



1001

OUTDOOR SWIMMING

TIPS

ENVIRONMENTAL, SAFETY,
TRAINING AND GEAR ADVICE
FOR COLD-WATER, OPEN-WATER
AND WILD SWIMMERS

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Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.adventurebooks.com

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First published in 2022 by Vertebrate Publishing.

vp Vertebrate Publishing
Omega Court, 352 Cemetery Road, Sheffield S11 8FT, United Kingdom.
www.adventurebooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-83981-123-4 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-83981-124-1 (Ebook)

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Front cover illustration © Julia Allum represented by www.meiklejohn.co.uk
Photography by Calum Maclean unless otherwise credited.

Edited by Jess McElhattan, design by Nathan Ryder, production by Terry Yeardley, C2 Clear Creative.

Printed and bound in Europe by Latitude Press.

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introduction

‘You never regret a swim.’

This is a philosophy to try and live by when it comes to swimming outdoors. I say *try* to live by, as when there’s an icy wind, grey skies and dark water in the thick of winter, it can be very easy to ask, *why am I doing this?* The big ‘WHY?’ is a question that gets asked by family, friends, puzzled onlookers and even curious animals. At times, the truth of ‘why’ does not come during the swim, but in the aftermath: in shared tales of water with friends; in the look across the sea to a distant island; in the glow of heat returning to once-frozen toes; in the realisation of, *wow, I just did that*; in the sheer buzz that zips around your body after leaving the water and comes flying out of your mouth in a howl.

At times, it can feel like type II fun. Having said that, it doesn’t need to be a struggle. We can find the joy and truth within the activity: the feeling of gliding through calm water, the zen-like state reached after hours of left, right, breathe, left, right, breathe, the power of controlling our breath and getting over that initial shock upon entry. There’s also the learning of new and exotic ways to swear and entertain the wise, towel-holding friends.

I’ve loved the water since I was a child. Many of my family holidays involved camping trips and in my memory I was constantly in or around water. I didn’t grow up as a competitive swimmer, and it wasn’t until my very late teens and early twenties that I became hooked and eventually addicted. I got into triathlons and trail running, and I’d often try and combine this with a swim. I was still not competitive or very fast in races, and eventually realised that competitiveness against others doesn’t motivate me: much of my love of outdoor swimming comes from finding new experiences and locations. I can get bored of swimming in one place, so to

spend hours seeking a dunk in a far-off river pool is, for me, an ideal way to spend a day.

A number of years ago, miserable in my work, I’d spend almost all my free time going out finding new places to swim. The freedom and buzz I’d get from ‘discovering’ a new, hidden waterfall or bay that I’d yet to swim in made me feel alive. From this, I started to document swims, firstly through photos and writing a blog and then videos on the BBC The Social platform. This opened up the opportunity to film three series of *Dhan Uisge (Into the Water)* on BBC ALBA, my outdoor swimming series where I’d take on the most interesting or unusual swims I could think up. The BBC always wanted them to be filmed in winter for some reason ...

The majority of my swimming has been in Scotland, as it’s where I live and where I feel I’m meant to be. In Scotland we have such a variety of swimming opportunities, from the frozen ice in winter and kilometres and kilometres of lochs for endurance swimming to crystal-clear pools (if you know where to look). We even have the very occasional warm-water days in a hot summer – well, we have small warm patches, within some lochs. And usually only at the surface ...

All swimmers enjoy it for their own reasons: some want the challenge and focus of long-distance swims, others just enjoy being in the cold. This book looks at all the types and aspects of swimming, with a focus on what I know.

I am an average swimmer – maybe I’m not even average. I’ve not swum across the Channel, and a decent 14-year-old swimmer in training could smoke me in a race ... maybe even a 12-year-old, I don’t know how fast they swim. But I have done, and do, swim a lot. I’ve made very silly mistakes, I’ve taken part in races, I’ve swum down sketchy rivers and under



Jumping for joy in Montenegro.

ice and pushed myself into being an all-year-round swimmer. I wear a wetsuit, and I wear nothing at all. I've tried to swim every day for a year three times, and failed each time. Through failure and success, I've learnt a lot. As I get older I feel my focus turn more towards the endurance aspects – this might just come with age – but I'll never lose the joy of leaping into a waterfall pool.

I love to inspire and encourage others to swim, or simply to try the water, so they can find out for themselves what they love about it. As much as swimming outdoors grows as a 'thing', what could be a hindrance to some people taking part is the activity becoming framed by one particular view; as though it can only be seen through one lens, or as if it should only be enjoyed in one way. The 'WHY?' question that attracts many people also raises many a derisive or skeptical eyebrow. The sport of open-water swimming and swimming outdoors as a hobby is not new, despite a recent surge in people taking to the water. I know record-setting marathon swimmers, ice-milers (*tips 443–446*) and dippers who only do it for their mental health – often they'll all swim together.

Within this book I hope to give tips and information that could help all swimmers, no matter their experience or interest. It's a compilation of things I have learnt, and much of

this has come through experience, and failure at times. I've learnt these tips by meeting and listening to other swimmers, and from viewing how people take on swims. Some knowledge has come from sitting and staring at the surface water of a river pool from below. Maybe all the tips will be useful for you; maybe none at all. Maybe I'll look back at the book in 20 years and have 500 tips I'd throw away and 500 new ones. But one tip will always remain: there's enough space in the water for everyone.

