

Finisterre founder Tom Kay on building Britain's Patagonia and scaling sustainably

Tom Kay has built a premium, environment-first outdoor clothing brand in Finisterre. As he eyes expansion, his reputation and responsibility for sustainability remains as important as ever

When Tom Kay gets on the phone, he's just got back from a dip in the ocean. Whenever he has an hour or so spare in his busy schedule, he'll nip down to the coastline a stones throw from his house in St Agnes, Cornwall.

The Cornish coast is rugged and windy. It feels prehistoric, a step back in time: it's no wonder many refer to it as the 'end of the earth', or in shipping terms, 'Finisterre'. It's this coastline where Tom fell in love with the ocean, and where he launched and built his outdoor clothing brand.

The *Finisterre* brand is a tribute to this coast, to his affection for the ocean and the environment, and to the surfers and outdoor lovers that flock here throughout the seasons. But to call Finisterre a local, Cornish brand is to do it a disservice. Since its launch in 2003, it's gradually become a highly respected, premium outdoor clothing brand not just for surfers, but for lovers of the outdoors: Britain's Patagonia, if you like.

With a huge online presence, and with ten high street stores across the UK

already, Finisterre firmly has its foot on the accelerator. But growing is only half the challenge: maintaining a responsible and sustainable business as they scale is central to success for Tom and his company.

Swapping bikinis and boardshorts for wetsuits and waterproofs

Tom's affinity for being in the water dates back to childhood. He spent much of his youth in and around water, discovering surfing around the age of 15 and never looking back.

Chances are, if you're picturing surfing, you're picturing long haired, tanned surfers in tropical waters and balmy climates. If you've never been to Cornwall, it's not surprising if you'd think this. This was the image of surfing that Tom grew up seeing in fashion magazines: but it was far cry from his actual experience. "It's pretty wet, windy, cold, rough, wild, and dark—but on its day, it's as good as anywhere in the world," Tom says.

Time was spent trudging in and out of frosty waters, throwing on as many layers as possible while running to the car to warm up with air conditioning and a flask of tea.

Few brands spoke to this experience of cold water surfing. With brands like Billabong and O'Neill focusing on warm water Pacific surfing, few had the practical application to the experience he was having. "There was a real need for the product. Better wetsuits, better jackets, better waterproofs," he says.

A few years at university in Bristol, and then working in London as a chartered surveyor, removed a bit further from the ocean. But the ocean never really left him. He was still fixated on building a brand that catered to this new type of surfer that was increasingly present in the UK. Moving back to St Agnes, the stage was set to launch his new clothing company.

"I didn't have a business degree, I didn't have a fashion degree," Tom admits, "But I believed in what I was doing, and that there was room in the world for a brand like Finisterre."

They started small, launching a waterproof, windproof fleece for surfers—but have now grown to a range much more broadly spanning the outdoors.

But the ocean has always remained central to their story. Their locations are often coastal—places like Brighton, Falmouth, and Hawksfield. They've had a long running collaboration with the Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI), with whom Tom is a regular volunteer.

Scaling a sustainable brand

‘Sustainable clothing brands’ are omnipresent now—it’s almost a case that, if you aren’t creating your clothes with a sustainability lens, you’re the exception. It’s hard to believe then that, back when he launched Finisterre, it was pretty novel.

Not only were they producing clothes with sustainable fabrics (either natural or recycled fibres), they were creating products that were able to sustain the wear and tear of the outdoors. Fleece, wetsuits, waterproofs: they had to be made to last.

From its very creation, sustainability has been Finisterre’s ‘North Star’: the one thing they have an unwavering commitment to. While he was filling a gap in the market, it’s always been about more than just filling a gap: “There’s a reason behind why we’re doing this.”

In 2018, Finisterre became an early partner with B Lab, gaining a B Corp Certification to cement their commitment to more than just creating shareholder value, but to their duty towards all stakeholders (including customers, local communities, and the environment). This wasn’t a case of changing direction: they’d been doing this since day one anyway. It’s more about proving to customers and potential employees that they were doing things the right way. “It’s great to have an independent stamp of approval.”

Their green credentials have been a huge asset to their building a community around their business, too. Their customers are closely engaged in the business, attending events, participating in social or charity initiatives with the brand (such as Blue Friday, where they donate a percentage of profits to charitable causes). They’ve even actively funded the business—helping Finisterre raise £6.5 million across two crowdfunding campaigns.

Tom admits that being known as a sustainable clothing brand creates additional challenges, particularly as you scale. You face additional criticism, you’re certainly held to a higher standard. “We have to be honest that we’re not perfect, we’ve not got all the answers. We’re acknowledging that we’re on a journey.” That was part of the motivation behind getting the B Corp Certification: to get support so that they could improve how they were doing.

Still a startup at heart

Turning up to work each day, it still feels like they’re just getting started. This is how Tom remains motivated, and why he is so confident in the future of Finisterre.

10 stores open already, with new international expansion on the horizon. But staying true to their original values and the spirit in which the business was built has enabled them to continue operating like a startup, with the excitement and energy that comes from that. Harnessing that, whether you're a small startup or a 130-person team like Finisterre, is a huge asset to any founder.

It's hardly surprising his teams stay so driven and motivated: the way Tom tells it, it almost feels like he's building a revolution, not a startup. One which plans to permanently disrupt not just how people buy clothing, but how business will transform over the coming years.

“Never underestimate what a bunch of really committed people can achieve.”

Article by SIMON LOVICK