubai Mall. It was a big one. My students at the Dubai Ladies Club were like, ‘You’ve got to go in and you can do this!’ while I just said, ‘I don’t even know what CrossFit is!’ At the time, I had no idea. I passed the qualifier, just, and at this competition, they were some big names like Annie Thorisdottir and Lindsey Valenzuela, though I had no idea who they were then,” she says. After doing well in the competition, Karina still insisted that she didn’t really like CrossFit. “Then I was like, I’ve done all of these exercises all my life, so why is CrossFit so cool when I’d do something similar to this when I go to the gym anyway? Then I thought, ok, well actually, if that’s what I do, I should look into it more. And I thought, I believe in this type of training and all they’ve done is market it really well—after all, MMA is a hybrid, so CrossFit was just a hybrid of exercise too. So I got into it. It lined up with the way I think and the way that I’d train people anyway, so I thought yeah, coaching it would be cool,” Karina explains. She took the necessary courses, and was offered a job at a CrossFit gym,

which she took, quitting her job in the oil and gas sector. After her time there, Karina’s now ready for her next adventure: as a coach at ISIX8, a boutique fitness studio that offers unique classes based around HIIT and boxing, as well as yoga.

It’s no surprise that she eventually found her way back into an active field when it comes to making a living: Sports seems to have always been in her life. In high school, she played hockey and was selected for the New Zealand girls under-15 team. When she left school, she started Muay Thai, which she did from about the age of 17 until she joined the Navy. She then completed the New Zealand dive course, and was the first woman to ever pass that, coming in second on the course overall. “I didn’t really care [about my ranking]—I was just going in there having the time of my life and charging hard, but that was a bit of an achievement,” she says. In the Navy she also played rugby, representing them in games, before being selected for New Zealand rugby teams, which she thrived in until she had her car accident. “I had this big Forrest Gump brace on for ages when I broke my back [in the accident] and I was just [messed up] in the head then. I’d take it off and try and go for runs, and I’d hurt myself more. But I just couldn’t handle it—my whole being was based on sport and I had been doing really well, and I felt like my life was going to go in the direction of something sport-related, whether through the military or professionally,” she says, continuing: “I don’t mind now because obviously I’ve done heaps since then, but it did completely change my life.”





Surfing has always been a sport that she's loved, ever since she had her first taste of it at the age of 17, and Karina can also add three years of competitive boxing to her enormous list of sporting achievements: "The thing I loved so much about that was that there were no rules in that ring," she says, explaining how while she believes in living your life as a "pretty nice person who isn't fazed by much on a daily basis," being kind as a general rule, that no-holds-barred space was an incredibly cathartic release. Karina did so well that she was selected to join the New Zealand team to represent women's boxing as it was to be introduced at the Olympics, but when they postponed it for another four years, she had to back out. "It was just too much for me on my back, training like that every day consistently, so there was no way I was going to do it for four years," she says. Karina needed a new passion, and she picked triathlons: She did so well and loved it so much that, unsurprisingly, she started doing them competitively.

Sport has always been her passion: "When you grow up in New Zealand, it's just how it is. You throw rugby balls, kick footballs and play tennis,



because your parents do it too. I recently found out that two of my uncles were All Blacks, and I didn't know that before. One of my cousins also plays for the New Zealand Warriors. He's a bit of a legend, so I guess it is in the family, even if I didn't know it!" she smiles. One thing she does know for certain is that, despite cramming almost every sport that she could into the 38 years of her life so far, she's not stopping anytime soon. It's in her blood, and with her fearless, go-get-'em spirit, we can't wait to see where the wind will take this inspirational thrill-seeker next. ■





POSTER GIRL

Karina is passionate about championing causes, brands and campaigns that agree with her life philosophies and values. In addition to her day job as a Coach with ISIX8 UAE, she's also a Team Rider for Surf House Dubai, a Cycle To Work UAE Ambassador for 2016, and a Brand Ambassador for Seakiss Swimwear, lululemon athletica, and S Plus Surfboards.

WADI YOU WANT?

If these photos have got you frothing at the mouth to head to Wadi Adventure to catch your own waves (be they on a surfboard or a wakeboard), why not head to Al Ain for a day at the ultimate adventure-seeker's destination? For more information (including the exact location and directions), contact details for bookings, and information on their dining and leisure areas—in addition to the surf pool beach area, the park boasts a family pool, kids splash pool, various dining establishments (serving up everything from hot meals and cold drinks to smoothies and fruity desserts)—visit their website at WadiAdventure.com. Booking in advance is highly recommended.

> **SURFING:** This 3.3 metre man-made wave pool, or surf pool if you'd rather call it that, is the largest in the world—no wonder *Surfing Magazine* voted it into its "50 Favourite Surfing Sites" list as the 41st best surfing beach in the world, artificial waves and all. Who says there are no waves in Dubai? When the sea isn't giving you the swell that you're craving, this is where you'll find it. You can either take lessons with one of the qualified surf instructors, pay for shared use (whether with your own board or one of their rental boards), or go all out and hire the entire pool so you can get the perfect break all to yourself. Waves can be created at a variety of levels, from small rolling waves perfect for beginners to 3-metre-plus Lefts, Rights, A-Frames and Close-Outs. You can even bodyboard here if that's what you're after. Prices begin from Dhs150 for a 55-minute session in the pool, on top of the Dhs50 general park admission fee, or if it's lessons you're after, it's Dhs100 for a group class and Dhs300 for a one-on-one. Lockers and towels come at a rental cost of Dhs35 and 30, respectively.

> **WAKEBOARDING:** Thanks to this cool cable wake park system, here you can wake board, knee board and water ski in a safe and controlled environment that boasts more than 350 metres of running cable that can reach speeds of up to 45km per hour. Like the surf pool, here you can opt for wake boarding lessons from a qualified instructor, or you can just do your own thang (with people looking out for safety and the operation, of course). Passes can be sold by hour for up to eight people, with all safety equipment and boards provided by the park, with prices starting at Dhs50 for a 30-minute session.

> **KAYAKING & RAFTING:** Much like the surf pool, the white water channels at Wadi Adventure offer a variety of different speeds for whichever level you need, from an easy class 1 level to the highly challenging class 3, all held within conveyor access channels that make up the longest combined channels in the world. Lessons (which last for 1.5 hours each) are available from Dhs150 for a group session to Dhs500 for a one-on-one, or you can just opt for an all-day pass (based on availability) for Dhs150 instead. White water rafting is available for Dhs100 for a one-hour session, while private rafts are available for Dhs500 for an hour, if that's what you're after.

> **AIRPARK, ZIP LINE & GIANT SWING:** The wave pool and white water channels may be a key attraction here, but not everything at Wadi Adventure is water-based—they also have a 200 metre-long Zip Line over the lakes (which goes at 10 metres per second) with a combination of two levels and 18 different elements, where you can test your balance on suspended balance beams, rope webs and spinning platforms. There's also a 3-seater giant swing that's 11 metres high, which accelerates at 60km per hour, swinging you and your pals through the centre of the airpark. From Dhs50 for a one-hour session in the air park or on the zip line, or Dhs25 per swing for the giant swing.

> **CLIMBING:** Wadi Adventure's backdrop may be the beautiful Jebel Hafeet mountain, but they also have a killer climbing wall—at 13 metres in height and with seven colour-coded routes to choose from, it caters to all levels of climber. From Dhs30 for a 20-minute session.