

'They Swim in the Sea'

From October to December UK based documentary photographer
Eddie Stenstrom spent most mornings with a group of sea swimmers as
they began their day with a swim in the freezing cold waters of
Portsmouth.



'They Swim in the Sea'

Photo Essay by Eddie Stenstrom

It is not always easy to do something that is initially unpleasant, but then there are those who just accept it.

I thought sea swimming in the winter months was all about the quick in and out of the water and adrenaline kick screaming 'larger than life'. But, I could not have been more wrong.

When I first came around the wall of the little cranny next to the Beach Cafe I was met with a group of people chatting away. Some were half naked and some were dressed like they were about to go through a blizzard. My friend Zak introduced me to the group, "Heeeeeey everyone, this is my friend Eddie, he is doing a project about sea swimmers".







Every day from 7am to about 9am there is always someone in that cranny going swimming. Many of them are seniors but there are a few around their 40s and 50s and maybe one or two in their 30s. It is a special time in the morning but particularly so since it is winter, and the crisp mornings are a season of their own.

Over the two months I spent visiting these sea swimmers I picked up on a rhythm. It is during the magic hour people aim for, just as the sun strikes over the horizon. The moment where night turns to morning. Many of them arrive already changed into swimwear, and it is a matter of getting in sooner rather than later, less time to think about it, the cold. However, there is 'gear' to help combat the low temperatures, especially for the hands, feet and head, since it will go numb first. The water shoes are practical when walking down and up from the sea since it is a stone beach and without them it is like walking on lego.











I kept looking for a reason as to why they do it. I began to understand the more I got to know them that it is more complex than just a single reason.

I distinctly recall 73 year old Moira floating on her back and I was standing at the edge of the beach where swells hit just before my feet. I looked down through the waist level viewfinder to catch the focus as she was coming out of the freezing 8 degree sea. She came up to me and said something along the lines of "I get the sense of euphoria, like I forget I am in freezing water and my limbs go numb, but I love it".





After they have come out of the icy water shaking like withered leaves, they rinse off the salt water with a shower head that Patrick usually brings with him to attach to the water tap on the wall. Sometimes the sea water is not the best quality, so the second shower is a safe method but it also saves them from having to take a second shower at home.











They often have conversations about how the sea is behaving because of the currents. Because as you swim one way it can take three times the time and strength to swim back. But these swimmers are experienced and know how to read the sea. For example with Portsmouth being a coastal city with every now and then experiencing strong winds and bad weather the swells can get high. And that is just a day where they skip it, it is not about being a hardhead. They are badass anyway.







In a conversation I had with 89 year old Vincent, I also realised that swimming is only one aspect of the community they have created. Vincent had been sea swimming for 80 years and despite not swimming on the day I met him he had still come down to the cranny with his coffee in a thermos. After the swim many of them enjoy a hot drink together and have brought breakfast with them, a nice way to finish the swim and to begin their day.