This book is not and can't be a replacement for going out and swimming safely with people; from being open to trying new experiences and pushing yourself. You'll notice the tone shifts radically, often within the same paragraph or sentence: dark humour sits alongside inspirational guff. It might not go directly from A to B, but instead include diversions to F, Q and R along the way. It's probably a fair representation of my brain. A bit like that time I set out to swim and walk from coast to coast across Scotland – I did it, but via some hitch-hiking to the doctor en route, and a swim inside a tunnel ... but that's a story best told in person.

This book and the information within it should be useful and make you smile. Or smirk. It's got some nice pictures and places for you to swim anyway.

acknowledgements

Firstly, I'd like to thank my parents, Kerrie and Ruairidh, for their constant support and for giving me a love of the outdoors, adventure and swimming from an early age, and my partner Hannah, who has helped dress my cold body on many a windy shoreline.

I'd like to thank Kate Rew and the entire Outdoor Swimming Society, who helped grow my love for swimming, Vivienne Rickman and Alan Corcoran, who contributed to locations for the book, and Muslim Alim, who opened one door that led to so many opportunities.

To Sara Barnes, Suzanna Cruickshank and Rachel Whitfield, who all contributed to sections to this book, I am hugely grateful.

Thank you to Kirsty Reade and all at Vertebrate Publishing for giving me this opportunity, and Jessica McElhattan, who helped guide and shape my thoughts into a coherent, actual book.

Lastly, thank you to the outdoor swimming community, a supportive, vibrant and diverse collection of people – I'm grateful to be a part of this world.

feedback and updates

If you have any feedback or questions about this book, or updates to information within the book, I can be contacted at calumswims@gmail.com

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Warning: this photo may contain bare feet.



A stunning swim in Glencoe, Scotland.





O

There's no such thing as a bad place to brush up on your Gaelic.

001

BASICS (1-194)

*'Faigh cuidhteas air an ràmh, dhan a' chladach,
nì mi shnàmh.*

"Get rid of the oar, I'll swim to shore."

Not at all an ancient Scottish Gaelic proverb'



Look out, there's an orca behind you!

BASICS (1-194)

25 REASONS WHY (OR WHAT TO TELL PEOPLE WHO JUST DON'T 'GET IT') (1-25)

1. So that you can tell everyone you meet that you swim outdoors. It's a kind of shibboleth: once you tell someone that you're into it, if they respond with enthusiasm then you're probably going to get along. If they look at you with suspicion, just remember they don't yet know what they're missing out on.

2. Turn your frown upside down. It will put a spring in your step all day. Even that mental boost of getting into the water initially can change how you feel and give you a super-charged positive attitude. It's that moment of clarity as you overcome fear and expel doubt from your mind. It can be a way of rediscovering your child-like, fun side. Any swim, no matter how small, can feel like an adventure. I find an early morning swim is particularly useful ahead of a busy or potentially stressful day – getting an early win under your belt is good for the soul.

3. So you that can start a blog, telling everyone that comes across it that you swim outdoors. Good luck finding a new and unused variation of the words 'wild' and 'swim' for your title, though; I had a swimming blog (long since unused), *goneoffswimming.wordpress.com* – a future-proofed title if I get sick of swimming one day!

4. To learn some cool new party tricks. Ever seen a finger turn almost transparent, or been able to kick a door with your bare feet and not feel any pain at all? Well, who wants to be able to feel their toes anyway? This was the case for me for around a month due to a very poorly planned journey to and from a cold swim. I'm not saying I recommend it, but it was a good lesson learnt: wear footwear that keeps your feet warm and dry.

5. So you can tweet about the joys of outdoor swimming. Who knows, this might even lead to an article for *The Guardian*.

6. It's an excuse to eat cake. I think this might actually be the key motivator for many swimmers: the post-swim cake. While this can unite the community, it can also cause hours of debate. What's my favourite? For me, it is a nod to my Australian roots with lamingtons – read on for the recipe (*tip 298*).

7. The community and friends you'll make. Outdoor swimming gives you a feeling of belonging; you'll become part of a tribe, pod, club or group. This might at first be an online group, where you initially watch from a distance before dipping a toe in, before meeting actual, real-life swimmers. It's a huge and growing community. You will meet inspiring people and swimmers who will help you not only learn about your limits, but overcome them.

8. This is often the best way to gain knowledge, confidence, experience and cakes. The bonus of being in a group is that by just baking one cake, you might actually get to eat six or seven other ones too.

9. For the swears you'll learn. You might rate yourself as having a pretty crude turns of phrase, but wait until you hear variations of curses added together to create whole new meanings. I love regional variants – any new group of swimmers will have their own language system to describe the cold, and usually with plenty of swears as part of it.

10. So you can proudly post in a Facebook group about the joys of winter swimming. Maybe *The Independent* will pick this up.

11. The glamour and smugness as you get changed awkwardly in a cold, wet, windy car park, spilling coffee all over yourself from uncontrollably shaking hands. It's the perfect excuse to buy that changing robe.

