WILD SWIM

River, Lake, Lido and Sea: The best places to swim outdoors in Britain

KATE REW

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOMINICK TYLER
FOREWORD
To enter wild water is to cross a border. You pass the lake’s edge, the sea’s shore, the river’s brink, and you break the surface of the water itself. In doing so, you move from one realm into another: a realm of freedom, adventure, magic and occasionally of danger.
So the book you hold in your hands isn’t so much a guidebook as a passport to a different world or worlds. For once you see open water as something to be entered, rather than driven around, flown over or stopped at the brink of, and even familiar landscapes become rife with adventure. Britain seems newly permeable, excitingly deepened. Every lake or loch or lough or llyn is a bathing pool, every river a journey, every tide or wave a free ride.
As a wild swimmer, you become an explorer of the undiscovered country of the nearby, passings through great geological portals (Durdle Door in Dorset), floating over drowned cities (Dunwich in Suffolk) and kelp jungles (The Isles of Scilly), spelunking into sea-caves (The Llyn Peninsula), or stroking out into the centre of cold Loch Ness, where the water – as Kate Rew beautifully puts it – is ‘black as space’.
There’s nothing faintly class-based about all this. What could be more democratic than nearness? You need even less equipment to swim with seals or eels (take your pick; I know which I prefer). You acquire what my friend Roger Deakin, author of Waterlog – a powerful inspiration for Wild Swim – once called ‘a frog’s eye view’ of things.
And the smells! The green scent of the seaweed. The estuary’s Limpopo grunewuff: The mineral smell of high mountain lakes. Virginia Woolf, who used to bath in the River Cam, near Granchester, described its odour as one of ‘mint and mud’. When I first came across this phrase, I misread it as ‘mint and mud’, which also seemed right for that university river.

‘You can never step into the same stream,’ noted Heraclitus, philosopher of flux, back in the fifth century BC, for new waters are always flowing onto you. Just so – a version of the truth that you can never go for the same wild swim twice. Weather, tide, current, temperature, company – all of these shift between swims. Different types of water actually feel different. Wild water comes in flavours. Not just salt and fresh, but different kinds of fresh. Next time you’re on chalkland, for instance, find a spring or a river and take up a handful of water as you might do a handful of earth. It feels. Silky between the fingers. Smooth, almost rounded. Quite different to granite water or slate water.
Let’s be clear, though, wild swimming is about beauty and strangeness and transformation – but it’s also about companionship, fun, and a hot cup of tea or nip of whisky afterwards. Nor do all wild swims have to take place in what we might conventionally call a wild place. It’s among the many merits of this book that it doesn’t shy away from the agricultural-industrial aspect to outdoor swimming in Britain. Some of the most memorable plunges described here occur in sight of a nuclear power station, or a farm building or pig ark, or off a sea beach thick with marine debris (those two-stroke oil bottles, those Tetrapak cartons, those ubiquitous chunks of sofa foam).
There’s also the question of the cold. I used to be something of a cold-water fetishist. I have dipped into a part-frozen Himalayan river, bathed at midwinter in an imperial lake in Beijing, and once cracked the ice on a Cumbrian tarn and plunged in. But a dive into a Devon lake on New Year’s Day, which left me green and nauseous with shock, has now put me off dipping in January. It’s inspiring, without being prescriptive. It sends the mind out adventuring, but also makes specific adventure possible. There are some fine touches the ‘oil-rig’ water that Kate finds roiling darkly in sight of a nuclear power station, or a farm building or pig ark, or off a sea beach thick with marine debris (those two-stroke oil bottles, those Tetrapak cartons, those ubiquitous chunks of sofa foam).

This is a wonderful – in the old sense of that word – and joyful romp of a book. It’s been researched with bravery and impishness and written with the same qualities: a dash of Huck Finn and plenty of Mole and Ratty. Roger Deakin spoke to me several times about his wariness of any commercialisation of wild swimming. He was concerned that the improvisation of it all would be lost. But I know that he would have approved of Wild Swim. This is a book that, like Waterlog, will launch a thousand swimmers. So go on. Dive in.

