



Trends in
Outdoor
Swimming
Report –
Highlights

Welcome

WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THESE HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR NEW ANNUAL REPORT TRENDS IN OUTDOOR SWIMMING

Please read on for the executive summary, key statistics, background to the report and our conclusions. If you would like to order a full copy of the report, please contact info@outdoorswimmer.com.

Contents of the full report include:

- **How the coronavirus pandemic affected outdoor swimming**
- **Who swims outdoors and why?**
- **Outdoor swimmers and the environment**
- **Swimmers and travel**
- **Swimmers and gear**
- **Black and ethnic minorities in outdoor swimming**
- **What happens next for outdoor swimming?**
- **Supporting data and survey results**



Foreword



I am delighted to present the highlights of our first “Trends in Outdoor Swimming Report”. I hope you find it as fascinating to read as we did in putting it together.

This year, 2021, marks 10 years since I launched H2Open Magazine, and four years since we rebranded to Outdoor Swimmer. While there have been plenty of ups and downs along the way, 2020 presented us with our biggest challenges yet. I’m proud of how the Outdoor Swimmer team stayed focused on producing timely and relevant information to swimmers in a fast-changing environment. The events of last year also prompted us to dig deeper and take an in-depth look at trends in outdoor swimming, and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. We wanted to improve our understanding of who swims outdoors and why. As you will see, outdoor swimming is an activity that brings its participants a long list of benefits and much joy. It’s uplifting to be part of such an exciting, vibrant and positive sector.

An argument for learning to swim is that it could save your life. However, our findings suggest that this may be the tip of the iceberg when it comes to reasons to learn to swim. We show, for example, almost everyone who swims outside says it supports their mental and physical health, it keeps them fit and is important for their social lives. Being able to swim gives you access to a lifetime supply of self-administered mental and physical health support, a means to exercise at almost any age and it is a source of great friendships. Moreover, becoming an outdoor swimmer may change how you think about

a range of issues such as climate change, the environment and pollution. It could make you a more caring person as well as a healthier and happier one. We also learn that it could provide you with a career.

I want to share one finding from our survey with you in this introduction. We asked: “How important is outdoor swimming to your sense of identity?” People could answer from (1) Not Important to (5) Most Important. The average came in at 3.8 with 64% ascribing it 4 or 5 and just 6% of people saying it wasn’t important. I find this amazing. Outdoor swimming is not something you do. Being an outdoor swimmer is something that

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you are. It is something that shapes your life and the decisions you make, from what you eat and wear to where you go on holiday and, for some people, even where they choose to live. Outdoor swimming is important. We hope this report helps raise awareness of this in governments, National Governing Bodies, Sport England (and its equivalents around the world),

health authorities, tourist boards, local and regional authorities and anywhere else that has a decision-making role that can impact outdoor swimming.

The other audience for this report is those who work in sectors that supply products and services to outdoor swimmers throughout the world. We know 2020 was a massively challenging year for everyone, and financially more difficult for some than others. I hope our findings give you cause for optimism in 2021 and will be useful in supporting your marketing and product development in this sector.

We hope you enjoy these highlights from our new annual report Trends in Outdoor Swimming. If you would like to order a full copy of the report, please contact info@outdoorswimmer.com.

Swim wild and free
Simon Griffiths,
Founder & publisher, Outdoor Swimmer



Yvette Helinski

Executive summary

Both anecdotal evidence and the available data paint a picture of growth in outdoor swimming around the world in 2020, especially in the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Two big themes emerge from our survey of swimmers.

Firstly, there is a growing recognition of the importance of swimming outside for mental and physical health and for general wellbeing. Secondly, and perhaps related to the first, has been a big jump in interest in winter swimming. We also observed that the proportion

of female swimmers has increased, and women appear to be swimming more frequently than men. In addition, swimmers care about the environment and take active measures to improve the quality of the water they swim in and the surrounding areas.

However, despite the growth, businesses serving outdoor swimmers have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic in widely different ways. Event

companies and swim travel businesses have suffered most with very few outdoor swimming events going ahead and most travel cancelled. The first lockdown was devastating for many swimming coaches, but some managed to recover during the second half of the year. Product suppliers first saw demand evaporate and then, for certain products at least, come flooding back.



Swimmers estimated they spent £200 each, on average, on swim-related kit in 2020

45%
of swimmers increased how much they swim outside in 2020

60% of swimmers are worried about pollution and the risk of getting ill

20%
of outdoor swimmers started to support their mental health and general wellbeing

With direct retail being extremely challenging in 2020, many pivoted to increase their online sales. Unpredictable demand also caused supply chain issues. Meanwhile, despite having to delay opening and put in place extensive Covid-measures, venues have had a great year.

Looking forward, we see a mixture of optimism and

caution. There is widespread recognition that outdoor swimming is something that people want to keep doing once they discover it. However, we are clearly not yet out of the woods with coronavirus and this will continue to present challenges to businesses and individuals going into next year.