BASICS (1-194)

12. To travel and see the most incredible places. It's not all about being cold and huddling under a giant robe: once you start to consider swimming as a reason to travel, a whole new world opens up. From Arabian wadis to the azure-coloured seas of Belize and the seemingly endless lakes of Italy, the world is full of stunning locations, challenging swims and historic venues.

13. To transform how you look at any body of water. Outdoor swimming will help break up long, boring car journeys with new dunks; any trip is transformed when you view it through your swimmer's eyes. A dull section of motorway might hide a secret river pool, right underneath your tyres; an out-of-view section of coastline could be that next special beach.

14. To get you through winter. Having a focus and embracing the seasons can really help you to feel that they go by quicker. At the very least it's an excuse to wear 10 fleeces in winter all at once.

15. So you can write a blog post about how you've always just called it 'swimming', without any prefix. *The Telegraph* will soon come knocking.

16. The pain relief of water. Cold-water swimming recovery has long been used by athletes to allow their muscles to recover after exercise, but using cold water to relieve chronic pain is growing in popularity. Just being in water also removes the weight and pressure from joints, making it an ideal activity for all ages.

17. Swimming is a vital life skill. Many people would panic if they suddenly dropped into water and were forced to swim any distance, yet swimming in open water is a skill that the vast majority are capable of, if they choose to learn it. There may come a day when you are forced into swimming, so why not get that capacity and skill mastered on your own terms?

18. To tap into something primal. There's something deep inside us, a connection to the water, that you may not even realise exists until you take the plunge and swim. It can become addictive. There is something to suggest that outdoor swimming is actually 'the truth' – it just makes sense to do, and needs no clear explanation.

19. To escape flies, insects and beasts: they often won't travel far from the shore, so taking yourself off into deep water is the perfect antidote to getting devoured by mosquitoes or midgies on a summer evening.

20. So you can declare in an online article that there are just too many people nowadays swimming outdoors. *The Daily Mail* might enjoy that.

21. There are no lanes, black lines or tumble turns. Okay, there may be at lidos (which are also great), but having the power and responsibility to decide how to swim and look after yourself is freeing. You're forced to think for yourself, make mistakes, learn from them and then make the right decisions. It's akin to the difference between running on a treadmill or pounding the pavement and then running on trails or mountains: I occasionally do one, so that I can really enjoy and thrive at the other.

22. Just so that passing walkers can shout, 'You must be maaad!' at you. I've yet to actually convert a bewildered onlooker in the moment, but the more we swim and encourage others to do so, the more we normalise it. Otherwise, it may become frowned upon, viewed with suspicion or even prohibited in some places.

23. Yeah, staring at swimming pool tiles for hours is nice enough, but have you ever had a gaggle of honking geese soar above you on a silent, misty morning? Have you floated above a parrotfish, nibbling at a coral reef? Have you swum with the sweet fragrance of a summer flower meadow filling your nostrils? Or felt the power of the sea, bodysurfing a wave back to the shore? These are experiences you might never get any other way. It will help you understand nature, and as part of that, our place in the world.

24. To have constantly wet swim gear on rotation. Bathroom? No, that's my wetsuit-drying room, actually. (Remember not to hang it in the shower overnight or you risk having a heart attack on your half-asleep trudge to the toilet.) There's no feeling quite like sliding on a clingy, damp swimsuit, especially in the depths of winter. This takes out half the challenge of the swim: you are already a bit cold and wet, so get on with it and get in the water.

25. To develop your balance. Okay, there's that 'balance' you get within your mind, but I'm talking literal, physical balancing ability. You'll become adept at standing on one leg without a wobble as you pull on those dry socks. It takes time to master but is also a very good workout for your lower leg and ankle. Lots of tiny muscle movements are required to keep your foot planted and secure.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW (26–71)

26. Knowledge and experience are more important than gear. You are constantly learning.

27. Don't say that outdoor swimming is a new 'thing' – people have been swimming outdoors for centuries.

28. 'Wild swimming' doesn't mean you are angrily doing the breaststroke.

29. Is outdoor swimming actually *wild*? It's not a term I use or like (full disclosure: I did previously use it), but we all see things differently: one person's 'wild swimming' may well be another's 'just swimming'. Swimming in a seaside Sydney lido and a mountain loch are both 'swimming' but one is more likely to be wilder than the other ... I've been in Bronte Baths during a rough August swell! The term 'outdoor' covers a multitude of things, so to categorise one area of that with 'wild' helps people understand it, I suppose. I've taken part in races that took me on to wild, isolated islands, swum under icebergs in high mountain lochs and floated down long, bumpy rivers; each swim was outdoors, and each within itself required different experience, gear and techniques to survive. Don't get too bogged down trying to classify whether your swim is 'wild' or not – call it, or don't call it, what feels right.

30. We are all beginners at some point. Some of us pick up a skill as a child, others might not come to it until adulthood, but the fact remains: we are all new to swimming at some point in time.

31. You'll not be a marathon swimmer overnight. Fitness, breathing, technique, concentration and sighting (*tips 487–503*) are all things that take time to develop. Your body and mind will take time to adapt to new surroundings.