Robert Macfarlane, April 2008
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So the book you hold in your hands isn’t so much a guidebook as a passport to a different world or worlds. For once you see open water as something to be entered, rather than driven around, flown over or stopped at the brink of, and even familiar landscapes become ripe with adventure. Britain seems newly permeable, excitingly deeper. Every lake or loch or lough or llyn is a bathing pool, every river a journey, every tide or wave a free ride.

As a wild swimmer, you become an explorer of the undiscovered country of the nearby, passing through great geological portals (Durdle Door in Dorset), floating over drowned cities (Dumrock in Suffolk) and kelp jungles (The Isles of Scilly), spelunking into sea-caves (The Llyn Peninsula), or stroking out into the ocean. There’s something faintly class-based about all this. What could be more democratic than near-nakedness? You need even less equipment to swim than you do to play football. A bathing costume, if you insist. Then, just enough swim than you do to play football. A bathing costume, if you insist. Then, just enough.

For when you are swimming outdoors your sensorium is transformed. You see the world in All-New Glorious Full-Body Technicolour! Everything alters, including the colour of your skin: coin-bronze in peaty water, soft green near chalk, blue over sand. You gain a stealth and discretion quite unachievable on land – you can creep past chub and roach, or over trout and pike, finning subtly to keep themselves straight in the current. You can swim with seals or eels (take your pick. I know which I prefer). You acquire what my friend Roger Deakin, author of Waterlog – a powerful inspiration for Wild Swim – once called ‘a frog’s eye view’ of things.

And the smells! The green scent of the merbanch. The estuary’s Limpopo guff whiff. The mineral smell of high mountain lakes. Virginia Woolf, who used to bathe in the River Cam, near Granchester, described its odour as one of ‘mint and mud’. When I first came across this phrase, I misread it as ‘mud and mud’, which also seemed right for that university river.

‘You can never step into the same stream,’ noted Heraclitus, philosopher of flux, back in the fifth century BC, for new waters are always flowing onto you. Just so – a version of the truth that you can never go for the same wild swim twice. Weather, tide, current, temperature, company – all of these shift between swims. Different types of water actually feel different. Wild water comes in flavours. Not just salt and fresh, but different kinds of fresh. Next time you’re on chalkland, for instance, find a spring or a river and take up a handful of water as you might do a handful of earth. It feels…silky between the fingers. Smooth, almost rounded. Quite different to granate water or slate water.

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There’s also the question of the cold. I used to be something of a cold-water fetishist. I have dipped into a part-frozen Himalayan river, bathed at midwinter in an imperial lake in Beijing, and once cracked the ice on a Cumbrian tarn and plunged in. But a dive into a Devon lake on New Year’s Day, which left me green and nauseous with shock, has now put me off really cold-water swimming. Still, even in summer, there’s no avoiding what James Joyce unforgottably called ‘the scrotumtightening’ moment of entry – which is usually accompanied by noisy intakes and expulsions of breath, raucous hoo-s, and haaa-ahs. Kate Rew has coined a great new verb to describe the first few strokes of swimming in chilly water: ‘to fwaw’ (as in ‘I fwaw fwaw fwawed into the middle of the lake’). I hope it makes it into the OED.

Wild Swim is a lovely book in all its aspects. It tone accommodates comedy, glee, beauty, discomfort and hard fact. It’s inspiring, without being prescriptive. It sends the mind out adventuring, but also makes specific adventure possible. There are some nice touches: the ‘oil-rig’ water that Kate finds roiling darkly around the legs of the Brighton piers, or Dominic Tyler’s description of a llyn up in the Rhinog hills as ‘gruff’ – so unexpected as an adjective, so exactly right (not least because the Rhinogs have a healthy population of wild goats).

This is a wonderful – in the old sense of that word – and joyful romp of a book. It’s been researched with bravery and impishness and written with the same qualities: a dash of Huck Finn and plenty of Mole and Ratty. Roger Deakin spoke to me several times about his wariness of any commercialisation of wild swimming. He was concerned that the improvisation of it all would be lost. But I know that he would have approved of Wild Swim. This is a book that, like Waterlog, will launch a thousand swimmers. So go on. Dive in.

