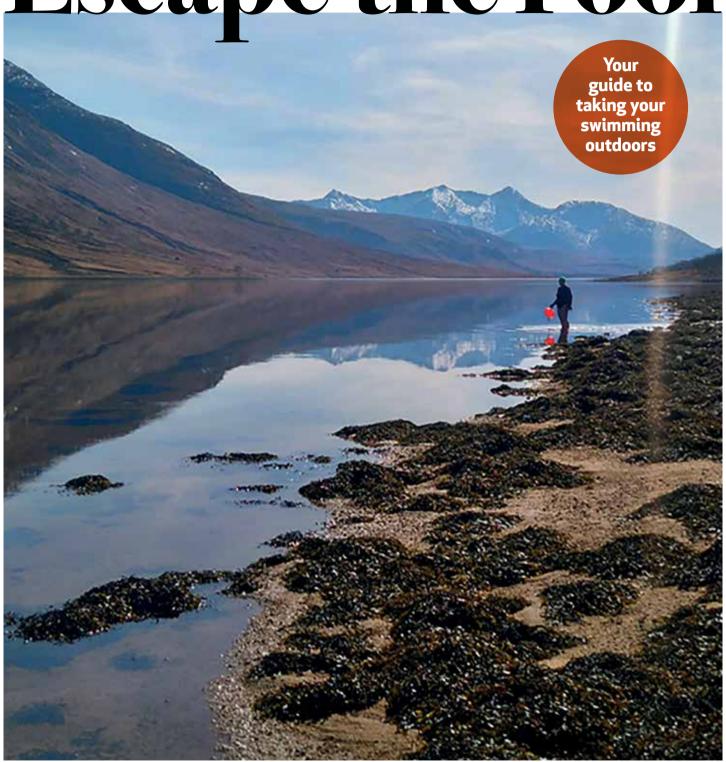


Escape the Pool



• GETTING PREPARED • KIT GUIDE • ESSENTIAL SKILLS • YOUR FIRST OUTDOOR SWIM



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# Getting Started

can't remember a time I didn't swim outdoors. I didn't even realise outdoor swimming or open water was a 'thing'. My mum used to bundle me, my siblings, various friends, and sometimes a couple of dogs, into the back of her Ford Granada estate (no child safety seats back then) and drive us off to the beach or an old water-filled quarry, and we'd spend the day roaming and swimming free. Later, as a student, I remember hitch-hiking across Europe and swimming in lakes and rivers along the way. I then spent three years in Africa, where I frequently swam in the sea.

While I've done plenty of other sport, swimming has always been my favourite activity for training and fitness to relaxation and the sheer joy of being in the water - and that experience is always more intense outside. My dream is to share that passion for swimming and especially outdoor swimming, and provide the resources and inspiration for other people to experience it too.

What I've come to realise is that my early swimming experiences were an enormous privilege that not everyone shares. For many people, swimming outside is incredibly daunting. It induces panic and fear rather than exhilaration and joy. Or you just don't know where to start.

Well, one place you could start is your local swimming pool. Outdoor swimming is different to pool swimming but there's no reason why you can't practise some of what you need to know indoors to build up your confidence to swim outside.

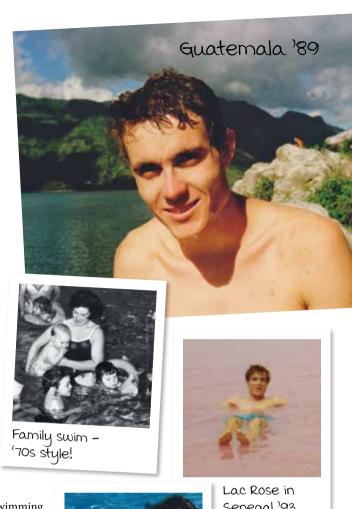
We've therefore produced this short guide to help you start on your own outdoor swimming journey which, if it's anything like mine, will take you to places and give you experiences that you never imagined.

Let's take those first steps.

Happy swimming Simon Griffiths

Founder and publisher **Outdoor Swimmer** 





Senegal '93



Teaching my son to swim



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COMPETENT

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#### Photographer:

Suzanna Cruikshank

#### **Swimmers:**

24 swimmers (plus dogs) **Location:** 

Derwentwater

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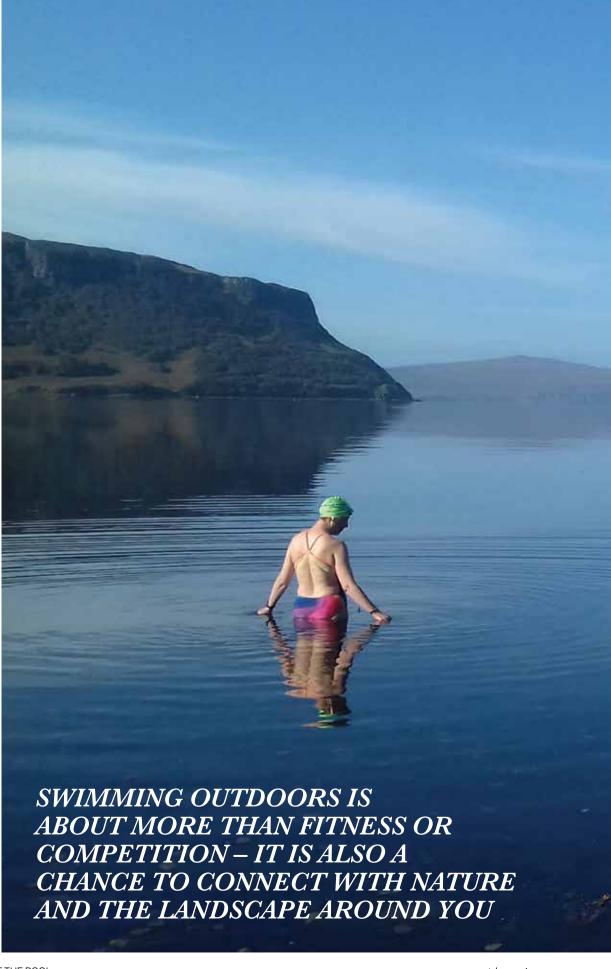
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## POOL VS POND



ven if you've never swum in open water, you can probably still imagine how it will be different to your local pool, but let's take a moment to look at some of those differences in more detail. Understanding what you are getting into will give a big boost to your confidence levels and keep vou safer.

#### WATER TEMPERATURE

Most indoor pools in the UK are maintained at somewhere between 26 and 31 degrees Celsius. Outside can range from 0 (or even slightly below in the sea) to close to boiling point in some hot springs. In the summer, rivers, lakes and the sea around the UK will range from low double digits to, very occasionally, something like 25 degrees. This means that even at its very warmest, open water in the UK is cooler than a swimming pool.

Now, even if your local swimming pool is heated to 29 degrees, it can still feel chilly when you first jump in, so getting in to water that's 10 to 15 degrees cooler has got to be a lot worse, right? Well, yes and no. We'll take a quick look at the three main risks of swimming

in cold water later, but for now we'll just say that for many people, cold is not as big a barrier as they think it is, and cool water on your skin feels amazing. Learn to embrace it.

#### WATER CLARITY

If your swimming pool water is cloudy, it probably means something has gone wrong. Outside, your visibility in the water can be close to zero or, if you're swimming somewhere special, better than in the pool. Low visibility in the water does not necessarily mean poor quality or unsuitability for swimming. Rivers in particular can have low visibility as moving water may carry a high silt load. Shallow, manmade, muddy bottomed lakes may also have poor visibility because of churned up mud, sometimes due to bottom feeding fish. Even when the clarity is good, you often still can't see the bottom, so it seems as if visibility is poor.

Low visibility in the water can be disorientating if you're not used to it or prepared for it. Remember, you don't need to be able to see underwater to be able to swim.

#### **WATER OUALITY**

Open water is natural. That means it has things in it: fish, plants, insects, floating debris, rubbish, bacteria, algae etc. Many of those things will do you no harm but there are a few things to steer clear from. Avoid water that could be contaminated by sewage, is stagnant, full of rubbish or covered with poisonous blue-green algae. On the other hand, healthy water should have plants and fish and their



presence is a good sign. If you can't find water quality information, then relying on your senses and common sense will take you a long way. Swimming pools are dosed with chemicals and full of sweat and urine. Your local river might seem more enticing once you think about that.

#### WALLS AND FLOORS

In the pool, water depth is regular. Most pools have signage to indicate the water depth and to distinguish the shallow and deep ends. No such regularity exists outdoors. You occasionally see signs warning you of deep water, but for swimmers shallow water is often more of a problem. Always take care when swimming outside and avoid jumping or diving in unless you are 100 per cent certain the water is deep enough to do so and there are no other obstacles. Once you are out of your depth, it really doesn't matter how deep the water is; it doesn't affect your swimming. However, psychologically, swimming in very deep water can be a bit disturbing and takes a bit of getting used to. Remember too that you are not surrounded by walls that you can reach within a few strokes and hang on to. This is one of the things that gives you that great sense of

# HAPPENING IN ANY

freedom when you swim outside but you need to manage the associated risks that come with it.

#### WATER MOVEMENT

Unless you're in one of those strange pools with flumes and whirlpools, the water in pools doesn't move significantly, and certainly not in any dangerous way. Conversely, open water can move faster than anyone can swim. In order to stay safe, you need to know what's happening in any body of water you swim in.

