

A Challenge of the Mind

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Photos Páll Stefánsson

Sea swimming in the icy Atlantic has been attracting more and more people in the last five years. Today the Reykjavík Sea Swimmers Association (Sjór) has close to 200 members who practice this freezing activity on a regular basis throughout the winter and of course in summer when the sea is considerably warmer.



The most common spot for cold water swimming is the geothermal beach at Nauthólsvík, in Reykjavík. Natural hot water flows out into the sea and the sense of swimming in the clean Arctic Ocean or bathing in the geothermal lagoon is like no other. Visits to the beach in wintertime

have multiplied, showing the popularity in sheer numbers. In 2007 827 visits were recorded, in 2008 there were 3,300 visits and in 2009 the numbers had exceeded 12,000. The beach has great facilities for sea swimmers: dressing rooms, hot pots and showers to wash the salt off. This year they

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are expecting over 40,000 visitors, summer traffic not included.

In the Icelandic Sagas there are several episodes of people doing famous bouts of cold water swimming. One particular story is that of Grettir the Strong, who swam from the island of Drangey in

Skagafjörður to shore, then recuperated in a natural hotpot on the shore afterwards which still exists. Many have swum in his wake and every summer numerous swimmers take on this distance.

Sea swimming is good for the health and an excellent form of recreation, exercise and athletic

On the Fly



training, say Benedikt Hjartarson and Árni Þór Árnason. The former is the first Icelander to swim the English Channel. Both have been active cold water swimmers for years and have now started a company called Coldwater which organizes sea swimming expeditions for visitors. “We know all the best spots for swimming in the clean Atlantic, so if people want to take a dip they should contact us,” says Hjartarson.

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In summer the temperature of the sea around Iceland is usually about 10°C but in fjords and inlets it can easily reach 15°C. “During winter we often swim in water down to -2°C. The best time for practicing for beginners is from mid July to the end of August when the sea slowly starts cooling down again,” says Árnason.

Stepping into the ice cold water for the first time can be a challenge even for the strong hearted. Árnason maintains that if a person knows how to swim it is first and foremost a challenge of the mind. “When you try this for the first time you have to remember to control your breathing. There is considerable danger of hyperventilating and panicking. If you overcome that obstacle and

concentrate on the breathing everything becomes easier,” he says.

But when the limbs go numb, including the arms with which you swim, the danger of drowning becomes imminent. “There are a few safeguards we always stress for newcomers. No matter how experienced you are you should never swim alone, you should stay close to the shore and listen carefully to your body,” says Hjartarson.

Icelandic cold water swimmers have recently discovered the picturesque rugged lava shore near Reykjanesvirkjun geothermal power plant where hundreds of tons of hot water flow into the sea in a steaming hot river. The stretch of beach is fascinating as Atlantica discovered on a visit there with a group of swimmers recently. There are natural hotpots close to the open Atlantic but the coast is extremely rugged and dangerous for the inexperienced. “The sea is actually quite warm out there—it can be up to 30°C—but it is hazardous because of strong currents and waves which can smash swimmers into the rocky beach and actually drag them down. I would not dare to take beginners out there,” says Árnason. “There are plenty of other places here where sea swimming can be practiced safely according to all security rules. And when you get into the sport it is an absolutely fantastic experience.” [a](#)

ORGANIZED SUMMER EVENTS FOR COLDWATER SWIMMERS

7 July: Fossvogur.

A 600 and 1,200 meter swim.

22 July: Bessastadir.

Swimmers participate in a swim of 2.2 km or 4.2 km.

9 August: Fossvogur.

A 600 or 1,200 meter swim.

14 August: Five Islands Swim.

Only for experienced cold water swimmers, 12.5 km.

20 August: The Videy Swim.

Participants swim 900 or 1,800 meters. This is probably the largest sea swimming event in the country.

For more information visit sjosund.is