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Some enjoy the sea’s unruly nature, being bobbed up and down by waves, moving with the ebb and flow of the tides. The open sea is a force that one can learn to be with, but not one that can be controlled or contained.

Some prefer long calm beaches where you can stretch out in an endless front crawl never far out of your depth, a view of a cliff or horizon seen under each front-crawling arm. In the sea you can circumnavigate islands or skinny dip with seals on white sand beaches, snorkel above crabs and kelp forests, or wave your hands around like an aquatic Merlin should you be lucky enough to find a warm shallow bay with phosphorescence at night.

For some people who live along the coast, the sea is their life: going to bed and waking up with the sound of the surf, taking a morning dip come rain, shine or hailstorm. It’s a lifestyle many of us instinctively take to the minute we go on holiday, punctuating the day with dips in the healing salt water.

This section contains all these kinds of swims, as well as longer distance swims suitable for strong swimmers and triathletes. Long-distance sea swims have fixated men and women for centuries, from Captain Webb’s first crossing of the English Channel in 1875 to Byron’s crossing of the Turkish Hellespont, a famously wild stretch of water. (Many poets and writers are dedicated swimmers: the repetitiveness of swimming seems to awake creativity.) Swims like this are a different beast to our sun and sandcastle dips, taking swimmers deep inside themselves in a psychological game: where they butt up against a sense of their own relentlessness, their will to persist in the face of fear, tedium and pain.

But if life is made with persistence, it’s also made out of play. Swimmers dominate most of the coast in Britain with their suncream, beach balls, windbreaks and bright towels, so this section focuses on places that offer something different — cathedral-style cliff arches you can swim through, blue lagoons that attract jumpers, beaches tracked by sheep and deer rather than people. It also features sea pools — some of the best fun parks ever invented — where you can swim in safety as hundreds of gallons of water smash and shower over the walls.
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1. BLUE LAGOON, ABEREIDDY, PEMBROKESHIRE

It’s the jumping that people most come to the Blue Lagoon for. There’s a nice beach, and great scuba diving, but it’s the chance to hurtle off the blackened walls of an old quarry into clear, deep blue water that draws the crowds.

We are the first people to arrive after a morning storm, with families and holidaymakers not far behind, all of us are on the move with beach towels after the first rays of sun. One family says they heard about the Blue Lagoon back in Yorkshire and brought their children especially, another reports that the place was crammed yesterday. A rumour goes around that the tide is too low to jump from the tallest wall today, and it’s passed from parent to child to newcomers, even before the first children in wetsuits have crossed the lagoon.

The sea is still full of white caps, but the lagoon, protected by steep cliffs, is flat and calm. Occasional gusts spread out over its flat surface like fast-moving ink blots.

Standing on the lowest wall a South African kayaker teaches me how to jump ‘properly’.

‘Cross your arms over your chest, and keep your feet together. Don’t hold your nose, you might break it when you land. And don’t jump with your arms out – you could dislocate your shoulders.’ He tells a cautionary tale of a jumper in Dorset who hit the water with his head forward and knocked himself out – luckily someone was watching and jumped in to get him.

Duly instructed I plunge off the baby wall, which feels high to me, and then float around looking at the children in shortie wetsuits on the giants. The walls are between 20 and 45 feet above the water. The South African hurts off the very top in a running leap, clearing 6 feet of wall before leg pedalling out into the water.

Billy points out her friend Hermione, a little blonde girl of about ten, who has jumped off the top wall five times. Gus, 12, is standing on the middle wall in blue shorts. ‘He’s in a tough situation there,’ says his mum, who’s here on holiday. ‘He doesn’t like heights. But he likes Billy.’ Gus’s battle with his contradictory desires continues for at least ten minutes. Eventually Gus jumps. ‘Two kisses!’ he shouts up triumphantly to his friend on the wall, after Billy has given him his reward.

