



“Ferries are for Wimps – Let’s Swim!”

Story and pictures by Peter Myers

Homo Sapiens spent significant amounts of our evolutionary ancestry in a semi-aquatic environment. Most of us spend our summers gazing at, or paddling in, watery environs. Let’s hear it for open-water adventure swimming and the company that makes a holiday out of it.

Swimming has never been my greatest passion, but it’s a sport at which I am more than adept, that I have enjoyed all my life; it keeps me in shape, and is the only effective way of limbering myself up for a back-busting bout of squash. But even the most enthusiastic swimmers will confide the tedium of crawling umpteen lengths of the public baths, maddeningly ticking off 40, 60, 100 longitudinal bisections of the pool – not to mention the lane rage that can turn a relaxing swim into a mental killing spree.

SwimTrek changes the way one approaches swimming. It is a company – the only company, I think – that specialises in open-

water swimming jaunts, running ‘treks’ all over the world, from the Inner Hebrides to the Greek Cyclades, the German Bavarian lakes to New Zealand and Croatian seascapes. There are even River Thames weekends. SwimTrek’s motto is the title of this piece. As soon as I heard about them, I knew that I had to get on one of their trips, and fast.

Warm destinations like Croatia and Malta are SwimTrek’s most popular trips, but being a resident of the tropics, the most exotic itinerary I could envisage was the **Lakes Weekender**: two days spent gliding through the Lake District – Wordsworth country; and my homeland’s pastoral,

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mountain and lake adventure playground; the UK's answer to New Zealand's South Island. My father and sister, both keen swimmers, booked themselves up too.

Reading SwimTrek testimonials, it becomes clear that there are many people, all over the world, who feel the outdoor tug - people who wish to spend their free time crossing large swathes of ocean and lake. As the late Roger Deakin, British populariser of the joys of open-water swimming, and author of *Waterlog* described his move from pool to lake, "to break out of the frustration of a lifetime doing lengths, of endlessly turning back on myself like a tiger pacing its cage." Like Roger I was about to become an outdoor swimming addict.

SwimTrek is run by Simon Murie, 36, a bronzed Adonis of a man (that was my sister's description of him anyway) who has swum the English Channel, among other long-distance events, and trains Channel swimmers at the Tooting Bec Lido in London, Britain's largest swimming pool (92m long). His father was a lifeguard on Sydney's Bondi Beach, but his first experience of open-water swimming was in the Thames with his mother, a big outdoor swim fan.

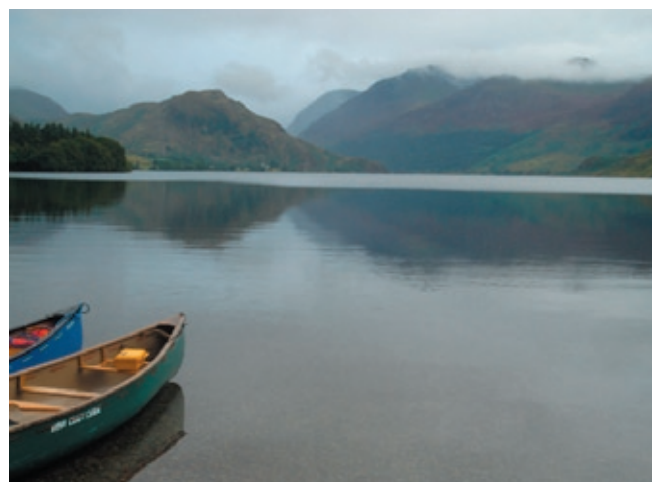
A former mining engineer, Simon found that his solo swimming holidays were prohibitively costly - and time-consuming, what with getting permits, etc. "I went over to Canakkale seven years ago to swim across the Hellespont in Turkey. It took me a week to organise it whilst I was over there and only 90 minutes to cross it, which made me realise that surely other people would have wanted to do this. The swim was from Abydos to Sestos, the route of Leander's nightly swim to his beloved Hero." SwimTrek was born four years later, in 2003. Soon, Simon hopes, the company will be running trips year round, and be the primary source of information for open-water swimming.

Our late-August weekend began on the Friday night with a practice swim in a local pool, having checked-in earlier at a summer-camp-tastic YMCA. Simon soon found fault with my front crawl; I was expending far too much effort in the downward stroke. He demonstrated the flick-arm movement I should be making halfway through and immediately revolutionised my stroke.

It was clear that our assembled group, though mostly of the distinctly un-pert variety, were made up of some very strong, very fast swimmers. More than a few seemed to be part of a swimming fraternity, whose well-earned bragging concerning distances and freezing temperatures swum was soon being flung around during that night's hearty pub dinner (eat well and carb-heavily the night before a chilly swim). I became rather nervous rather quickly.

SwimTrek sends out training programmes months before each trip, and I had stuck to my practice routine fairly rigidly

- but traversing a neo-colonial club's outdoor pool for a few kilometres on sultry Bangkok evenings was hardly going to transpose fluently into 16C-18C English late-summer lake conditions. Other swimmers were equally nervous. We had two anxious Scots, Susan and Lillian, both in their 30s and sub-editors at the *Glasgow Morning Herald*. At least the cold wouldn't affect them, they laughed. John, from Ireland, a young



Opposite: A Croatian SwimTrek in full throttle [picture courtesy of SwimTrek], and above, the far more lackadaisical, no-motor-boats-allowed Crummock Water, in the English Lake District

academic at Imperial College, London was another virgin outdoorsman. The rest were quietly confident veterans: Mike, a Michael Douglas-look-alike American expatriate based in the City had been a dive champ in his younger days; Carmen, an asylum-seeker expert working in Brick Lane was on her second SwimTrek; and David, nearing retirement, turned out to be one of the strongest swimmers in the group. He was supporting a children's charity.

