

What's the attraction?

The lure of the big blue – and the steely grey and choppy – is getting stronger. If “open water” sounds a bit daunting, don't worry; there are plenty of specialist companies willing to hold your hand as you dip a tentative toe in. Swimtrek (01273 739713; swimtrek.com) was launched 10 years ago by Channel swimmer and coach, Simon Murie. Then, the number of people booking a swimming holiday was in the hundreds. This year, Swimtrek expects to take around 4,000 swimmers on holidays ranging from a week-long island-hopping trip around the Sporades in Greece to shorter breaks in Mallorca and Slovenia.

Other companies offering swimming holidays include The Big Blue (0113 2169 434; thebigblueswim.com) for trips in Greece and Gone Swimming (01244 940 740; goneswimming.co.uk) if you fancy a “Wet Weekend” in Wales. And there are dozens of opportunities to take the plunge in more controlled environments too, with learn-to-swim and improvement holidays in pools around the world.

Sink or swim

Champneys (0843 316 2222; champneys.com) offers three- and five-day Art of Swimming – Learn to Swim breaks (020-8446 9442; artofswimming.com) using the Shaw Method, which is based on the Alexander Technique. The three-day break is available at Champneys Springs Health Resort in Leicestershire from 8 August and costs £530 per person, full board.

The Shaw Method is also taught in Wales by Swimming Without Stress (01239 613789; swimmingwithoutstress.co.uk). These residential tailor-made courses for beginners are based at Croft Farm and Brongwyn holiday cottages near Cardigan, each with heated indoor pools. Six 45-minute lessons cost £295; four nights' cottage accommodation from £306.

The Residence Mauritius has complimentary children's swimming lessons. Turquoise Holidays (01494 678400; turquoiseholidays.co.uk) offers a week's half-board from £4,099 for a family of four, with transfers and return flights from London. Closer to home, the Sani Resort in Halkidiki, Greece, has launched baby swimming lessons for guests aged six months to four years old for €15 (£12.70); doubles from €126 half board (0800 949 6809; www.saniresort.gr).

In hot water

In Iceland, they take their bathing so seriously that the word *laugardagur* means both Saturday and pool- or hot-springs day. The Blue Lagoon (00 354 420 8800; bluelagoon.com) is one of the country's most renowned attractions, where the mineral-rich water is a balmy 37–39°C. Entrance costs from €33. Iceland also has numerous geothermally heated swimming pools, 13 around Reykjavik alone. The Laugardalslaug Geothermal Pool (00 354 411 5102; reykvjavik.is) is the largest in the country with an Olympic-sized indoor pool as well as an outdoor pool, a whirlpool and a steam bath. Entrance costs Ikr550 (£3.40). Swimminginiceland.com lists more hot springs and geothermal pools around the country.



Water babies: (clockwise from left) a Strel swimming holiday in Lake Bled; and beneath Kozjak Waterfall, Slovenia; underwater in Croatia; swim with beluga whales in Canada

COME ON IN, THE WATER'S LOVELY!

Whether you fancy exploring blue lagoons or taking on river challenges, swimming holidays are guaranteed to make a splash, says **Lucy Gillmore**

Private party

Luxury swimming-holiday specialist, John Coningham-Rolls (020-9675 6608; coningham-rolls.com) offers tailor-made trips geared to groups of friends or triathlon participants, as well as set itineraries in the UK, Europe and Asia. A week aboard a traditional 1915 Norfolk Wherry yacht, for a small group of eight swimmers, costs £895 per person including full-board accommodation, skipper and a wild-swimming guide. The tour departs from Beccles in Suffolk on 10 and 17 August and ends in Norwich, with plenty of swimming in the Norfolk Broads in between.

A whale of a time

Thousands of beluga whales summer in the waters of the Hudson Bay and Churchill River in Canada each year before migrating north to the Arctic Ocean. Discover the World (01737 214250; discover-the-world.co.uk) offers the chance to jump into the water and snorkel with them. The five-night trip in July and August costs from £1,553 per person and includes return flights between Winnipeg and Churchill, transfers, five nights' accommodation, half-day tundra buggy tour, a tour of Churchill, a three-hour beluga whale-watching cruise and a two-hour beluga-watching zodiac cruise; international flights not included.



In Western Australia, you can swim with mighty – but harmless – whale sharks between March and July on the Ningaloo Reef. Exmouth-based Oceanwise (00 61 447 089 752; oceanwise.com.au) offers licensed day trips for A\$390 (£260) including transfers, training, photos, lunch and equipment.