Afterwards we swim out of the channel that connects the lagoon to the sea, the bubbly rock beneath us covered in flat slate pebbles, and then swim around into the beach. The caravan on the beach serves us huge cups of chai, and we sign a petition to keep Aberreiddy car park open.

Swim Easy. With clear water, a blue lagoon and an old quarry, this is a popular coastal spot for scuba diving and jumping.

Directions Aberreiddy can be reached by following signs from Croesoegh on the A487 (St David’s to Fishguard Road). Fishguard Harbour station is 11 miles away. There are fine coastal walks in both directions and scuba-diving, canoeing and kayaking. Divers and swimmers may see seals, soft corals, anenomes, spider crabs and ribbons of kelp.

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24. PORTHOWAN TIDAL POOL, CORNWALL

The north coast of Cornwall is dotted with sea pools that give swimmers a chance to bathe safely away from the waves that make the coast so popular with surfers.

We arrive in Porthtowan at 5pm. It’s high summer; the surf shop is having a boom day and the beach is a morass of sun cream, ice cream and bad parenting. Facing the sea we take a right turn up the cliff path closest to the beach, and soon come to some steps down to the empty tidal pool.

The tide is high so we sit and wait for the pool to open – a pleasant change from the normal swimming experience – watching for the point where the pool is no longer part of the sea. Waves crash over the concrete wall that dams the pool, water and white bubbles surging forward over the wall closest to us. There’s a sheer dark rock cliff to one side and a jumble of rocks to the left. We see a black shag in the green arc of a wave, perhaps diving for fish.

To pass the time, Dom inspects barnacles and anemones in the jumble of rocks, and I watch the sea lower almost imperceptibly. It reaches a point where the top of the front wall is clearly visible through the clear water and then another where a few centimetres of sea pours over the wall like melted glass.

At this point I get in. It looks like a place where mermaids would swim: purple, turquoise and bright green seaweeds cover the bottom. With goggles I suss out the rocks underneath, then stand on a ledge by the sea wall. Waves are being broken by the wall, hundreds of gallons of water being smashed up into the air. The change in air pressure means I can feel the water coming before it lands, instinctively shying away from the most violent blasts. The water lands on my back with a shocking thump. My heart is pounding in my throat as I swim around the pool but I am soon back waiting for the next wave to fall. It’s hard to imagine how any wild pool could beat this as a swimming experience.

Swim: Easy. A wild and exhilarating tidal pool on the Cornish coast.

Details: Porthtowan is about 4 miles north of the A30 at Redruth (nearest station: Redruth). There’s a chain of tidal pools along this coast, and a few could be visited at low tide: Portreath tidal pools, Lady Basset’s Baths (also Portreath), Millendreath, Polperro and Treyarnon Bay (see also the picture on page 2).
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Until heated pools were built in the 1950s everyone learned to swim outdoors, many in rivers with sectioned-off learner pools, or at the hands of people who kindly took it upon themselves to chuck children into the village pond until they learned to float. I have a particular fondness for rivers, their silky softness and the experience of floating downstream, looking at clouds while being carried along by the current, then nosing up to tree roots, water lilies, willows and ducks.
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River swims are perfect mini-adventures, and a brilliant combination of daring and safety, of being together and apart. You start out walking barefoot together along towpaths in trunks and bikinis, then you’re in and immersed in your own experience, until you stop to chat or swing off a rope together.

Waterways are also cleaner than they’ve been for years, so it’s no surprise that more people are getting back into them, enjoying their back-to-nature morning wash by a wild camp or their own stretch of riverbank, meeting friends for a downstream expedition at the weekend or just taking a dip post-festival or mid-walk, wedged into a natural jacuzzi with a few baby trout.

River swims are as various as the people who swim in them: there are waterfalls, sun-warmed paddling pools and swimming superhighways. There are traditional bathing spots where you can join in the splash and chat with children and picnickers, and remote crags and brooks known only to climbers and ramblers where you can swim through underwater arches and plunge off rocks.

This section includes examples of these, from swims suitable for children in armbands to tougher swims for fit triathletes.