All, except the Scots and my family, were on holiday alone - a burgeoning trend in evolved markets like Britain. Although most were not actually single, they simply had different interests from their partners, and were keen to pursue them. And, unlike a spa resort break, a trip like this, in which a group of likeminded individuals are put through an intense few days of activity and adventure, was sure to be a bonding experience through which new friendships were formed. I left the Lake District sorry that my fellow swimmers were not my near neighbours.

Saturday first thing, the assembled group of 13, plus Simon and another guide, Martin, were undressing, and shivering, on the shore of Lake Buttermere. Bystanders gaped, dumbfounded. Speedos, goggles, brightly-coloured swim hats, Vaseline, and, for some, wetsuits and ear plugs, were gingerly applied. Buttermere bans motorboats, and, according to Simon, this makes it taste



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“sweeter” than other waters we would be negotiating. After the first swim, most had abandoned their wetsuits, finding that they restricted their strokes.

We were streamed into proficiency groups, which would remain largely the same for the weekend. Scrunching through the rocky shallows, staring glumly at the distant point which we were to swim to, I thought the biting cold of Buttermere would stop my heart. Then, during my first gasping strokes, I thought it would surely evoke hypothermia. Five minutes later, however, all thoughts of a cold, dank, Virginia Woolf-esque death had left me. I had found my stride; now it was a case of keeping going. The only markers were the other swimmers’ bright bobbing hats, many of whom were already far ahead. A lot of unnecessary extra distance was accrued thanks to erratic zigzagging.

The darkness below was ominous at first, and the occasional swarm of river grass, sweeping out from the murky depths, twirling around my legs, gave me a start more than once. After a kilometre of so, a rest break was called, and the support canoeists, who had been shouting words of encouragement, offered a warm energy drink. I declined, not wanting to generate a stitch. Lying on my back, in the middle of Buttermere, with green peaks encircling in the distance, all apprehension left me, and I realised that this actually wasn’t an exercise in sadism; the next two days were going to be fantastic, if high-endurance, fun. With no lanes, no kicking off walls, lake swimming added a hundred new levels to the sport for me.

Swimming relatively long distances requires mental as well as physical strength. There were a few times during the weekend’s 12-kilometre swim where I felt I could not continue, my arms having lost their power, muscles deflated. My ankles, thanks to a couple of prolonged breaststroke passages, became black with internal bruising. But brief stops for a chat with a passing swimmer alleviated the hardship, and gave me the will to complete the swims. Stronger swimmers would often stop and offer encouragement, and Simon would suddenly scull into view, with valuable comments on my stroke.

After crossing Buttermere, the groups’ relief was palpable, and we fell on the offered biscuits and hot chocolate. Warm clothes on (all modesty during these quick changes swiftly disappeared), Simon, aided by his girlfriend Louise, laid out a picnic: fresh rolls, cheeses, hams, salad. This was swiftly relocated to the back of the van after a sudden downpour hit. We walked off lunch during a bracing hour’s tramp up to the Lake District’s highest waterfall, Scale Force. David and Allen, two of the group’s hardiest swimmers, were exhausted after the walk – whereas I hadn’t even got a sweat up, and was glad of the aquatic respite. Only a few hours into the weekend,

Opposite: The SwimTrekbers tramp down to Crummock Water for the second lake crossing of the day.

jovial chatter was emanating from every pair of walkers. The rain hadn’t abated on reaching Crummock Water, and I willed my grumbling muscles into careering me across the second three-kilometre stretch. The day ended with another food fest at a delightful local pub, and a slow, nauseous, totally-spent, loss of consciousness.

The next morning, aching and summing up energy recesses, we managed a width of an exquisitely flat and undisturbed Windermere before a cacophonous breakfast at the mid-pubescent realm of the YMCA. After another woody walk through Grizedale forest into Coniston, we prepared for the longest swim of the trip, up Coniston. Later that afternoon, I didn’t envy the drivers amongst us who now had to steer home in semi-alert manner.

Perhaps the most surreal moment of the trip was when a couple of the swimmers bumped into a tweed-jacketed Charles Sprawson, who happened to be strolling by the lake we were crossing. Sprawson, from Trinity College, Dublin, is the author of *Haunts of the Black Masseuse*, one of swimming’s canonical texts, which explores the meaning that cultures from ancient Greece to the modern Olympics have attached to water, and charts the sports’ great heroes: Byron’s crossing of the Hellespont; Allan Poe’s river swims; Captain Webb’s English Channel crossing; and Johnny Weissmuller’s five-year undefeated reign as world champion.

It was, we all agreed, the best holiday ever. Those months of lane practice were now worthwhile. We were hooked and felt like ‘real’ swimmers. Having mastered the art of lake hopping, the oceans beckon. According to Simon, “You float higher in the sea, which makes it easier to swim in. However sea conditions are a lot more variable than lakes.” Bring it on. 🌊

SwimTrek Swimming Adventure Holidays

Tel: + 44 (0) 20 8696 6220; swimtrek.com

Look out for new SwimTrek destinations, including the Finnish Lakes, the Turkish Lycian coast and the US Virgin Islands. For the first time, the Olympic Games will offer an open-water event in 2008.

Useful Contacts:

British Long Distance Swimming Association (bldsa.org.uk); Outdoor Swimming Society (outdoorswimmingsociety.co.uk).