



TRY IT NOW

SEA SWIMMING *in* NORTH WALES

Under the expert guidance of Dan Graham and Gabby Dickinson of Gone Swimming, Susie Moss dons her wetsuit for a bracing weekend of open-water swimming off the Isle of Anglesey

WORDS **Susie Moss**

While splashing in waves and dashing in and out of the cold surf is something we've all enjoyed at some point, wild swimming implies a deeper commitment to the cold water, a sense of bravery to take the plunge, and an exploratory approach to swimming. This kind of swimming can challenge us and boost us on so many levels – increasing our connection to our environment results in huge physical and mental benefits.

There are plenty of groups you can join across the UK for a sense of camaraderie in the waves, and now a few holiday companies are emerging offering guided swimming experiences in Britain.

Gone Swimming, a dynamic, new company in their busy second season, do just that. With four bases in North Wales, Gabby and Dan offer a range of weekend swimming experiences for a combination of coastal and lake swimming in stunning scenery. Groups of mixed ability and ages are guided through swims to gain more confidence, improve their stroke, or explore further than they would do alone. I joined them for a wet weekend off the Isle of Anglesey.



HAVING A GO
Our writer Susie Moss takes the plunge and goes wild swimming (OPPOSITE) in Welsh waters

FRIDAY 4PM DIP AND DINE

Arriving in the hostel, I am immediately set at ease by the warmth of Gabby's flowing banter and her endless provision of delicious food, which remains a constant throughout the weekend. We dig into tea and cakes whilst the group gathers. Some are 'repeat offenders', having completed a previous wet weekend in a different part of Wales. Some, like me, are newbies to the group experience, but we are all keen to take our first plunge into Welsh waters and we head down to the nearest beach, Porth Dafarch.

Gabby gives us a safety briefing and introduces us to Roddy, who will be swimming with us. We are told that our group can split into 'beach huggers and pootlers', or 'ocean headers and horizon chasers'. Introducing ourselves slowly to the chill, there is a strange delight in being immersed in water under grey skies and lashing rain. I feel happy as a seal as I realise I can safely swim out as far as I like, play as much as I like, really push myself or simply float.

Returning for hot showers and a fantastic evening meal, we are all reminded of how good

food tastes after sea swimming, although trained chef Gabby's food would undoubtedly taste great under any circumstance. Her organisation, planning and timing is impressive, as is the accommodation. To keep the budgets low, Dan and Gabby use hostels, but they seek them out in good locations with vital requirements: a good kitchen, a cosy communal space, comfy beds, and hot showers that 'pin you to the floor.'

Warm and satisfied, we gather around the map and learn a little more of where we are. The Isle of Anglesey is the site of one of the first ever documented wild swims. Apparently a bunch of Romans in all their armour swam across the Menai Strait to bash the living daylights out of some poor unsuspecting souls. We discuss more peaceful plans for tomorrow's swims.

SATURDAY 9AM BREAKFAST AND GOLDEN DELIGHTS

Waking to the sound of chatter and laughter is a reminder that I am on a holiday rather than a hardcore endurance challenge. The group breakfast of porridge groaning in gorgeous toppings is served at a leisurely 9am.

Our first swim of the day is a

NEED *to* KNOW

i HOW TO GET STARTED

Check out the OSS website for local groups at outdoorswimmingsociety.com, or wildswimming.co.uk for swim maps of places to go. Book with Dan and Gabby of Gone Swimming at goneswimming.co.uk.

£ WHAT IT COSTS

£250 for a weekend with Gone Swimming, including all food and swims with guides.

i WHAT EQUIPMENT YOU NEED

Gone Swimming provide cosy towelling robes for changing into and staying warm, as well as a swim cap. You must have a wetsuit and goggles. Swimming wetsuits are more flexible than surfsuits. Swimming costumes for the brave are an option. You might like to bring gloves and boots along if you really feel the cold.



ABOVE Taking a closer look at the seaweed
RIGHT Doing handstands in the shallows



short drive to Rhoscolyn just over five miles south of Holyhead. We split into two groups again. I join the outer group to get to a small rocky island in the bay. Despite the grey skies, there is great visibility and I am drawn to diving down to look more closely at the array of yellow and green seaweed. We watch a dashing cormorant dive impressively far in the water, we lounge like seals on the rocks, and through my yellow-tinted goggles, Wales looks deceptively warm.