32. As you progress, swim in new conditions to push your boundaries.

33. Be responsible for yourself.

34. You'll probably get better as you get older. Don't try too much too soon.

35. A swim is often more of a mental challenge than a physical one. Believe you can do it and your body will follow.

BASICS (1-194)

36. Ignore the naysayers. There are lots of people in the world with opinions; if we listened to everyone's opinion of everything, nothing would get started.

37. Don't limit your ambition. Although you may come to swimming just to enjoy occasional dips, your goals may well develop and endurance may even become your thing. Don't ever doubt the changes you are capable of.

38. Follow your own path. Maybe you don't want to swim marathons; maybe you have no interest in head-up breast-stroke; you may hate the ice-cold water and be a strictly warm-water person. Swim your own swim.

39. Stay curious: walk up that stream; go have a look at that beach; dunk your head to see what's under the surface.

40. Look to any opportunity to learn something new about water or swimming.

41. Respect other water users.

42. No snobbery, please. If someone enjoys the water in a different way to you, as long as it doesn't harm them or others, let them.

43. You don't need to post every swim on social media.

44. You don't need to post *any* swim on social media.

45. If you never posted your swim on social media, did you even swim?

46. Swimming outdoors satisfies the mind, body and soul.

47. Outdoor swimming is not what you do, it's who you are.

48. Some people swim all year in nothing more than togs and goggles, while others prefer to expose as little skin as possible to the water. Experiment and find what works for you: swim initially in a wetsuit, followed by a short dip in only a costume at the end of your session – this will help you to feel the difference between the two. Over time, adjust to what suits your body best.

49. Choose function over fashion.

50. You don't need a big changing robe in order to swim outdoors.

51. Finding your swim pod or tribe can be crucial. Swimming with others makes the sport more sociable and can help you stay motivated and become a better swimmer.

52. Be honest about your abilities, both with others and yourself.

53. Finding your own special spot is far more satisfying than swimming somewhere you've been told about.

54. Share knowledge, but be wary about who you share all your knowledge with. By that I mean don't tell everyone about your favourite swim spots; people will come to find it, and your special place might not be special any longer.

55. Get used to saying, 'Well, it depends ...' when people ask if outdoor swimming is safe.



Finding your swim pod can motivate you to become a better swimmer. © Hannah Kettles

56. Asking how long you should stay in the water is like asking the length of a piece of string. Equip yourself with the skills and experience to understand. The process of learning will take time. Be wary of giving a direct answer of ‘X minutes’ to strangers who ask for advice.

57. Don’t follow any random ‘X degrees Celsius means Y minutes in the water’ formulas: the answer to how long you should be in for is entirely different for each swimmer. It’s not a recipe on how to make a cake.

58. You don’t need to put your head underwater. If it’s not for you, it’s not for you.

59. All bodies are different – people will react differently to the cold.

60. Reject peer pressure from children. If a 12-year-old can jump from the top of the tree into the river, it doesn’t mean you have to ... no matter how much their pals goad you.

61. ‘It’s positively tropical’ means it’s freezing cold.

62. ‘Endorphins’ are the endorphins you get from swimming. A classic line to drop to friends who question your decision to plunge into freezing waters.

63. ‘Bioprene’ is a euphemism for subcutaneous tissue that helps swimmers in cold water – also known as body fat.

64. You’ll start to consider any body of water as a potential swim. Anything glimpsed from a train, plane, car or bike will give rise to the question, ‘Could I swim in that?’ If you give something a go and realise you have overestimated your abilities, take note and proceed with extra caution next time.

65. Swimming in rough water is worth mastering: it may be the most fun you ever have swimming. Rough water is water that is moving, often choppy and unpredictable. It may feel as though you are being thrown around in the water or slapped by waves. As you gain experience, water conditions that you consider to be ‘swimmable’ may become quite different to that of a non-swimmer.

66. The increase in outdoor swimming is like a wave. This wave is growing, but it’s not yet started to break; in fact, it may still be the groundswell, growing in momentum. In time it may break, but rather than a solitary wave it may in fact be part of a set of waves: the best one is yet to come. To stretch this surf analogy even further, rather than a wave, we may be seeing a new ‘break’: where waves are consistently being produced. I always recommend looking at the Outdoor Swimming Society website for the latest information and advice from the community.

BASICS (1-194)

67. Become involved; we are all part of a wave. We need to urge governments to look after waters better, and companies and industries need to do better than they are doing. This will benefit nature and humans more widely. It's not just for us as swimmers, but we should care because it directly affects us.

68. Most people know absolutely zilch about swimming. Bear this in mind when hearing opinions from strangers, especially strangers who do not swim.

69. You may become addicted.

70. If you want an incredibly simple way of turning any dull day into a life-affirming adventure, just go for a swim.

71. You won't get any real experience from reading a book. Go swim.

SWIMMER'S LIFE (72-121)

72. What do you need to swim outdoors? In a word: nothing!

73. In a more considered way ... it depends. From your swim aims and fitness to choice of location and group dynamics – there are many things to consider.

74. Many extra factors will affect what other 'stuff' you will or won't need for a swim: where you are, what your swim goals are, water temperature, how you react to the cold, your fitness, your group and other water users are all worth considering.

75. If you're planning a big or new swim, speak to someone who's done it or done similar.

76. Location choice for a swim is crucial for both enjoyment and safety. Every environment will have different challenges. Ask regular swimmers for safe places to swim.