Take rivers first. It is often obvious if the water is flowing fast but it can still be difficult to gauge exactly how fast and what the implications are for swimming. With proper planning you can swim safely in fast flowing rivers, but this is best left to experienced swimmers. For people new to outdoor swimming, it's best to stick to slow flowing rivers (where the flow is

less than your swimming speed) and always start by swimming upstream if you plan to get out at the same place you got in. Otherwise plan a one-way swim but ensure you are completely confident in your exit point and how vou will spot it from the water. Note that the flow in some rivers can change very rapidly after heavy rain or if they are controlled by dams.

Water flows in lakes are generally benign, but look out for in-flowing rivers and outflows.

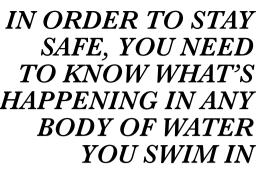
The sea is totally different and must be treated with the utmost respect. Speaking to an experienced swimmer with local knowledge is highly recommended before swimming anywhere except a lifeguarded beach. You can have both lateral movement along the shore or rip currents that can pull you away from shore. Around the UK, we have big tidal ranges which means that somewhere with easy access to the water may be submerged or out of reach a few hours later.

#### WAVES, SWELL **AND CHOP**

Except for rare calm days, the water surface of rivers, lakes and oceans is rarely flat. If you want to swim outside, you should expect to occasionally be

smacked in the face by a passing wave. Swimming in rough water can be challenging and fun, but it's also more difficult than swimming in the calm conditions of an indoor pool. You're more likely to experience rough conditions in the ocean, but you can get surprisingly big waves in lakes. You will get

tired more quickly when swimming in rough water, you will find it more difficult to see where you are going and safety personal will find it more difficult to see you. As you get more experienced, you will become more confident in rough conditions, but always stay well within your capabilities.









#### **RAIN, WIND AND WEATHER**

You're outside. You need to deal with the elements. Swimming in the rain isn't usually a problem. You're wet anyway. Just ensure you've stored your clothes somewhere dry for afterwards. However, be aware that heavy rainfall can result in pollution due to

overflowing drains or surface water run-off. Wind creates waves, which we've already mentioned, but in addition can make things unpleasant for safety kayakers and support crew. Certain combinations of wind and currents can create very mixed and choppy conditions that are

particularly difficult for swimming. That said, while you may picture your ideal swim as being in calm conditions under blue skies, your most memorable and exhilarating swimming experiences will take place when the weather is wild. However, if there is a risk of lightning, leave the water immediately.

#### SUN

Swimming outdoors with the sun on your back ranks as one of life's most pleasant experiences, but do remember the sun can still burn you while you're in the water. Outdoor swimmers often end up with intriguing tan lines. Use a good, waterproof sunscreen.

The sea must be treated with the utmost respect

How strong a swimmer do I need to be before venturing

You don't need to be a super-fit athlete to swim oudoors

# What type of swimming do you want to do?

THE REQUIREMENTS TO COMPLETE A TRIATHLON SWIM ARE DIFFERENT TO THOSE FOR PLUNGING INTO A WILD SWIMMING SPOT TO COOL OFF. THE ONLY WAY TO ANSWER THE QUESTION OF HOW STRONG A SWIMMER DO YOUNEED TO BE IS TO TAKE AN HONEST LOOK AT THE SWIM YOU WANT TO DO AND ASSESS YOUR CAPABILITIES AGAINST IT.



## SWIMMING **SKILLS**



Success! The thrill of completing your first open water event is addictive

As a minimum safety requirement we'd recommend that you can cover several hundred metres non-stop (i.e. without resting on convenient walls). You should be comfortable being out of your depth, be able to tread water or to roll onto your back to float and rest if necessary.

IT DOESN'T MATTER
WHAT STROKE YOU
SWIM, HOW FAST
OR SLOW YOU ARE,
OR HOW UNGAINLY
YOUR TECHNIQUE
IS AS LONG AS
YOU CAN MOVE
FORWARD AT
A SUSTAINABLE
EFFORT LEVEL.

Finally, remember that it is not just your swimming ability that's important.
Swimming outdoors is more difficult and tiring than swimming in a pool.
Experience counts for a lot, as does common sense. It is always better to underestimate your abilities and stay safe.

here is a danger that we wrap up outdoor swimming in a lot of mystique and unnecessary jargon. The reality is, 100 years ago, swimming outside in rivers, lakes and the sea was pretty much your only option, and people just did it. By sanitising and controlling swimming, pools have made us fearful of swimming outside and we've lost that sense of it being a natural and wholesome activity, which it is. Later in this guide we will look at some tips and techniques that will enhance your enjoyment of swimming outside, but these will make more sense once you've got some experience, so why not dive in immediately and find out for yourself what all the fuss is about?

#### WHERE SHOULD YOU **GO FOR YOUR FIRST OUTDOOR SWIM?**

There are several options here. Choose according to convenience or what you think you might enjoy the most.