We've earnt our scooby snacks of tasty sweetcorn fritters and hot drinks on the beach. As we huddle in woolly hats and the towelling robes provided, I reflect; this is not a glamorous weekend but it is sure to impress both swimmers and foodies alike.

1.30PM SWIMMING IN ST PATRICK'S WAKE

Our afternoon swim takes us to Porth Padrig and a belt of heavy rain. Dan tells us about the local legend of St Patrick. He was shipwrecked on a small island off Anglesey and swam over to this beach. There he came across amazing spring water, and founded a church on the site. Saint Padrig's Church and graveyard still look out to sea from their clifftop position. They must have seen centuries of wet days like this.

We huddle in the van with our warming butternut squash soup as the rain drums a battle march. During a brief break, we make a dash for it – we are here to get wet after all – and head to the next bay along. Fortunately we

find three seals bobbing in the surf and inviting us in. It's best not to swim fast towards seals in case we appear threatening, but it is a treat to swim close to them and, if lucky, they may approach you. They tease us as we swim out into the depths, clumsy humans compared to their slick selves. They dive and disappear, then pop up in a completely different place, almost grinning.

Along with their obvious love of Wales and their local knowledge, another good thing about being with Dan and Gabby is that they are careful to be part of its conservation too. They actively promote 'Rubbish Swimming', which is about taking away litter that you find on your swim and leaving the aquatic environment in better condition



than when you arrived. I'm sure those seals appreciate it.

6PM CHILL OUT AND FEED, AGAIN!

Heading back to base in the van, truly bonded as a group by now, we experience mild hysteria deciding who should hop out to pick up wine, dressed in our fetching towelling robes. I am one of the lucky ones who gets to stay giggling smugly and snug in the van.

Over another fine evening meal we discuss swim safety with Dan, an expert on all things to do with water safety and drowning prevention. He tells us about the Nile Swimmers, of which he is a co-founder. Set up in 2007 after two lifeguard instructors from the UK were asked by the British Council to run a project in Sudan, it is a unique and innovative program aimed at reducing rates of drowning on the River Nile and the surrounding areas. They do this by providing training, conducting research, building partnerships and providing a



ABOVE The group enjoying a warming cup of tea on the beach before heading off for another swim

perspective from low-income countries. Gone Swimming help to raise funds for the project.

SUNDAY 9AM SLOW START AND LAST SWIM

We make another relaxed start after a deep sleep dreaming of sea swimming. Our final swim takes us out to Penrhos Beach, a white sandy cove accessed by an intriguing path winding past old farmyards and through a tunnel of trees.

As a farewell blessing, the rain stays away and we enjoy a clear swim out into calm seas. I find it exciting to feel so small in the ocean as the huge Holyhead Ferry chugs past in the distance. Reluctant to leave the water, we spend some time playing near the shore perfecting our handstands like giddy children. Then it's a mad scramble to catch trains in time and we each rush off with a hearty packed lunch, soggy wetsuits, tired limbs, a handful of recipes, and enthusiasm to return for more.

ASK the PRO



Leading expert in water safety and drowning prevention, Dan Graham of Gone Swimming,

tell us how to make a safe start in the open water.

DO

☞ Begin at a life-guarded beach, with a coaching session or group, or at least where someone else is watching out for you.

☞ Open water presents a very different challenge to the pool. Acknowledge your capabilities and don't push yourself too far. It's important to have a positive first experience in order to carry on.

☞ Take your time. There is no need to rush or race or cover great distances to begin with. It's always better to get out wanting more, than to fail with exhaustion.

☞ Appreciate where you are. Enjoy the scenery around you rather than getting lost in your technique. A more relaxed swimmer is a stronger swimmer.

DON'T

☞ Drink alcohol (save that for celebrating down the pub after your swim). Alcohol affects your coordination and limits your ability to regulate your body temperature, which is crucial in cold open water.

☞ Swim alone. At least make sure someone knows where you are or can keep an eye out for you.

Dan says: 'Open-water swimming doesn't have to be traumatic. It is fun, daring and a great way to get fit and feel free. First-time nerves are inevitable, but swimming as a group allows you to gain some swimming tips, build confidence and have fun safely off our beautiful coast.'