77. Learn from others and use the knowledge of other swimmers. Time spent with experienced swimmers will help avoid many basic mistakes.

78. Learn to read maps. This can transform your appreciation of places and open up a world of discovery.

79. Check the weather forecast before you swim. Be prepared to change your plans.

80. Being a strong pool swimmer is a great start to swimming outdoors: good technique and fitness transfers over. However, there are many challenges to overcome and things to consider which won't arise in a pool.

81. You can practise open-water techniques and skills in the pool. Using a controlled environment to focus on nailing skills is useful for many swimmers.

82. Outdoor swimming is not the same as swimming in an indoor pool. You'll need new skills you don't use in the pool.

83. If you find your swimming skills are not what they used to be, or want to brush up on your abilities, find a qualified teacher.

84. Cold-water swimming is very different to cold-water immersion (a brief dunk in cold water, a cold shower or ice bath, where the focus is to embrace the cold rather than actually swim).



A secluded dunk.

BASICS (1-194)

85. Learn to make dynamic risk assessments. This will, in time, become a subconscious skill.

86. It's possible to float in only a few inches of water – this will come in handy.

87. Alcohol and water don't mix. If you've had a drink, your swim is done.

88. Keep your swimmers packed. Keep a swim kit in a small bag that you can slip into a backpack on any walk. My go-to is jammers (knee-length, tight-fitting shorts), a cap, goggles, earplugs and a thin hammam towel (a thin, lightweight towel that dries quickly in the sun).

89. Should you swim alone? In all honesty, I do swim alone, but not always. Swimming alone leaves you at far more risk if things go wrong: from the basics of losing a key and locking yourself out of a car to the dangers of the cold, injury or health issues in deep water. No person is invincible, and heading out on my own is a subject I find myself grappling with. The joy in a swim for me is often the freedom and feeling of having a place to myself – not having anyone else to answer to and not being restricted or controlled. I've made mistakes, I've learnt from experience and I've been in situations I'd never repeat. From mistakes experience grows, and lessons are learnt. To anyone taking up outdoor swimming – in whatever capacity – swimming alone is not something I would recommend.

90. I also go to the mountains alone. I walk and swim for multiple days on my own, not seeing another person. Maybe it's a misanthropic streak, maybe it's just within me to need to do it. But the more I do this, the more I think of safety. Should I always have someone with me if I want to swim to that island on a lake and explore? Should I come back to this river with a friend? If I'm honest, the urge to plunge in usually wins. Bear in mind that I have years of experience under my belt; never go out alone unless you are an experienced hiker and swimmer with a full understanding of the risks involved.

91. Remember to pee before getting in: cold water will make you need to go.

92. Take a bag for rubbish. I always try and pick up a few pieces and tidy up places, even if it's not my litter.

93. Wear old or comfy clothes to go swimming. Stuff will probably get wet and dirty.

94. Put your swimming stuff on at home – this can save a world of hassle.

95. Practise getting changed quickly in the summer. By the time it's winter, you'll be glad you did.

96. Wear something on your feet. Skin is no match for barnacles, rocks and glass.

97. Leave your clothes and things somewhere safe. If the tide is coming in, make sure it'll be above the high tide.



A day pack for a quick outdoor swim. I keep this packed for any walk or journey I take.

98. You don't have to indulge in specific breathing exercises prior to a swim, but don't discount it without trying it: it may be for you, it may not. Immediately before and while getting into the water I focus on deep, slow, controlled breathing, in through my nose and out through my mouth. The breaths out are controlled, with my mouth taking on a circular shape – it's an active process. Make sure not to puff as though you are blowing out a candle – it's much slower. Some people also like to go through sets of breathing and breath-holding exercises, such as the Wim Hof Method, prior to cold-water immersion.

99. In the UK, the water is generally some shade of cold most of the year. The coldest time tends to be from mid October until around April, but many factors affect this. A cold, wild winter will leave more snow on the hills which can keep rivers and lakes much chillier into summer. As warmer temperatures arrive, they will melt snow in the hills, leaving the run-off – especially rivers and streams – very cold.

100. Learn to pre-empt the cold. While on dry land, take a little gasp and allow yourself to feel a shiver move down your spine. This can help you deal with the initial cold. Imagine the pain as it creeps into your body; realise what is about to happen to you. It won't hit you in the same way as the water will, but it's a handy way to harden up your brain ahead of entry.

101. Don't judge a swim stroke by its splash. Some swimmers look like they're fighting the water, yet move quickly.

102. No matter what stroke you choose, focus on constantly breathing so that you are not holding your breath at any point. Keep your breathing smooth and steady, in time with your stroke, so that different points of your stroke will match up with your breath. For example, during breaststroke you may breathe out each time you reach forward with your arms. This may mean slowing down your swim stroke initially, but it will pay off in the long term.

103. Get your adrenaline rush fix by swimming straight into a jellyfish.*

104. If you don't like jellyfish, stay out of the sea.

* Possibly not the best idea.

BASICS (1-194)



105. Don't swim with your electronic car key inside a flimsy plastic bag – double bag it, using sealed bags. I'll not explain why I know this. Options people use for a car key include leaving it on the wheel springs or using a Keypod to lock it in.