A recommended outdoor or wild swimming spot (e.g. from a book or online guide) or recognised bathing spot

One of the joys of outdoor swimming is escaping the crowds and literally immersing yourself in nature. With numerous guides now available, it's easy to find amazing and safe swimming spots in rivers, lakes and around the coast. The obvious



How to ensure your first swim leaves you wanting more



beaches is often quite limited as the designated area is usually small and you may end up sharing the space with body

boarders and surfers.

appeared in the UK about 15 to 20 years ago to meet demand from triathletes looking to train. Often, the majority of swimmers at these locations are wetsuited triathletes and

Good venues will give you some induction training and a swimming test before setting you loose. Some also have coached sessions, usually with an extra charge.

# Do not make your first open water experience a race

Please, please do not turn up at an open water race without ever having swum in open water previously. In addition, do not make your first race the first time you wear a wetsuit.

pen water races can be great fun. They can also be stressful. Firstly, you will have lots of people around you either making you nervous because they're talking about how hard it's going to be, how cold or choppy, or making you feel inadequate because they are built like swimming machines and look supremely confident. Secondly, swimming in a crowd is hard. You will get bumped and kicked. You may even get dunked. Thirdly, even a relatively short one-mile swim looks terrifyingly long the first time you see it laid out in the water. And finally, there's the added pressure that your effort will be timed and the result published on a website for the world to see.

Why do all of that to yourself as well as trying to overcome your fears and worries of your first open water swim? The RLSS tell us that most of the people they pull out in events call for help within the first 200 metres. They are often first timers in the water and didn't know what to expect. They panic and



have trouble breathing or start too fast and quickly become exhausted.

Instead, make your first outdoor swim an enjoyable and relaxing experience. Take your time entering the water and getting used to it. If it's your first swim in a wetsuit, get used to how it feels in the water before attempting any serious swimming. Stay close to the bank or shore so you can easily get out or put your feet down if you want to. Have someone swim next to you whose priority is to support rather than beat you. Only strike out on a longer swim once you are completely comfortable and then finish before you're exhausted. Leave yourself wanting more not swearing never to do it again.

**Prepare** yourself for vour first open water

roper preparation for your first outdoor swim will make a huge difference to how much you enjoy the experience. Once you've decided where and when you need to think about who with. By all means, go on your own or with another complete beginner if you're going to a commercial venue or a supervised introductory section where you'll be properly looked after. If not, you should go with someone whose swimming experience and competence you can trust.

Next, make sure you have everything with you that you might need. This could be just a towel, although we recommend a little more than that - see our separate kit list. Test it all fits in advance and that your goggles don't leak. You can try out your costume and goggles in a pool. Some pools will also let you test a wetsuit, so do that if you can, but don't swim in a wetsuit in a heated pool for more than a few minutes. You'll get too hot.

As part of your preparation, it's worth spending a few minutes thinking through getting in the water and starting to swim. Read our notes on cold water shock. Being prepared and knowledgeable will help ensure it doesn't cause you to panic.

Then, organise your meals so you are neither hungry when you swim nor bloated from having just eaten. Some people suggest that cramp can be triggered or made worse by dehydration, so make sure you have drunk adequately. Never swim if you have recently been drinking alcohol or using recreational drugs.

When you change for swimming, pack and store your clothes so you can dress quickly and easily afterwards. If you come out shivering, you don't want to waste time looking for your thermal underwear.

Now, make your way to the water.

#### **GETTING IN**

Why have a whole section on getting in? Because unfortunately, this is the moment when things can go horribly wrong if you don't take care. Firstly, don't even think about jumping or diving in for your first outdoor swim (leave that for when you've got some experience), and never do it in water where you can't see what you're plunging into.

How you get in will depend on where you are. If there is a beach of some kind, wade in slowly, taking care where you place your feet. If the water is very cold, it might actually hurt. Don't worry. The pain will go away after a few minutes. Pause when you get to about waist deep and plunge your hands in. Scoop up some water and splash it on your face and neck. This will reduce the impact of cold water shock. Ensure your breathing is under control and lower yourself until your

TAKE YOUR TIME **ENTERING THE** WATER AND GETTING USED TO IT



shoulders are submerged but keep your face out of the water for now. If you're wearing a wetsuit, at this point some water may trickle in through the zip or down your neck. It will feel cold. Don't worry about it. You'll soon warm up.

Notice your breathing and make sure you are properly breathing out. When you're ready, while still within your depth, try briefly dipping your face in the water to see how it feels. Then try floating on your back or doing a few strokes of head-up breaststroke. It's good to keep your face out of the water at this point. Only move to face-down swimming when you feel totally comfortable

and your breathing is under control.

If you have to get into deep water off a bank or pontoon, it's slightly different. It's a good idea to first sit on the pontoon and dangle your feet in the water. You can also test the water with your hands and splash some on your face and neck. When you're ready, slide in feet first while keeping your hands on the pontoon. Keep one hand on the pontoon until you're ready to tread water or move away slowly using head-up breaststroke. As above, only start facedown swimming when you're ready.

