ACCESS ALL AREAS

One of the best things about outdoor swimming is that anyone can do it. For some, however, access can be tricky. **Rowan Clarke** finds out how we can help more people get in the water.

I feel that a lot of the social media side of outdoor swimming is of white able-bodied people. It's cool that people are loving the swimming, but if you aren't white and able-bodied it isn't encouraging or welcoming. So how do we change that?
Susanne Masters has become something of a spokesperson for accessible outdoor swimming. Quite literally putting accessible swimming on the map, her collection on wildswim.com not only equips swimmers with knowledge and confidence, but it also raises awareness within the open water swimming community as a whole.

"Sometimes the open water swimming community seems a little inward-looking rather than looking out for who is missing and welcoming them in," she explains. "Trying to make it easier to find places to swim outdoors that are accessible is just one component of a wider feeling that I would like to see the imagery of outdoor swimming reflect the variety of people who can enjoy it."

BREAKING BARRIERS
People with disabilities are still among the most marginalised in our society. While swimming is a great leveller that disregards most physical differences, it's not always easy to access physically or mentally. Many people have to not only deal with tricky access points to the water, but also overcome self-consciousness about their physical differences.

But attitudes are starting to change. At the Bosphorus Cross-Continental Swim, for example, marshals take people's prosthetics from the starting point to the finish. It was this event that inspired Susanne. As she contemplated her apprehension of swimming alone in deep water, she saw the man next to her who had entirely attenuated limbs jump joyfully into the sea.

Exploring wild swimming spots with her friend Cassandra Quave,
whose right leg is amputated below the knee, Susanne has come to realise that having a body that works differently isn't a barrier to swimming – the only hindrance is access.

For Somerset swimmer, Ben, outdoor swimming is invaluable for his physical fitness and mental well-being. "It's my main form of exercise," he says. "Without swimming I would get very uptight. It helps me relax. It's for fitness and relaxation. For my legs and my mind."

Ben swims at Clevedon Marine Lake, a tidal pool surrounded by level concrete that you can access via slopes. Entry into the water is by graduated metal steps with handrails on either side. "Clevedon is good," he says. "I can walk with a walker or crutches – I have a wheelchair, but I don't depend on it. I use a buoyancy aid around my waist so I can use my arms because I can't kick hard enough to float."

Ben’s confident to try new places to swim, and he shares his experiences via Facebook encouraging others to venture into the water. As well as Clevedon, he recently swam at Portishead Lido, and both get a mention in Susanne's collection of accessible swims. But Ben also ventured to Claverton Weir near Bath, a much more challenging terrain of grass and rocks down to a wide weir. "I found it reasonably accessible as I rather unglamorously shrunk down to the water," he says. "But oh my goodness was it worth it!"

Like Ben, being prepared helps Susanne's swim buddy Cassie access swimming spots that might not be obviously accessible. "I can reach most places at my own pace with the help of some standard walking sticks. But rocky or hilly terrain can present additional challenges and knowing what the challenges are ahead of time can help me better prepare," she says. "For example, the hike to the fairy pools on Skye wasn't very far in distance, but the path was rocky and hilly. On the other hand, when we visited An Lochan Uaine, it was a longer walk to reach the lake, but the path was relatively flat and without rocks, so no hiking sticks were needed and I could take my time and rest in the shade when my weaker leg was tired."

Once at the water's edge, getting in is the next challenge. "For me, the best location is one where there is a rock or overhang with a point of entry that is into deep water that I can immediately swim in," says Cassie. "If the point of entry is gradual and the distance to swimming depth water long, then I need assistance to either be supported to hop in, which can be painful in rocky bottom lakes, or be carried in. I prefer spots that allow for self-entry and exit from deeper water as it allows me to be more independent."

A COMMUNITY EFFORT
By building tools like the crowd-sourced wildswim.com map, we can all help people plan around their accessibility needs. You can also share information through Facebook pages. Starting by with your favourite outdoor swimming spot, describe the approach, whether or not you can get close to the water by car or wheelchair, and highlight features like steps with handrails and beaches with sand-friendly wheelchairs.

"It would be amazing if the swimming community included more posts on a map of accessible wild swims with information on reaching the swim site and entry points to the water," says Cassie. "The challenges for people with different types of disabilities are somewhat different than for ambulatory

Top five accessible swims
Here are some of Susanne's favourite swim spots in the UK.

1. On a calm day in winter when the water is clear, it is a real treat to swim out to the artificial reef at Boscombe in Bournemouth, Dorset and check out the seaweeds and creatures that have moved in.

2. Huishinish beach on the Isle of Harris is gorgeous. It has car parking nearby, though it is a little walk over uneven ground to get to the beach.

3. Lough Hyne in Co Cork, Ireland has bioluminescence that is phenomenal. It's right by the road and there is a parking spot close to the ramp.

4. Man O'War Cove, Dorset is sheltered and you can see a lot of marine life swimming through the seaweed there. It's a steep trek, but you can access it by swimming from lulworth Cove or by boat.

5. Lochan Uaine, Highlands, Scotland for the colour of that water! It's a walk over an uneven path, but Cassie managed with her prosthetic and it's fine for a rugged wheelchair.
amputees, but they too would benefit from this information.”

You can also support local initiatives and schemes that make your favourite swimming spots more accessible and encourage venues to waive the entry fee for swimmers’ helpers and carers so that they don’t have to pay to have somebody to help them into the water.

We have a wonderful, welcoming community of like-minded people, and the joy of outdoor swimming is unlimited by physical differences. But being inclusive is often about thinking beyond your own experience. Small changes will help to start to turn the tide and make open water swimming an activity that truly is for all 🌍

Add my venue

Go to wildswim.com, click ‘collections’ and find Susanne Masters’s Access Swims collection. You can then contact her to add your venue. To help people with different needs decide how to use your swim spot, think about these points:

- How close to the water can you park?

- Can you get to the water’s edge in a wheelchair?

- What’s the entry/exit like? For example, are there steps with a handrail or hoists?

- Is there a secure place to leave belongings, including prosthetics, crutches, sticks and wheelchairs?

- Are there specialist sand wheelchair or mats for wheelchairs to go over sand or wheelchairs that go in the water?

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