

PIPE DREAMS

By Alex Davies Photography by Steven Chee

Golden
girl

She may have a historic seven World Titles under her belt, but Aussie surfing legend Stephanie Gilmore still has goals to conquer – both in and out of the water

DKNY top, \$59, The Iconic; Roxy bikini bottoms, \$39.95; surfboard, Steph's own

Stephanie Gilmore is reminiscing about her first love.

She was 11, growing up in Murwillumbah, NSW. It was the first thing she thought about when she woke up, and the last thing floating in her mind before bed. That's the power of the ocean, she says – it's constantly changing and you're left wondering what it'll be like tomorrow. "I think that's what keeps me coming back. [The ocean] has taught me to let go of things, you know, because you can't fight it. You just have to sort of go with it. It gives me so much joy, all these challenges, and at the end of the day it's fun, too. The most fun that I've had in my life has been moments in the ocean." It freaks her out sometimes, though, right? Steph bursts out laughing. "Of course! The ocean is terrifying! I've got scars on my body from missing a wave here and there. But it's nice to have that little bit of fear – that's where the magic happens, when you push yourself into that uncomfortable zone."

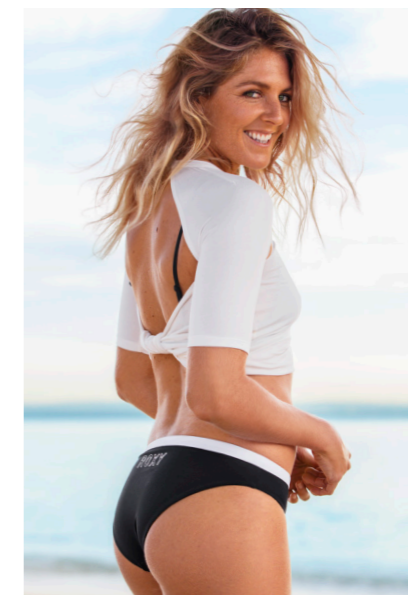


THIS PAGE (from left) DKNY top, \$59; The Iconic; Roxy bikini bottoms, \$39.95.

Good American top, \$125; Roxy bikini top, \$49.95, and bikini bottoms, \$49.99.

Roxy swim top, \$79.99; Duskii bikini bottoms, \$80.

OPPOSITE Good American jacket, \$229; Roxy bikini bottoms, \$49.99; surfboard, Steph's own



Steph's dynamic kind of magic looks something like this: the 31-year-old won the first of her seven World Titles during her 2007 rookie season (the first surfer, male or female, to do so) and made history when she claimed number seven in 2018. She now matches Aussie icon Layne Beachley for the most women's World Titles ever. ("I smile a lot already, but [my grin] would've split in half if I'd smiled any more," she recalls of that seventh win, which was enthusiastically celebrated with "a tour of dancing and drinking and having a good time!")

At the time of our photoshoot (BTS highlights: Steph dancing to disco tunes and fielding 1001 surfing questions from our photographer), she's also looking ahead to the small matter of Tokyo 2020 – the first time surfing will be included at the Olympics. "It's a huge opportunity for our sport, and it's great to think that there'll be a whole new audience of people who have never seen surfing before, and maybe they'll become fans and want to watch it in the non-Olympic years as well," says Steph. "We've had so many inspiring athletes and Olympic gold medallists come out of Australia – Cathy Freeman, Stephanie Rice, Ian Thorpe – who have inspired me like crazy. So to finally have that opportunity in my career is really special."

For Steph, competing would fulfil a childhood dream. She's always wanted to be an Olympian, even if it wasn't on a board. As a kid, she became smitten with riding waves thanks to her surf-loving siblings and dad, but she also threw herself into softball, football, hockey and athletics. So no surprise, really, that she's a fierce advocate for female athletes now. She played a big role in the campaign for equal prize money for male and female surfers, which the World

Surf League announced in September 2018, and hopes it'll have a knock-on effect beyond sport. "I think [the pay transparency] can really set the standard for so many industries around the world, and that's the power of sport. I'm proud that surfing wanted to be a leader in that way."

A shore thing

Hit up Steph's Instagram and you won't find a typical 'Aussie surfer living my best life' bio. Right now, there's simply a link to a *Rolling Stone* article, which tells her story in 15 songs. Sure, her feed contains surfing photos, but you'll also spot shots of art, dogs, friends, travel (another great love) and videos of her playing the guitar.

Creativity is a huge part of what keeps Steph so positive and chilled, whether it's journaling to help her stay present and cope with stress, or music – she's hooked on musician docos and plays everything from Roberta Flack, Aretha Franklin and Tame Impala to Led Zeppelin on her 20-odd guitars ("I have a total addiction"). "I think the first song my dad taught me was [Bob Dylan's] *The Times They Are a-Changin'* but I probably played it horribly for years and years," Steph remembers, laughing. (Her practise came good: she's played onstage with two of the Foo Fighters, as well as US singer/songwriter Jimmy Buffett.)

