

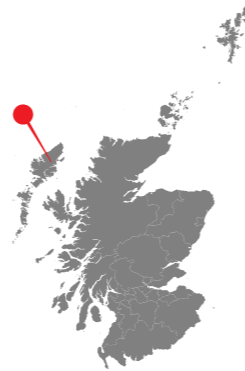


Outdoor swimming...the challenge of a sunrise dip

By Katie Macleod

Growing up on the east coast of the Isle of Lewis means I've always enjoyed being by the sea, but I've always been slightly wary of open water, too. It was with curiosity, then, that I watched from afar during the pandemic as outdoor swimming became more and more popular in the Outer Hebrides.

By the time I found myself back in Lewis for a few weeks in the summer of 2021, I knew I had to try cold-water swimming for myself, and signed up for a "sunrise dip" at the local beach



with Immerse Hebrides, who offer outdoor swimming adventures and boat trips in the Inner and Outer Hebrides.

While I wasn't confident enough to get fully out of my depth, I loved it. Even when I wasn't swimming — even when all I was doing was floating in the water, looking out to the island in the bay — I felt on top of the world. It was clear that all the regular "dippers" felt the same way too. From then on, I was hooked.

One of the reasons so many people do get hooked on outdoor swimming is the mental health benefit, as even just a quick dip in cold water releases feel-good hormones like endorphins and dopamine. "The cold is like shock treatment, almost," says Norma MacLeod from Lewis, who founded Immerse Hebrides with her husband Neil, a Master Mariner, in 2019. "Whatever's going on in your life at the time, I've always found that if you go into cold water, stay in for a few minutes, it's like it blasts everything away. Whatever you take into the water, you leave it there. After a cold-water swim, you've got clarity for the day, and a bit of a buzz if you time it right."

But it's not just the cold. As Norma explains, part of the appeal of outdoor swimming in the Hebrides are the islands themselves. I can see why: when I first started swimming in Lewis that summer, I found myself alongside oystercatchers and cormorants, and marvelling at the water as it sparkled around me.

"Our water here is so clear, and it's not like that everywhere else," says Norma. "There's something about the west coast of Scotland, the scenery, the greenery, the machair. The combination of colours makes everything light up. Even the seaweed, when you've got clear water and you're swimming over it, it looks like a rainbow sometimes."

"The reason I came up with the name Immerse Hebrides was that I really felt immersed in the Hebrides. When I was just floating in the water, or looking at the seaweed and the underwater scenery, I felt really immersed. Yes, I'd been a competitive swimmer, but that changed when I started doing outdoor swimming more. I didn't really care about the competition side, it was more about the fulfilment and enjoyment of it, and being immersed in your surroundings."

That immersion is what swimmers on Immerse Hebrides swim and boat trips can expect, and people come from all over the world to experience it. Recent swimmers have come from as far afield as the USA and Canada, and no matter where they travel from, they're always amazed to discover that the scenery really is as beautiful as it looks on social media. The options for swim and boat trips are varied, from the early morning dips I tried, to day trips to outlying islands like St Kilda, the Shiant, and Little Bernera. There are longer holidays too, in Coll and Tiree, Lewis, Harris, Uist and Barra, and a new one for 2023 which takes swimmers on a "10 Islands Trip" through the full length of the Outer Hebrides.

In St Kilda, if the wind is in the right direction, swimmers can jump off the boat in Village Bay and swim to shore, and in the Shiant's they can swim under the arch at Garbh Eilean next to puffins and guillemots. On boat trips to Little Bernera and Pabbay, there's the opportunity to swim across the lagoon and visit the ruins of an old temple. (If those on board are extra lucky, they can also get a slice or two of cake freshly baked by Norma's mother-in-law.)

These experiences are not only about swimming, but also about getting to know the islands' historic locations and visiting local businesses, from coffee shops to distilleries. "I want people to feel like they've experienced the Hebrides, not just the swimming," says Norma. "If they've come that distance, you don't just want it to be about water and swimming. It's got to be about our culture."

Although she'd been a competitive swimmer as a teenager, it was 20 years before Norma returned to swimming as an adult. Taking part in a local triathlon in 2016 reignited Norma's love for the water and got her back into the sea, as she started to swim locally with a small group of other long-distance swimmers.

She was still working full-time as a cardiac nurse in 2019 when she qualified as an Open Water Coach and lifeguard, and announced on social media that she was available to take people out for swims. The demand from locals alone was so high that in early 2020 Norma decided to take the leap from nursing to running Immerse Hebrides full time.



The timing coincided with the arrival of a global pandemic and her unexpected cancer diagnosis and treatment, but Norma kept Immerse Hebrides afloat. When swimming was restricted during lockdowns, she hosted online safe swimming webinars to raise money for charity, and when outdoor activities were allowed with limits, she did one-on-one swim coaching, before reintroducing group swims and launching the holidays.

Norma's sense that other people felt the same way she did about the Hebrides, and being immersed in the landscape, was an accurate one. "I was thinking in the mind of an outdoor swimmer, you're always wondering 'Can I swim there?' I just decided to share my passion and hopefully others would follow me and come on holiday with me, and they do. I've been really lucky that there are people out there who love Scotland and the islands as much as I do."