106. Dogs will pee on stuff left on the ground. Put your clothes in a bag, or above leg-cocking height.

107. Leave your stuff someplace safe. If you've got someone waiting on land, leave it with them. If it's a quiet, safe location then leave it in a bag hung on a tree. Alternatively, hide your valuables well or take them in your tow float.

108. Don't poo in the water.

109. Do not practise holding your breath on your own in the water.

110. Some outdoor swimmers employ drinking Coca-Cola as a method to prevent illness after a swim. Should you drink Coke after your swim? If you like Coke, go ahead. There's no scientific evidence it'll help an upset stomach though.

111. A little knowledge can be dangerous: just because you found one swim to be easy, it doesn't mean the next one will be.

112. Outdoor swimming can be used to commute or hold business meetings. If you live near a river, investigate whether you can swim to work. If you have a meeting, ask if they like to swim outdoors – if yes, you may have already sealed the deal.

113. Equip others with facts, not fear. Lots of information and even physical signs are based on the principle of keeping people out of the water entirely. This doesn't mean you should disregard signs – be aware of any danger they point out.

- 114.** Learn to swim in winter: you're more likely to get the best places to yourself.
- 115.** Water will drip out of your nose at an awkward time during your day. If you've been duck diving (diving underwater so you can go beneath a wave) or upside down in the water, expect this to happen later. After a swim, lean forward and hang your head between your legs to ease the water out.
- 116.** 'Swimming skins' usually means swimming without a wetsuit, in a normal costume.
- 117.** A swimskin, not to be confused with swimming skins, is a thin swimsuit that resembles a triathlon suit, but is not quite a wetsuit.
- 118.** When taking a plane abroad, wearing your changing robe as a jacket is both space efficient and cosy. The large pockets allow for storage and their overall bulky size can take up your valuable luggage space.
- 119.** Resist the urge to splurge on every single piece of gear. The chances are you'll not use half of them within a year.
- 120.** Keep a spare towel in the car. You never know when the urge to swim will hit.

121. Remember to check your kit bag for old bananas that you forgot to eat.

GENERAL SAFETY (122–145)

- 122.** Swim with others. Aside from other swimmers, it can be an entertaining spectator event for your partner or friends – unless you're doing a six-hour training swim, then it could be as much of an endurance event for them as it is for you. Always reward and thank your support crew.
- 123.** Don't swim after heavy flooding or downpours. Unless you like swimming in excrement and mud.
- 124.** If you are unable to swim, stay out of any water you don't know the depth of. It might seem basic, but shelves and sudden drops in depth where a step has been cut underwater have caused the deaths of people who were paddling and never intended to swim.
- 125.** If you swallow water, stay calm. Stop swimming if it's safe to do so and tread water, facing away from any waves. Regain your breath. If you can stand or reach a safe place, do that too.
- 126.** Stay hydrated – dehydration can lead to cramp. This includes having enough to drink before and after your swim.
- 127.** Flex your legs occasionally. Calves and hamstrings can develop cramps during swims, especially over longer distances and in cold water. Every so often I will make sure to straighten my leg and flex my ankle towards my knee, to stretch the back of the leg. This will hamper your stroke as you do it, but it's better than cramp.
- 128.** Cramp can be eased by floating and gently massaging the affected muscles.

BASICS (1-194)



Remember to wear water shoes in new environments.

129. Know who to call in an emergency. At sea call 999 and ask for the **coastguard**. On inland rivers or lakes call 999 and ask for **fire and rescue**.

130. Preregister your phone to be able to text 999 on EmergencySMS. This is useful in areas of weak or patchy signal. It's very simple: send the word '**register**' to 999. You will receive a text back, reply to this text with '**yes**'. In the event of an emergency, you can text 999 to tell them what emergency services you need, what the problem is and where you are.

131. Install the OS Locate app on your phone. This is a basic app that immediately gives you your location as a six-figure grid reference (based on GPS, not phone signal).

132. Other apps such as What3Words, while useful, can lead to problems: some word combinations sound very similar to others and there may be difficulty in the emergency services understanding a caller's accent and even mispronunciation of words, especially where phone signal might be weak.

133. Don't swim in blue-green algae blooms. Cyanobacteria, known as blue-green algae, occurs naturally in bodies of water and blooms in nutrient-rich, slow-moving water during periods of warm weather. It looks like a blue-green scum, pea soup or green lumps in the water, and swimming in it can cause illness or even rashes on the skin.

134. It's always best to heed signs about blue-green algae at swimming locations, but also remember that some signs are left up all year round, including when the water is fine to swim in and contains no blooms.

135. Keep your dog away from blue-green algae, as it can make them very ill.

136. Not all scum is dangerous. Decomposing plants and some algae will bloom into a non-toxic, brown, frothy scum, other algae (*Noctiluca scintillans*) can turn the water an orange colour and during the summer high pollen counts can create a yellow film on the surface. If you are unsure, don't swim.

137. Stand between large, wet rocks, not on top. You will go flying off them. Take care with your ankles.

138. Take it easy when moving on wet rocks. Keep your hands free of objects and move as though you are a gorilla: keep your knees soft and hands loosely by your side in case you need to use them.