#### NOW WHAT? HOW FAR SHOULD I SWIM?

Good questions. Unless

you're a very experienced and fit pool swimmer, we'd recommend keeping your first outdoor swim to about 10 to 15 minutes and not even worrying or measuring how far you go. Even if you're a brilliant pool swimmer, our advice is still to keep it short and sweet - no more than 30 minutes.

As mentioned above, there's a lot of variability in open water. If it's very cold and the conditions are tough, make your swim shorter. If it's calm and warm, you might push it a bit longer. But don't go crazy.

Swimming outside is more tiring than the pool because you don't have walls to grab hold of every now and then, and because cold water cools your muscles they and become less efficient. Your first swim should be about finding out how you feel when swimming outside. You don't need to set yourself any distance challenges at this stage. Just do enough to feel comfortable in the water and leave yourself wanting more.

You may see other people swimming incredible distances or staying for hours in cold water without any noticeable ill effect. Do not try to copy them on your first swim. Your cold water tolerance and stamina will both improve with experience. Some of those people you see will have been doing it for years.

Credit: Alan Johnstone, Andrew Kenyon, James Kirby



# Next steps: becoming more confident and competent

Learn how to swim efficiently before trying to improve strength or fitness

ow you've done your first outdoor swim, hopefully you're inspired and ready for more. Great! You have done the hardest part. You are now an outdoor swimmer. So, what next? Well, there are a few skills you could learn and practise that will help you become more confident and competent in the water.

#### **ARE YOU SWIMMING COMFORTABLY?**

Swimming is often described as sport or exercise. We also like to think of it as a way to relax and unwind. This happens

best when you can swim with minimal effort and strain. This is obviously important in open water if you want to swim any further than a few hundred metres. Swimming can be as easy, or easier, than walking.

The two most popular strokes for swimming outside are breaststroke and freestyle. Breaststroke is the best for moving silently through the water and observing nature, and for many is the most natural way to swim. It's also the easiest stroke to see where you are going. Front crawl is faster and more efficient, but you need a reasonable level

of proficiency in order to swim at a sustainable energy level.

Swimming comfortably is primarily a question of technique rather than fitness. Inexperienced swimmers often get out of breath quickly not because they are unfit but because they don't know how to breathe when swimming. If this applies to you, you may find it easier to swim breaststroke to start with as it is easier to manage your breathing. A good thing to practise is floating or swimming gently on your back. This is a useful skill if you ever need to rest or recover and you are out of your depth. Also, lying on

your back while waving an arm in the air is the generally recognised call for help in open water.

Swimming good, efficient front crawl is more difficult than it looks but don't let that put you off or discourage you if your early attempts don't get very far. Allow yourself time and enjoy the journey.

If you can, we recommend finding a coach for small-group or one-to-one lessons. It is very hard to teach yourself front crawl. There are lots of moving parts to co-ordinate. Moving in water is different to moving on land. You may think you're doing one thing, but you're actually doing something else.

You can practise swimming either in a pool or in open water but many people find pools are more convenient as it is easier for a coach to observe what's going on and provide feedback.

Remember, it is mostly your technique that determines how quickly you get exhausted. If you are new to outdoor swimming, you will make



## WITHOUT THE GUIDANCE OF A BLACK LINE, MOST SWIMMERS VEER TO ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER

quicker progress (and end up swimming further and faster) if you put your efforts into learning to swim efficiently rather than trying to improve strength and fitness.

#### **SIGHTING AND SWIMMING STRAIGHT**

Most swimming pools have black lines along the bottom. Even if you haven't ever paid them much attention, these lines help keep you swimming in a straight line while in the pool. You also don't need to worry about where you are going as every 25m or so you are forced to turn around. You would struggle to get lost in a pool.

Swimming outside is very different. Often vou can't see the bottom anyway. If you can, it is unlikely to have any features to help you navigate.

Without the guidance

of a black line or tiles. most swimmers veer to one side or the other because of asymmetries in their stroke. Test this for yourself next time you're in a pool by swimming a few strokes with your eyes closed (obviously only do this if you've space and you're not likely to crash in to anyone!).

Clearly, the straighter you can swim, the better, so becoming more symmetric in your stroke is worth striving for. But, regardless of how straight you swim, in open water we still need to frequently check that we're going in the right direction.

We do this through "sighting", which means lifting your head out of the water to look around. If you're doing breaststroke, this is easy. With front crawl, it's a little more difficult.