42%
of outdoor swimmers say that cold water is not a barrier to swimming as often as they like

KEY STATISTICS

We estimate participation in outdoor swimming in the UK has increased by between 1.5 and 3 times since 2019

Female participation in outdoor swimming has increased from roughly 50% in 2017 to 65% in 2020

52% of people who tried outdoor swimming liked it more than they expected (and 47% liked it as much as they expected)

75% of new outdoor swimmers said they wanted to continue swimming outside through winter

69.4% say outdoor swimming is essential or very important to their mental health

43.4% say "health and wellbeing" is the main reason they swim outside

70% of people say that being an outdoor swimmer has made them more concerned about water pollution

When they travel for non-swimming reasons, 78% look for opportunities to swim in open water

Background

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY OUTDOOR SWIMMING?

We take the broadest possible definition of outdoor swimming to include any swimming that takes place in water that isn't covered by a roof. This covers a large range of activities and participants from swimming in remote and untamed bodies of water, to triathlon style racing, long distance challenges such as English Channel crossings and cold water dipping. We most definitely include lidos in our definition as we're well aware those places inspire a unique devotion from their fans.

Other terms we might use, loosely, but not completely interchangeably include:

- **Open water swimming** – primarily referring to events and racing, often in wetsuits.
- **Wild swimming** – swimming in unsupervised locations in seas, rivers and lakes etc.
- **Marathon swimming** – either the 10km marathon swim distance and Olympic distance open water event, or longer (solo) swims across large bodies of water such as the English Channel or Catalina Channel.
- **Winter swimming** and cold water swimming – swimming outside, in natural water temperatures in winter, either for recreation or in competition.



Katia Vastiau

This report looks at trends and participants' attitudes in all these areas of swimming.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS REPORT?

Our aim with this report is to provide relevant and up-to-date information for anyone involved in the world of outdoor swimming, from swimmers to brands offering products and services to swimmers, businesses interested in entering this space or associating with it and organisations whose work is in some way connected to outdoor swimming. In addition, the findings in this report are relevant to people who care about societal health and wellbeing (including mental health), the environment, the importance of blue spaces and the value of being active in nature.

OUR OBJECTIVES IN CREATING THIS REPORT

We researched and wrote this report in order to:

- Improve our understanding of the scale and rate of growth in outdoor swimming around the world.
- Understand more about why people swim outdoors and the benefits of outdoor swimming to individuals and society.
- Learn about what swimmers think about a range of topics from their kit choices to travel destinations and support for environmental activism.
- Collect evidence for the benefits of investing in and supporting outdoor swimming.
- Increase our knowledge of how the coronavirus pandemic impacted outdoor swimming.

We hope this report helps broaden and deepen readers' understanding of outdoor swimming and will be a valuable guide to businesses and organisations connected to this wonderful activity. We intend to publish updates to this report annually to track the changing shape of outdoor swimming around the world and look forward to working with all stakeholders in the outdoor swimming space to track trends and collate data and empirical evidence as, hopefully, ever more people take to the water.

HOW HAVE WE CREATED THIS REPORT?

The core of this report is based on findings from our "Attitudes to Outdoor Swimming Survey" that we ran in November and December 2020, and through which we collected 2196 responses. This was supplemented by separate surveys of businesses connected to outdoor swimming, desk research and interviews with key players in the sectors.

Thanks are due to Swim England who helped refine the survey questions and shared it with their database, ensuring a large response.



Katia Vastiau

Closing remarks

It's clear to us that outdoor swimming grew significantly in 2020 but we have to question whether that growth is a transient fashion linked to the coronavirus pandemic or a long-term trend. What our research shows is that outdoor swimmers perceive a wide range of benefits from their activity and, although the science is still underdeveloped, the indicators are that these benefits are real. The pandemic has shown us many things, good and bad, but perhaps one of the better things to come out of it is the growing recognition of the importance of looking after our physical and mental health. This bodes well for the future of outdoor swimming. It's a widely accessible activity, with low entry costs and huge potential benefits. Our vote is for long-term growth rather than fleeting fashion.

While outdoor swimming has been an activity for millennia, the industry supporting it is still young. There is an expectation of future growth and development and further opportunities. We expect more businesses to enter the space, providing increasing choice for swimmers but also more competition for the existing brands.

We have highlighted some of the potential challenges

to growth in this report and swimmers will need to become increasingly aware of how their activities could put excessive pressure on fragile natural environments. On the other hand, outdoor swimming has already shown itself to be a fantastic vehicle for campaigning and highlighting broader issues such as climate change and pollution, and there is every likelihood that this will continue.

Putting this report together has been a fantastic learning experience for the team at Outdoor Swimmer. While we anticipated many of the findings, it's reassuring to see them backed up by strong data and supported by a wide range of people involved in outdoor swimming.

If you have any questions about the findings or our conclusions, or have suggestions for research topics for next year's Trends in Outdoor Swimming report, please get in touch.

Finally, a big thank you to everyone who completed our surveys or took the time to share their views and experiences for this report.





Outdoor Swimmer has been publishing inspiring content about all aspects of swimming outdoors since 2011.
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Swimmer OUTDOOR

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