Eventually all rivers lead to the sea and so this section also includes some estuary swims. Estuaries are primordial muddy places, alien to most of us, where oak leaves and seaweed bob along together. One of the delights of estuary swimming is getting a free ride: catch the tide in either direction and you can cover more ground and see more scenery than when powering yourself.
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60. STAINFORTH FORCE, YORKSHIRE DALES, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Stainforth Force (pronounced ‘foss’) lies just below Stainforth packhorse bridge, with some shallow sun-warmed pools suitable for small children, and then a succession of platforms and falls. We approach on an un-sunny Sunday in September, but the banks are full of families eating picnics.

The commotion centres on the deep pool at the end of the falls, where jumpers and divers are gathered on the cliff, peering out from behind tree trunks and scrabbling up slopes. Children in sports shorts and soggy trainers run down an incline holding a rope-and-wood bar-swing, arcing out over the fall and letting go as they soar over the pool. A sister and brother do tandem dives, backflips and somersaults to the delight of their parents.

‘I felt like I was flying for ages,’ says the brother, running back from a jump that scared him. A teenager stands on the highest ledge, shaking. ‘Come on then!’ shouts a boy of about five, then offers ‘I’m not old enough’ to the spectators beside him.

It’s a riotous human circus that everyone joins, the less confident leaping off lower rocks into the water. Michael tries the rope swing, but his grip-slip and he lands on the ledge, jarring his back and then skidding out over the waterfall. It provides the only hush of the afternoon – a collective intake of breath – then the chatter starts up again as he swims to the edge. ‘I knew he was holding it wrong,’ offers Tom, 11, red-haired and wet beside me. ‘You want to hold it like this.’ ‘Don’t tell me,’ I say, ushering him forward, ‘tell him.’

Swim: Easy to moderate. A popular jumping spot on a lively section of the River Ribble.

Details: Stainforth is on the B6479, about 2 miles north of Settle (which is the nearest railway station). The Force is just west of the village. This swim is part of the Ribble Way (a 70 mile footpath) and various circular walks. Stainforth and Little Stainforth are both on National Cycle Routes. The bridge is a short walk from the Stainforth Force car park.

61. TOPSHAM TO THE TURF, DEVON

In the 1930s there was an annual race on the Exe Estuary from The Turf pub upstream to Topsham. There’s a foot ferry that runs between this pretty Devon village and the canal bank on the other side, and over the last few years, as sailing boats pass up and down and birds pick things out of the mud, Mike the ferryman used to wonder what it’d be like to swim down the channel.

In 2006 he did it as a personal challenge, and in 2007 17 others joined him on this beautifully brackish part of the River Exe. James Lowe was one who went along. ‘It was a great day, the weather was gorgeous, the Morris dancers were in fine fettle and all the swimmers had a wonderful ovation from the crowds gathered. One eager chap passed by and decided he would also have a go. He was helped out of the water at the finish (in a pretty respectable time) in only his cotton boxer shorts and a big smile.’
60. STAINFORTH FORCE, YORKSHIRE DALES, NORTH YORKSHIRE

Stainforth Force (pronounced ‘foss’) lies just below Stainforth packhorse bridge, with some shallow sun-warmed pools suitable for small children, and then a succession of platforms and falls. We approach on an un-sunny Sunday in September, but the banks are full of families eating picnics.

The commotion centres on the deep pool at the end of the falls, where jumpers and divers are gathered on the cliff, peering out from behind tree trunks and scrabbling up slopes.

Children in sports shorts and soggy trainers run down an incline holding a rope-and-wood bar-swing, arcing out over the fall and letting go as they soar over the pool. A sister and brother do tandem dives, backflips and somersaults to the delight of their parents.

‘I felt like I was flying for ages,’ says the brother, running back from a jump that scared him. A teenager stands on the highest ledge, shaking. ‘Come on then!’ shouts a boy of about five, then offers ‘I’m not old enough’ to the spectators beside him.