In normal front crawl, your head and neck

are usually aligned and your face points directly towards the bottom. To "sight" you need to bring your eyes above the water and look forwards. This is not a natural swimming position (unless you play water polo), so the trick is to incorporate the movement smoothly in to your swimming stroke, and return your head to the neutral, face down position as quickly as possible. For most people, the easiest way to do this is just before you breathe. Say you breathe to the right. Look up when your left arm has reached its full extension to the front and your right hand is about to exit the water by your hip. Then, as your right arm swings forward, turn your head into your regular breathing position and then continue swimming normally.

#### Key points to remember:

In flat water, you only need to bring your eyes above the water. The more you lift your head, the more your hips and legs will sink and the more you will slow down.

In rougher water, you may need to lift your head higher to be able to see above the waves. Kick harder as you sight to keep your hips and legs high.

If you don't see what you're looking for, sight again on the next arm cycle (rather than trying to keep your head out of the water for several strokes).

If you still can't see what you're looking for after a few strokes, try swimming head up freestyle for a few seconds. You will need to kick hard to maintain momentum.

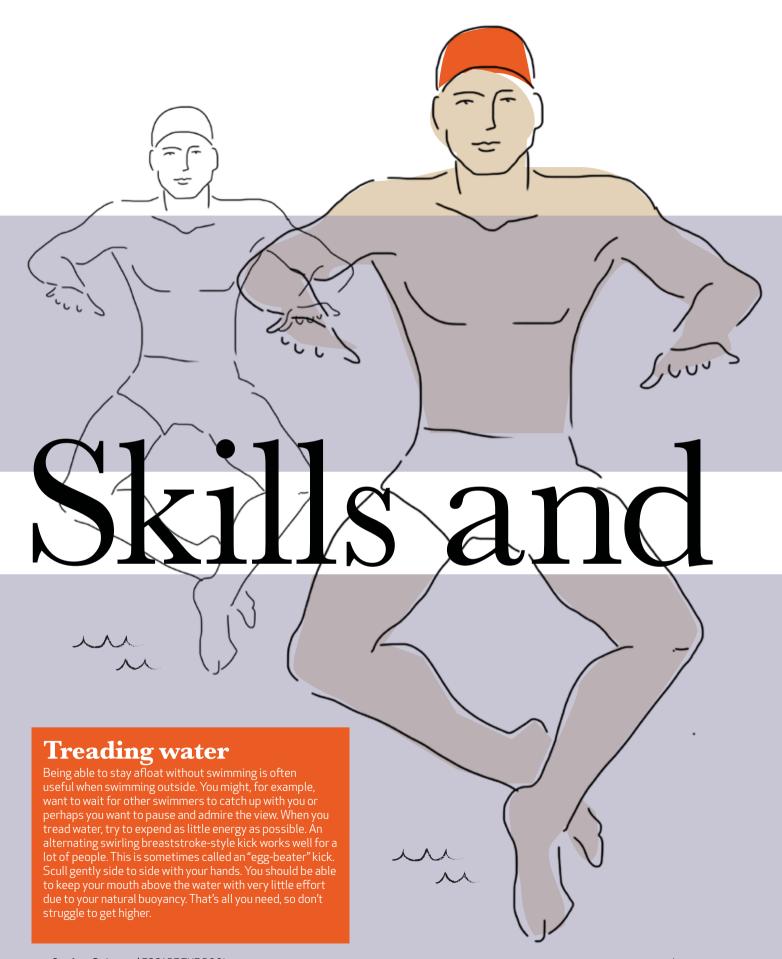
Only stop to look around as a last resort.

It's difficult to see things at water level. Try to identify landmarks behind any points on the water (such as buoys) you're aiming for and sight one of those landmarks instead.

How often you sight will depend on a range of factors: the conditions, how straight you swim, how confident you are and so on. You have to find a balance

between swimming as straight as possible and minimising how often you look up, as that will slow you down and put a strain on your back and hips.

Illustrations: Juliet Boucher Illustration





With outdoor swimming there is always a risk that you come in contact with a bug that could make you ill. You can reduce the risk by washing your hands as soon as you leave the water and before you eat or drink anything. Rinse off your wetsuit and costume as soon as you can and hang them to dry. Wash your hands again after handling your wet kit. If you don't have access to clean water, carry a small bottle of hand sanitiser with you.

THERE IS A MYTH THAT DRINKING COKE AFTER YOUR SWIM WILL KILL ANY BUGS IN YOUR STOMACH AND REDUCE THE RISK OF YOU GETTING ILL. THERE IS NO SCIENTIFIC **EVIDENCE FOR THIS** AND THE THEORY IS FLIMSY.

A few tips to ensure your outdoor swimming is enjoyable and healthy

# Clearing your goggles

It's a fact of swimming life that sometimes your goggles mist up or fill with water. You can reduce the risk of misting by keeping them clean. New goggles mist less than old dirty ones. Cleaning the lens with baby shampoo and rinsing before swimming also helps. If during a swim your goggles have misted so badly you can't see where you are going you may need to stop, tread water

(see above), lift your goggles away from your eyes (don't take them off), lower your face into the water and rinse the lenses. If you have unwanted water inside your goggles you can remove it by turning onto your back, swimming one-armed backstroke and gently lifting the offending eye-piece to let the water out.