139. Make yourself known to boat traffic, especially in areas where swimming is unusual. Use a tow float and bright cap or hat, and even shout to boats, 'Swimmer in water!' Smile and wave firmly (not frantically) and give way to faster craft. Be sure to get clear of their path.

140. Avoid swimming around jet skis.

141. If you hear an unusual, high-pitched whirr, it may be an outboard motor. Look up and assess where it is.

142. If a sign tells you that there's quicksand in an area, then there is.

143. Quicksand can move with the tide, and it won't always be in exactly the same place.

144. If you find yourself caught in quicksand, don't stand still and sink. Wiggle your limbs and try to lie down on to your back, spreading your surface area wider, and roll away. It's messy but it's better than being trapped.

145. Don't use pool inflatables outdoors. They're not designed for it and are swept away very quickly in the wind. If you are using them in a natural environment, choose a location where they can be kept under control and never rely on them as a safety device.

SAFETY OF OTHERS (146–161)

146. Ask how others feel before a group swim. Consider if they are happy, cold, nervous, stressed or focused. This is more important on swims that might require commitment, either in terms of distance, time away from land or challenging conditions.

147. If you are swimming as a group, take into account the weakest or slowest swimmers and consider making a schedule or swim that allows them to thrive. It might be that you can split a group into smaller groups of swimmers, with people of similar abilities and aims sticking together.

148. If you're swimming for the first time with someone, get to know them a bit. Ask about their experience and fitness, and be honest with others. Find out what they want to get from a swim.

149. Plan your swim, and swim your plan – but be prepared to change it.

150. Communicate with fellow swimmers; check how they are feeling as a swim progresses.

151. Keep communication straightforward. A simple, 'all good?' answered by a thumbs up or 'yes' can be enough most of the time.

BASICS (1-194)

152. Agree on hand gesture communication before entering areas where verbal communication is not possible. Reasons you can't hear well might be because of choppy water, loud environments like waterfalls or multiple swim caps and earplugs.

153. Stay close to each other, especially in choppy or moving water. You should be able to speak to one another.

154. Watch for any marked changes in swim speed and style in other swimmers – this could be an indication that someone is tiring and/or getting too cold.

155. Learn to spot drowning. Someone drowning usually makes no noise and is in an upright position, almost like treading water. They may bob up and down below the surface, with their head back, and may look like they are trying to climb a ladder or as if they are trying to doggy paddle.

156. Shout, reach, throw, row, go: this is the order in which to help someone if emergency services are not available. If you are safe and see someone in difficulty, shout to them. Give them clear instructions, such as telling them to grab a hold of something or to move to a safer location if possible. You may have an advantage of being in a position to see more than them, and will have a calmer mind. Shout for help if required. Reach for them if you are in a safe position, or use something that extends your reach that you can both hold, like a branch. Throw them a lifebuoy, ring or line. If a boat is available, use this to safely reach them in order to get them into the boat (if it is safe to do so) or use it to keep them afloat. Then go to them – this step should only be done if you know how to rescue someone, or you run the risk of the other swimmer pulling you under and putting you both in danger.

157. Swimming induced pulmonary edema (SIPE) is a condition where fluid collects in the lungs. It can be fatal and is triggered by swimming outdoors. Although it's still poorly understood, symptoms include coughing, pain or tightness in the chest and difficulty breathing. If you start to feel any of these symptoms, the current advice is to get out of the water as soon as possible; symptoms should recede once you are out of the water.

158. Early signs of hypothermia include 'the umbles', a series of telltale signs that progressively get worse. People will (usually) grumble, fumble, mumble, stumble and crumble in this order. The grumbles consist of moaning and negativity, fumbles are poor coordination and diminished motor skills, mumbles are slurred speech and the stumbles include tripping when moving and being unable to walk properly. If the person 'crumbles', they will lose the ability to walk and may become semi-conscious; this is now a life-threatening situation. Hypothermia will not occur suddenly but develop over time, so knowing what to look out for initially can help prevent it progressing.

159. Bear in mind that the above is not always easy to diagnose, especially if the swimmer is a grumpy, clumsy person generally.

160. If you do suspect that someone may be suffering from hypothermia, the focus should be on getting them warm and dry as soon as possible. After calling the emergency services, get any wet clothes off them, pat their skin dry and layer them up with dry clothes that will help them warm up, such as merino wool, thick, woolly jumpers and insulated jackets. Focus on getting their extremities warm, such as the head and hands. If possible, move them into a warm, dry environment.

161. Take snacks to share afterwards. Cake is always a winner – homemade cake for extra points (*tip 298*).



Remembering the snacks you brought for after your swim can help you to power through the last few minutes. © John Weller @wildswimminglondon

SWIMMING WITH CHILDREN (162–173)

162. Children often have great enthusiasm but less ability and experience to make the right judgements. Risk assess for them. Children, of course, vary wildly in their bravery and ambition, but very often won't take into account factors that are obvious to us – the strength of moving water being one.

163. If you are unsure about their swimming ability, use a buoyancy aid and wetsuit.

164. Plan for them. They often won't remember to bring enough layers to stay warm (I'm speaking from experience!).

165. They'll get cold before they know it. Enthusiasm might mask how cold they are, until all of a sudden they're shivering and have blue lips.