It’s a riotous human circus that everyone joins, the less confident leaping off lower rocks into the water. Michael tries the rope swing, but his grip slips and he lands on the ledge, jarring his back and then skidding out over the waterfall. It provides the only hush of the afternoon – a collective intake of breath – then the chatter starts up again as he swims to the edge. ‘I knew he was holding it wrong,’ offers Tom, 11, red-haired and wet beside me. ‘You want to hold it like this.’ ‘Don’t tell me,’ I say, ushering him forward, ‘tell him.’

Swim: Easy to moderate. A popular jumping spot on a lively section of the River Ribble.

Details: Stainforth is on the B6479, about 2 miles north of Settle (which is the nearest railway station). The Force is just west of the village. This swim is part of the Ribble Way (a 70 mile footpath) and various circular walks. Stainforth and Little Stainforth are both on National Cycle Routes. The bridge is a short walk from the Stainforth Force car park.

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Lakes, ponds and tarns are nature’s swimming pools: safe, still bodies of water that offer tranquil swimming, the gentle pleasure of staying afloat in natural water. Before there were swimming pools there were springboards by ponds (piscine, from the Latin piscina, meant ‘fishpond’ and later came to mean ‘swimming pool’).
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84-86. Loch Ness, Loch Oich and Loch Lochy: The Great Glen

It’s a bright, crisp autumn morning as Dom, Kari and I stand on the banks of Loch Ness putting on wetsuits, booties and gloves. The sky is blue, and the dark water is in sharp contrast to the trees ablaze on the far shore: yellow and green by the water, rising to oranges and reds on the hills.

We stand at the water’s edge of the pine forest primed to experience the first mass sighting of the Loch Ness Monster since 1961, when 30 hotel visitors saw a pair of humps break the surface and travel for about half a mile without submerging. We’re keen to identify the wave pattern against the sharp stones on the shore as ‘unusual’, but that seems unlikely so Kari fashions a Nessie out of a tree, moss and bracken and carries that into the water with us instead.

Today we are swimming in each of the three lochs of the Great Glen, the 60 mile long rift valley that runs from Scotland’s east to west shore and is home to the long narrow forms of Loch Ness, Loch Oich and Loch Lochy.

We run a sweepstake on the temperatures of the three lochs as we enter. The Great Glen can be cycled in a day in the summer, with refreshing, not-wetsuit-required swims along the way. But this is the season where grouse are fattening and clouds of mist hover over grass before the sun falls; where stags roar at night as dead thistles grow silvery with frost. Water temperatures are rapidly dropping. A cold trickle of water makes its way down my breastbone. We guess temperatures from 9 to 13°C, with the lochs becoming warmer as we move west.

The water is black as space. In our wetsuits we are weightless, and bob about doing somersaults like aquatic astronauts. Swimming’s ability to restore the magic to over-familiar landscapes works again here: Scotland becomes epic now we’re actually in it. Roads, cars and people have dematerialised. We abandon Nessie to the depths and head out like great explorers, breaststroking together towards the horizon. To our surprise the loch tastes of salt.

We swim around a moss-coloured rock, all the time staying close to the shore (we’re in colder water than we’re used to and don’t know how our bodies will respond, even in wetsuits) and get out an hour later feeling invigorated and alive. Kari and I dress in alpine hats, thermals, ski gloves and down jackets, sipping hot chocolate while looking fondly back at Loch Ness. Our new wetsuits, boots and gloves have worked – the thermometer tells us that it’s 9.5°C.

After a pub lunch by a fire at Fort Augustus we move on to Loch Oich, a small loch that – currently deserted – looks both wild and approachable. We know we haven’t got much daylight left so we go for a quick crossing.

We select a bright orange tree on the opposite bank – easy to keep track of – and head for that. It’s a wonderful swim: yellow leaves hang suspended in the black water, illuminated by sunshine. The loch is flat and empty so we feel safe. We stroke out in a smooth, rhythmic front crawl: seven minutes to the bank opposite, seven minutes back. Every now and then we come across a straight line of fallen leaves on the surface blown into formation by the wind. We get back in the car and set off for our final swim of the day: Loch Lochy, which empties the water that started at the North Sea, gathering Highland rivers and rain en route, into the Atlantic.