Her approach to fitness also transcends the waves. Travel can throw her routine out of whack, but she aims for 90 minutes of exercise daily. Think: an hour of strengthening yoga ("It's so great for flexibility and balance") followed by a 20-minute run ("I'm doing a bit lately to keep my cardio up – I change my training a little around each event, depending on what the

waves will be like”) and finally some plyometric work, so “my body feels dynamic when I’m surfing”. It’s got to be fun, though. “If one day I didn’t do anything, then maybe I’ll go out with my friends and we’ll dance for a few hours. Or, go hiking. It’s about making it fun rather than feeling guilty for not going to the gym.”

Like many athletes (and yogis, for that matter), she places huge importance on breath work. “I’ve learnt a lot working with different people around the world who really like to tap into the Wim Hof techniques,” she says, referring to the Dutch extreme athlete, known for his ability to withstand freezing temperatures. “[Like] learning how to use your entire body when you’re breathing, not just the shallow breaths up in your chest. If you’re stressed and freaking out, doing some breathing exercises can really bring you back to centre, bring your heart rate down and help you focus. You can also use it at the start of a heat or before you paddle out to kind of get the blood flowing and get the oxygen happening and get your body switched on. It’s crucial, I think, for everybody, not just athletes, to really pay attention to how they breathe.”

In case you’re wondering, her daily training includes actual surfing, too. This champ will get in the water at least once a day, whether it’s for a high-intensity catch-as-many-waves-as-possible 30 minutes or a three-hour session, with a practise competition heat thrown in for good measure. It depends on what the ocean’s doing, though – kind of like a fiery toddler, it’s always the one in charge.

Water warrior

Equality in sport isn’t the only issue that gets Steph fired up. She’s an environmental advocate, which makes her picky about the brands she works with. Ones that have made the cut? Nikon, Breitling, Audi (a force in electric-car innovation) and Roxy. She’s collaborated with the latter on a POP Surf collection of wetsuits and swimwear, made using a fibre created from recycled plastics, including old fishing nets, bottles and industrial scraps. “I was involved with making sure the product used sustainably sourced material that would have the least amount of impact [on the planet], because that’s a huge part of what I want as my legacy. To really make a difference in the world – that’s important to me – and I’m so stoked that Roxy was willing to work with me on these things.



STYLING: CHARLOTTE STOKES. HAIR: GAVIN ANESBURY. MAKE-UP: SARAH TAMMER

STEPH by numbers

40 or 50

The approx number of surfboards Steph owns. In her words: “Too many!”

7

This is how many surfing World Titles Steph has to her name. What a champ!

20

The music lover has at least this many guitars. “My favourite is a custom Gibson Les Paul and my off-white Fender Jazzmaster.”

88

Her lucky number. “My jersey number is 88, which is the year I was born, but also seems pretty lucky too.”

2

Steph’s post-training snack is two eggs and avo on toast. “Always well done. I don’t do runny eggs. Coffee order? Oat milk piccolo.”

60

The minutes of yoga Steph tries to do daily for “flexibility and balance”.

“In some way, shape or form, some transaction [you’ve] made throughout the day will probably affect the ocean’s health,” she adds. “No matter where you are in the world – it can be in the middle of a city, in the middle of America and ... maybe something you throw out ends up in the sea. I think, as a surfer, we have this opportunity to talk to and educate people, because we’re seeing the changes every single day. Every time I go back to a beautiful destination, like Bali, we see the trash in the ocean becoming greater and greater, and that the temperatures in the ocean are rising. We need to figure out how we can work together to make a difference.”

Seeing the world fuels Steph as much as surfing. She considers herself Australia-based, but spends a lot of time in the US (she’s in California for our phone call) and admits her lifestyle is pretty nomadic. She wouldn’t have it any other way, though, and you definitely won’t find her confined to a hotel room when she’s on a surf tour. “Of course, we are competing, we have a job, but it’s important to actually stop and enjoy the culture and, you know, talk with the young kids and hang out with the local people and really enjoy the time.”

Her favourite spots for waves? Northern NSW, aka home, the Mentawai Islands off West Sumatra in Indonesia, and mainland Mexico. She’s keen to get back to Tahiti and surf Teahupo’o, and maybe take on Pe’ahi (also known as ‘Jaws’ because of its deceptively huge waves) in Maui. She’s also gunning for Pipeline, the iconic surf reef break in Hawaii. “I’ve surfed a small one, but I really need to go there and push myself and be in the conditions, because that’s really the pinnacle of our sport – to surf a big day at Pipeline,” Steph says.

All this chat conjures up memories of 2002 surf movie *Blue Crush*, which saw a generation of us punch the air as central character Anne Marie finally conquers Pipeline. “[That film is] the best depiction of surfing that Hollywood has ever done, 100 per cent. I love that movie,” laughs Steph. “Kate Bosworth was just the coolest.” Nah, Steph Gilmore, you definitely win our vote for that title. **wh**