Most open water swims do not result in you getting ill but if you do, in most cases any sickness is short lived, mild and self-limiting.

All open water users (e.g. anglers, rowers, kayakers as well as swimmers) have a small risk of contracting Weil's disease. In the UK there are usually less than 100 cases a year with many of these in people who come in to contact with contaminated water through their work. Swimmers are only rarely infected. You can reduce your risk further by ensuring you don't swim if you have any open cuts (or they are completely covered by waterproof plasters). You should, however, be aware of the illness and if you do develop flu-like symptoms after swimming, let your GP know you've been swimming in open water so they consider Weil's disease as a possible diagnosis and you get the right treatment.

# What kit do you need?

One of the good things about outdoor swimming is that you don't need to spend a lot of money on kit nor do you have to carry a ton of stuff around. Pretty much everything is optional. That said, having a few select items will make your outdoor swimming more enjoyable.

# CHANGING ROBE Why you need it

Warmth, changing, fashion From lightweight towelling to fully waterproof and windproof robes,

there's a big choice out there.



#### WATERPROOF BAG Why you need it

Keep your clothes dry while you swim It sometimes rains.

TOWEL
Why you need it
Drying or changing
Douglas Adams got this about right
in the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy
for swimming.



# Why you need it Decency. Avoid arrest.

A tight fitting sporty costume will be best. Beach shorts for men are OK for a quick dip but not recommended for swimming.

### GEAR ESSENTIALS



#### WARM CLOTHES Why you need it

Warmth!

Always pack more clothes than you think you will need. Swimmers wear thick socks, gloves and woolly hats after swimming, even in summer.



#### **GOGGLES** Why you need it

Eye protection. See where you're going.

You don't need specialist open water goggles although some people prefer them. More important is that they don't leak.



#### **SWIMMING HAT** Why you need it

Warmth. Hair control.

A hat makes a surprising difference to how warm you stay in the water. Silicon hats are warmer and sturdier than latex ones.



#### **EARPLUGS** Why you need it

Additional protection for your ears.

Can help keep you warmer. Consider using if susceptible to ear infections. Trade off is the impact on your hearing.



# SLIP-ON SHOES OR FLIPFLOPS

#### Why you need it

Foot protection

Beaches and river banks can be harsh to your feet. Slip-on shoes are the easiest to use when your feet are cold and numb.



#### **TOWFLOAT**

Why you need it

Visibility, security, carrying kit

An inflatable bag you tie around your waist while you swim. It doesn't impact your swimming but helps other water users see you. Some include bags so you can carry kit.



#### WETSUIT Why you need it

Warmth, buoyancy and speed

Possibly the most controversial item in outdoor swimming. Some people won't swim outside without one, others wouldn't wear one if you paid them.



#### FLASK Why you need it Post swim hot drinks.

Hot chocolate, coffee or tea are all good. Best served with a slice of homemade cake and shared with your swimming buddies.



Do you need a wetsuit?

Understand the pros and cons of wetsuits before parting with your cash

hether or not you use a wetsuit is up to you. It is definitely not a prerequisite for taking up outdoor swimming. Some people never wear one and never will, some people start their outdoor swimming with a wetsuit and then abandon it, some people will always wear

a wetsuit for swimming outside and always will, and some chop and change as they feel like it. There is no right or wrong. That said, if you decide to enter an organised swim, be sure to check the rules. Some events insist you wear a wetsuit and others are strictly non-wetsuit. Some make wetsuits compulsory if the water temperature is below a certain level.





#### **REASONS TO WEAR A WETSUIT**

A wetsuit keeps you warmer and will allow you to swim in cool water for longer, especially if you suffer from the cold.

However, wetsuits will not prevent hypothermia, they just reduce the risk. Wetsuits usually help you swim faster, although this isn't universal and depends on the fit and quality.

Wetsuits can help you feel more secure and protected. Wetsuits keep you afloat. It's almost impossible to sink in one.

#### **REASONS NOT TO WEAR A WETSUIT**

Swimming in cool water without a wetsuit feels amazing once you get used to it. Even the most flexible wetsuit restricts your movement in some way, so

swimming without feels freer. It's less hassle to be without and you have less kit to carry around, wash afterwards and hang up to dry.