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Loch Ness was a playful swim, Loch Oich a
short, wild crossing; Loch Lochy is different again – surreal and stilling.

The loch has corrugated sides with hidden bays to discover, and the landscape seems richer and softer: felted hills and pillowy forests. We park in a pine wood and walk down to the shore. Up close nothing seems quite as it should be. A brown frog the size of half a thumb is making its way down to water from the car park – an improbable distance – and the forest floor is so dry it seems unlikely to make it. Three acid yellow mushrooms nestle in the moss. Every few minutes a fish leaps out of the water.

We reach the shore, and a few hundred metres across the bay there appears to be a mangrove swamp: a waterlogged forest of black, truncated tree stumps.

We spread our clothes on rocks for later, throw our towels high into the trees to sway and dry in the breeze and swim across. There is grass under the water, and we can see the submerged perfect three-pronged prints of large wading birds. Every now and then we hear the slap of another jumping fish.

The sky turns pink and a cloud like a giant tadpole snags on a mountain. We get out and wade about on the shoreline with towels wrapped over shoulders, looking at the untouched footprints and blackened trees under the clear water, unable to deduce how everything got here. It’s stilling, calming, transfixing. We drive away as the light is fading, heading off to the Isle of Skye, our next swim destination. Elegant birches with silver trunks and yellow leaves pick up the last of the light. In the dark the lochs shine like tin foil.

The temperatures on our visit were 9.5°c, 10°c and 11°c: Dom won the sweepstake.

**Swim:** Moderate to advanced. A swim across Scotland in three beautiful, contrasting lochs.

**Details:** We drove along Loch Ness on the B862, which gives greater access to the lake than the opposite shore and got in opposite Castle Urquhart, where we were advised there was good shallow access. Invergarry or Laggan Locks would be a good base for (a walk and) a swim at Loch Oich and at Loch Lochy. The Great Glen Way is a footpath linking all the lochs (73 miles) and you could cycle and swim them all in an active day. There are shallow entry and exit points along their shore; temperature, not access, will be the issue with children.
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Swim: Moderate to advanced. A swim across...
There’s an expansiveness to public outdoor pools rarely seen elsewhere: lidos are places of goosebumps, coincidental friendships, shared habits and smiles. People move to be near to their lidos. You needn’t go often to become part of a lido’s community; just a few trips and there’ll be a nod, an upward tip of the chin in recognition, a ‘hi’ from the lifeguard. Swimmers understand something very fundamental about each other, which is why one can often see deep mutual fondness in people’s eyes, just behind the sheen of their goggles. The bond cuts across age, gender, politics, personalities and class: you share the same routine or passion.
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95. Bude Sea Pool, Bude, Cornwall

Bude Sea Pool is as much wild swim as lido, with a steep black cliff on one edge, a rocky base and a tide that sweeps right over it and laps up against the lifeguards’ huts 20 days of the month. The swell brings in fish, sand and surfers. Seagulls squawk overhead and the ‘Sea Pool lifeguard’, in red shorts and a red vest, job title in yellow, wages a daily battle against seaweed with his broom. A solitary lane divider is used to keep swimmers away from falling rocks rather than marshal them into swimming order.

The sunbathing area around the pool gives a clear view of the surf that swimmers seek refuge from, and the ‘No Diving’ sign is there to be obeyed – the daily swell moves sand bars around in the pool, sometimes just a few feet under the cloudy sea water.

When Bude gets an attack of weaver fish, which bury themselves under sand on the shoreline and cause painful stings, the pool is inundated with swimmers at low tide, but early in the morning you can be the only one in the water. A rising tide is a special time to swim – the Atlantic lapping and slapping against the pool edge.

Bude Sea Pool was almost shut a couple of years ago, but a vigorous local campaign saved the day. ‘We have four generations of the same families coming down here. It’s part of Bude and people love it.’ Thanks to them, the pool remains free to all swimmers.

