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Why I . . . swim outdoors

Devon based GP Neil Rushton talks to **Helen Jones** about how his lifelong love of swimming has helped him through the toughest of times

Helen Jones

"Swimming, for me, is a kind of spiritual experience. There's something about being immersed in water that washes away your troubles," he says. "I do a lot of thinking while I'm swimming—about my family or what a patient needs, or sometimes I think about nothing at all as I watch the black line go past in the pool."

Rushton adds that swimming helped him deal with the loss of his first wife from cancer and with other difficult times. "I've had many ups and downs in life. My current wife had a big operation in Plymouth three years ago. During her two week stay in hospital I was able to find a local pool and do a quick 50 lengths. It somehow resets me, so that things are alright," he says.

Rushton regularly swims in an open air pool at Wiveliscombe, of which he is a trustee. "What could be better than driving to the pool in my Morris Minor convertible, doing a 7 am swim for 45 minutes, and then starting work in the village surgery?" he says. But his real love is swimming in the sea and rivers. "I read the naturalist Roger Deakin's book *Waterlog* and that gave me the push to do more wild swimming."

He has swum in Lake Titicaca, the Hellespont from Europe to Asia, and the Senegal River, and completed a 16 km trip around the Isles of Scilly. He also tried to swim the Channel. "Our support boat got stuck on a rock and we lost 90 minutes of the tide," he explains. "After 12 hours I got within 3 km of France—I could see houses and people on bikes—but we had to abandon the swim as the tide was against us. We had great fun nevertheless."

Rushton uses his experience to run a special study unit on wilderness medicine for students at Exeter Medical School every November and February. "We walk up on Dartmoor and swim in Crazywell Pool to learn about hypothermia. I think they enjoy it and almost all of them get in. I have cold showers every day and don't mind swimming in water down to about 8°C," he says.

Rushton started swimming at school and as an 11 year old made it onto the swimming team. "Suddenly, at this large school of 1000 pupils, I was someone," he says. During his years at St George's Medical School in London, Rushton swam at Tooting Bec Lido. Eventually, when finances allowed, he got a swimming pool in his back garden. "I taught all four of my children to swim, each a bit quicker than the last," he says. "As I've got older, I've realised that swimming is a sport I could keep doing in my dotage."

He says he plans to celebrate his 70th year—he is currently 68—by attempting to swim the Channel again and is keen to try an ice mile. "You have to go to Poland or northern Germany to do it—they cut a channel in an icy lake and you swim it, although you have to take an electrocardiogram first. You have to work out whether to do it as quickly as possible to get it over with, which raises your pulse and sends cold blood around more quickly, or whether to swim it more slowly and get very cold," he says.

For his most recent birthday Rushton completed the Bantham Swoosh, a 6 km swim down the River Avon from Aveton Gifford in Devon which ends in a "swoosh" as the tide is funnelled through a narrow section of the river speeding you along to Bantham beach. "I met my wife at the end of the swim and we had mussels and a pint at the pub—what better way to celebrate a birthday?"

How to start outdoor swimming

- Join a local swimming group which will offer help, support, and advice. "Facebook is a very good place to start," Rushton says. "There is a real camaraderie amongst us outdoor swimmers. It's great for joining in and meeting new people"
- Start in summer—that way you can build up to colder water as the season progresses
- Consider getting a wetsuit. Lots of people start off wearing a wetsuit and then go without as they get used to swimming outdoors
- Do your research—if you are swimming somewhere new then find out about tides and currents. "An orange tow float—a buoyancy aid which is clipped around your waist—is a good idea; it shows boats that you're in the water and helps people spot you more easily if there's an emergency," Rushton says