#### **CHOOSING A WETSUIT**

If outdoor swimming is going to become part of your life and you're going to do it in a wetsuit, we strongly recommend you buy one specifically designed for swimming. General purpose wetsuits may be cheaper and surfing wetsuits may be warmer, but swimming has unique requirements. These primarily relate to flexibility around the shoulders, fit and distribution of buoyancy. Expect to pay between £100 and £200 for an entry level swimming wetsuit and upwards of £500 for a top of the range one. The difference will be in the flexibility and thickness of the neoprene. Top end suits are built for speed and put flexibility at a premium. The material is often thinner, so less warm and more susceptible to damage. Entry level suits tend to offer more buoyancy and warmth and are more than adequate unless you're hyper-competitive.





f you've got this far, you may be wondering: what next? Swimming, and especially outdoor swimming, offers endless possibilities for fun, fitness, adventure, exploration, personal development and relaxation. Here are some ideas to get you started.

#### **CHANGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH** THE SWIMMING POOL

Once you become an outdoor swimmer, pools can feel confining. Still, they are great places for practising and improving your fitness. As discussed previously, your best route to swimming efficiency and speed is through technique. Good technique comes about by multiple repetitions of correct movement patterns. Swimmers often use exercises (known as 'drills') to isolate specific aspects of their technique to work on. These are best done in pools where it's warm enough to take your time and really observe and concentrate on what you are doing. Any drills you do should be done with purpose. Know why you are doing them and what you want to achieve. It's best to work with a coach



for this. It's also good to familiarise yourself with training techniques. Swimmers in training will rarely just swim steadily up and down but will follow a programme that typically includes a warmup, main set, second set and cool-down. You can find sample training sets and explanations on our website and in Outdoor Swimmer magazine and there are plenty online too.

#### **CONSIDER JOINING** A CLUB OR **SWIMMING GROUP**

There are lots of options here. If you're looking for an informal social outdoor swimming group, search

## **OUTDOOR SWIMMING OFFERS ENDLESS** POSSIBILITIES

on Facebook. There are many around the UK and elsewhere in the world. For something more structured, try a masters swimming club. These are open to all adult swimmers but some may require you to achieve a certain swimming proficiency in order to join. The focus in most masters clubs is on competitive pool swimming but increasing numbers of people do both open water and pool swimming. Another option is a triathlon club. This can be a good choice as the standard of swimming is often wider than in a masters clubs and there will be plenty of members with non-swimming backgrounds who are struggling to learn. The focus will mostly be on long distance front crawl and many triathlon clubs have access to lakes for outdoor training sessions.



#### **ENTER AN EVENT**

Outdoor swimming



events come in all shapes and sizes. Take a look through the event listings in Outdoor Swimmer magazine or on our website and see what takes your fancy. Choose from a 1-mile loop in a lake to a 5km sea swim or a 10km river descent. Go for the buzz and atmosphere of a big event or choose a smaller, more personal one. Events often give you the opportunity to swim safely in places that might be difficult to access on your own or they push you to set yourself ambitious targets for your training. Be ambitious, but then make sure you do the preparation.

## GO ON A SWIMMING HOLIDAY

If you've really got the outdoor swimming bug, how about a week of swimming twice daily, island hopping around the Mediterranean, or going further afield to Thailand or the Maldives? Swimming holidays, which didn't exist 15 years ago, now cater for a wide range of abilities and interests. Some are designed around technique improvement while others focus on distance or exploration. The daily distances may be further than you usually swim but there are always options to cut short if you feel tired. You will also find you can swim further than you expect when you

don't have to worry about work or preparing your own food.

# CREATE YOUR OWN SWIMMING ADVENTURE

Something like 70% of our planet is covered in water. This means the opportunities to create your swimming adventure are mostly limited by your imagination and your budget. For example, Avo Akinwolere, who was a Blue Peter presenter at the time, set himself the challenge of swimming five miles across the 8,000m deep Palau Trench in the Pacific Ocean. Before he started training for the challenge he reports that he could barely swim a length of his local pool. You don't need to be so ambitious. How about exploring a stretch of a local river or setting yourself a dip a day challenge for

## 70% OF OUR PLANET IS COVERED IN WATER

a week or a month? It doesn't matter really but it helps if you can attach some importance to it. Akinwolere wanted to inspire more children from ethnic minorities to learn to swim. Other people raise funds for charity or link a challenge to a significant birthday.

#### **JUST ENJOY IT**

It's easy to get caught up in the desire to swim further, faster or in colder water but you don't have to. Swimming, particularly outdoor swimming, is such a wonderful activity you can enjoy it for what it is without setting yourself scary challenges. It's been described as moving

meditation and there's definitely something in that. Anecdotally, many swimmers report how outdoor swimming helps them cope with mental illness, physical injury and personal tragedy. It's one of the last refuges from electronic gadgetry, social media and smart phones. It's ideal for practising mindfulness and being in the moment. It's liberating, freeing you both from the bounds of gravity and the restrictions of your clothing. It's a truly wonderful activity, so come on in, the water's lovely.



#### Additional resources

Outdoor Swimmer – www.outdoorswimmer.com
Find an event or swimming challenge:
https://outdoorswimmer.com/find/events
Find a training venue:
https://outdoorswimmer.com/find/venues