The pool is 88 metres long and 50 metres deep, with an irregular shape – a big breezy pleasure to swim in. ‘We tell people it’s “solar-heated”’, jokes Mini the lifeguard, ‘but the sun only penetrates about 4cm, so it never gets hotter than 17 to 18 degrees.’

96. Chagford Swimming Pool, Devon

This 30 metre by 15 metre pool on the edge of Dartmoor can’t be that far from Heaven. Swallows nest in the changing room and divebomb the swimmers, and tea is ever present in ‘Chagford Swimming Pool’ mugs. With the sound of the river Teign running past stepping stones and the sun-warmed decking inviting a long afternoon lie-down, it’s as relaxed as a swimming pool gets.

We arrive in the late afternoon. The pool looks like a faded David Hockney, wavy white lines stretched over its surface like a distorted fishing net. Big oaks with acorns rustle in the summer breeze above a man who lies reading. There’s a shelf of second-hand books outside the changing room (‘Pay Pam or the lifeguards’ says a handwritten sign – Pam has run the teashop for 30 years and her father was among those who first dug the pool) and we sit swinging our legs on the raised decking.

Children are experts at swinging – out of trees, in playground parks – but it’s not often adults get a seat tall enough to reconnect with the art.

The pool is riverfed, and the Teign water feels wonderfully soft. It’s topped up when it evaporates. It’s lovely swimming, with a dolphin painted on the pool base and it feels just as appropriate to meander around as to get busy with laps.

The pool was originally dug out by locals in 1934 to stop children in the river disturbing the fishing. (A black and white postcard depicts hundreds of people in dresses and cricket whites watching an opening race.) For years the leat (a channel that provides water to a watermill) was blocked so the river literally spilled over into the pool, and the mud bottom had newts nesting in it.
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The pool was given in trust to the people of Chagford in a will, but reverts to farm land if it goes unused for a year. So far this has never happened and, in 2000, locals raised £180,000 to meet new health and safety requirements. The amount of local love that has gone into this pool may explain why it leaves the swimmer with such a sense of allrightness.

The pool now attracts people from Exeter, Tavistock and the south coast. It’s just a few minutes from the A30 that runs from Exeter to Launceston and well worth a detour on your way down; if it makes you late for your final destination you can always blame the West Country traffic.

Swim: Easy. An idyllic riverfed village pool on the edge of Dartmoor, where swallows divebomb the water.

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Simon Murie

Simon is the swimming superstar of the featured swimmers, a man who breaks the ice in Finland, has swum the channel and has the trunks to prove it. He owns and runs SwimTrek (www.swimtrek.com), which takes people on swimming holidays all over the world. ‘I like cold water, the rushing effect of the blood around your body – the best way to feel awake is going swimming in cold water.’ He swims in Tooting Bec Lido all year round, and has a particular love of undertaking significant crossings, such as the Hellespont in Turkey or the Gulf of Corryvrecken in the Inner Hebrides. ‘A pool is a tedious medium to be submerged in,’ he says. ‘You generally know exactly how far you’ve gone as you can count the distance. It’s wonderful to take swimmers outdoors and find they can swim much further than they think – three to five kilometres straight off – just because they’re not bored.’

He also enjoys the bonding aspect of swimming trips. ‘A lot of bonding goes on because you’re undertaking a challenge together, doing a crossing and spurring each other on. After a week people often understand a lot more about each other than friends they’ve known for years socially, because with a swimming challenge you understand each other’s inner self.’

Kate Rew

Kate, this book’s author, grew up swimming in the river Culm which ran the length of her father’s farm in Devon. ‘My brother Alex and I would start at the deep section at the top of the farm, shout our echoes under a bridge, paddle frantically to get out before we got sucked over the waterfall, and then hold on to slimy rocks at the base of the falls to batter our heads under its flow.’

‘From there the journey was on! A sprint down a narrow straight, knees banging against stones and minnows in clear view, joint terror around ‘eel corner’ and then a long stretch past willows before dodging cowpats and thistles barefoot on the way home.’

She has never lost the draw of water, scaling lido fences at university for midnight swims and jumping into rivers and seas at the slightest opportunity.

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