166. New and dynamic environments can be intimidating and very full on, so consider introducing them to a location before swimming: go for a picnic one day, throw stones the next day.

167. Choose a fun place to swim. They probably won't do that much swimming overall.

168. Keep to flat water, and avoid places with strong currents. Remember that even wading in water is much harder on smaller legs.

169. Ensure there is easy access: choose somewhere where you can walk in and out of the water easily, and where shallow water can be reached.

170. Avoid places with sudden underwater shelves. The sudden change from walking to swimming or floundering can lead to immediate panic, especially in inexperienced swimmers (this applies to adults too). A horrible experience around water can last many years in the memory and affect future behaviour.

171. Ask kids where's best to swim – they'll often find hidden gems and are a fount of knowledge. Given the right amount of freedom, children can make the very best local explorers: they'll find the exciting pools and the hidden waterfalls – the kind of places that make you feel like a child again.

172. Explore the world in a childlike way: take a walk down that path, peek around that next bay, see how deep that river pool is.

173. Don't force them into it, teach them to love it.

BASICS (1-194)

THE NASTY STUFF (ILLNESSES) (174-176)

174. Swimmer's itch doesn't refer to the psychological itch that you may feel the need to scratch once you become addicted to outdoor swimming, but a skin rash caused by microscopic parasites which burrow into your skin. This is itchy and annoying and is best avoided by swimming away from areas where birds' nests and snails are found. Towel yourself dry vigorously as soon as you exit the water. The itchiness usually goes within a few days and corticosteroid cream or antihistamines can be used to reduce the itchiness.

175. Weil's disease. The urine of some animals, such as rats, mice, cows and dogs, carries a bacterial infection, leptospirosis, which can lead to Weil's disease – the signs are flu-like symptoms within around one to three weeks of exposure. To avoid this, cover any cuts or wounds before you swim, especially in urban or slightly dodgy water. Keeping hydrated and taking paracetamol can help reduce the symptoms, but if the symptoms develop it's worth consulting a medical practitioner as the disease can progress nastily.

176. Cryptosporidiosis/E. coli. Swimming in water contaminated with sewage or animal excrement can cause vomiting and diarrhoea. Avoid swimming near sewage outlets, don't swallow water while swimming and clean your hands thoroughly before eating.

PLANNING (177-184)

177. Some large inland waters have a lifeboat, either Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) or independently run. Keep this in mind if swimming in such a location.

178. Check the mobile signal coverage for where you're going.

179. If you're heading for a remote or adventurous swim, leave your route plan with someone you trust. Give them planned timings, locations and the contact details of any other group members. Have a plan with them that involves checking in on return, and then a set process to follow if they have not heard from you.

180. On some swims you'll need a safety vessel. Depending on the swim this could be a boat with an engine, a dinghy with an outboard, a stand-up paddleboard (SUP) or even a kayak. Safety vessels should be used for very long swims where fatigue may become a factor (especially if you're taking on your longest open-water distance swim), swims that are particularly committing in terms of environment (around a coastline with no safe exit points) or sea swims where tide and current or busy shipping channels will affect the swim. If you're taking on a long swim in an unfamiliar setting, consider whether you might benefit from some safety cover, even if this is just from experienced, confident paddlers who can act as your eyes and ears with a better vantage point. They can also carry your snacks!

181. Find the right boat and safety crew. Use experienced water people and a crew you trust, and if possible train and practise with them. For example: understand how to hold on to a kayak if you need help, set out how you intend to communicate with one another and establish what will happen in emergency situations.

182. Some boat safety crews are expensive. Find out their costs and consider if you can ask experienced people you know instead; but also consider the different levels of safety and experience on offer.



Be prepared to change your plans according to the weather, even if conditions look calm.



Avoid choppy conditions if you are still learning to swim outdoors.

BASICS (1-194)

183. Give your team your plan. Have a written plan with your feed times, estimated speed, any specific communication requirements and inspiring snippets/heckling motivation. Having a main point of contact on the boat who knows you well is a huge help.

184. Have any kit that you'll need in clear boxes, clearly labelled, and group by similar stuff.

WEATHER (185-194)

185. Get used to checking the weather regularly. Met Office, XC Weather and WillyWeather are three of my favourite websites to use. When heading for swims in the English, Scottish or Welsh mountains, use the Mountain Weather Information Service (MWIS).

186. Pay close attention to the wind. This is the biggest weather variable for swimming and can entirely change your swim, preparation and recovery.

187. If the wind forecast is high, look for a sheltered swim. Think about the wider geography of the location: wide bays facing the open sea are susceptible to waves.

188. Check overhead in strong winds – trees and branches can be brought down easily.

189. Get changed out of the wind. Spend as little time as possible in the wind both before and after your swim. Being wrapped in neoprene is a big help here.

190. Offshore wind is when the wind is blowing from land out to sea. An onshore wind is the opposite: from sea to land.

191. If the wind is blowing in the opposite direction to the tidal flow, it throws up small, choppy, awkward waves and is known as wind over tide, making swimming challenging.

192. If you are still learning to swim outdoors, avoid choppy conditions.

193. Make sure to swim at least a few times in the rain – you may get hooked. It's the perfect time to view the water at surface level and see the patterns as the drops dance.

194. Stay out of the water during thunderstorms.