River wild

Slovenian Martin Strel, aka Big River Man, was the first man to swim the five great rivers of the world: the Amazon, Yangtze, Paraná, Mississippi and Danube. He has since set up Strel Swimming Adventures (07700 061236; strel-swimming.com) with his son, Borut. They run swimming holidays in Slovenia, Austria, Croatia, Montenegro and Lake Powell, Arizona. The four-day Slovenian Lakes and River trip takes you to the lush forests and glacial lakes of Triglav National Park to bathe in the Kozjak

waterfall. Other highlights include plunging into the vivid green glacial River Soca, swimming out to a 17th-century church on Lake Bled, and the final challenge, swimming the length of Lake Bohinj. The trip costs €508 including B&B, local guide and transport, coaching sessions and equipment hire but not flights.

Wet and wild

At The Scarlet hotel (01637 861800; scarlethotel.co.uk) you can take a wild swimming tour of Cornwall's coast exploring caves, spotting seals, sun fish and even dolphins, with professional instructors, towels and hot toddlers on stand-by. A two-night package costs from £515 per person, half board.

Camino Ways (020-3468 1516; caminoways.com) has a self-guided seven-day walk and swim trip, hiking along the west coast of Galicia and winding up at Finistère, believed to be the end of the world by the Romans. As you trek along the Costa da Morte (Coast of Death) you can veer off the path to head down to wild beaches and jump into the Atlantic breakers. The six-night trip costs from €539 per person half board, excluding flights.

Nicole Kidman swam in the remote waterfalls and natural pools of the El Quetro Wilderness Park in Kimberley, Western Australia (00 61 3 9426 7550; elquestro.com.au) while filming Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*. Some of the cascades were only discovered in 2010 and to reach them

you have to hike through ancient gorges or drop in via helicopter. Check-in to Emma Gorge tented cabins to explore El Quetro's 1 million acres. Rooms start at £190 per night through Bridge & Wickers (020-3642 5938; bridgeandwickers.co.uk).

Swim Barbados Vacations (swimbarbadosvacations.com) is staging two open-water sea races on 6-7 July and 26-27 October. The swimming festival, featuring a 1.5km race and a 5km race, plus watersports, a beach barbecue and live music, is open to swimmers from across the world. Entry is US\$18 (£12); closes 5 July.

Finally, the Outdoor Swimming Society (outdoorswimmingsociety.com) promotes wild swimming around Britain. For more information on joining a wild group swim visit: wildswim.com.

Insider information

“Swimming is so much more than plodding up and down the lane of your local pool. In open water, no two experiences are the same. My favourite swim is the Hellespont in Turkey which divides Europe from Asia and which Leander made famous in Greek mythology by swimming to his lover Hero every night. Lord Byron repeated the feat in 1810. This 4km swim starts at Gallipoli and finishes near the ancient city of Troy.” – Simon Murie, founder of SwimTrek

Who said that?

“Swimming is normal for me. I'm relaxed. I'm comfortable and I know my surroundings. It's my home.”
– MICHAEL PHELPS

“I know some of my parents' friends think *Little Britain* is incredibly poor taste. But swimming the Channel? You can't really say anything about that, can you?”
– DAVID WALLIAMS

“Me don't swim too tough so me don't go in the water too deep.”
– BOB MARLEY



OLIVER MORIN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Q&A TRAVEL UNRAVELLED



This week: which airline offers the best passenger rights for my flight to the US?

Q I am in the process of booking a return flight from London to San Francisco. The direct flight I have selected is run by United (pictured) but I can also book the same one through the Lufthansa site. Is there any advantage, under the EU rules, for this flight if I book the Lufthansa option?
Margaret Read, Stafford

A Good question. Just to run through the European rules on passenger rights, known as EU261: every airline flying within or from Europe has a duty of care in the event of a delayed or cancelled flight from an EU airport. Cash compensation is also payable in some cases.

European carriers have an equal liability worldwide. But non-EU airlines have no such obligation for flights that start outside Europe. In the case of London-San Francisco, every airline has the same liability on the outbound flight. But inbound, passengers on British Airways and Virgin Atlantic have stronger rights than those on the other non-stop airline, United. For example, in the event of severe weather delaying the flight from San Francisco, BA and Virgin are required to find accommodation and meals for passengers; United, being a US carrier, is not.

United sells flights through a range of “code-share” partners, including Lufthansa of Germany. So United's first non-stop of the day, UA900, is also known as LH9378. If you book a flight through Lufthansa, and get a ticket for an “LH” flight, it is reasonable to suppose that you would be covered by the EU scheme. But I am afraid that is not how it works. The deciding factor is the “metal” on which you are flying, ie the nationality of airline that is actually doing the flying. In this case, it is United.

So the short answer: your rights are the same whichever you choose. Unless Lufthansa is cheaper (which occasionally happens), I would book direct with United – so that, in the unlikely event that something goes wrong, you can deal direct with the operating airline.

For future trips, note that as airlines move closer together, they are increasingly selling each others' products. So a BA customer who books a London-New York trip with American Airlines happening to operate the inbound leg would not be covered for this sector.

