

# Into The Water

As outdoor swimming continues to grow in popularity, Scotland boasts spectacular spots for a dip – from lochs and rivers to the sea

by FIONA RUSSELL

**C**ALUM MacLEAN'S voice is animated as he talks about his favourite outdoor activity. "There is such a sense of freedom, happiness and joy," says the 33-year-old.

He adds, "As soon as I am in the water, submerged, I am suddenly more relaxed and, then when I get out I'm much more awake. Afterwards, I'm also full of creativity."

Calum's passion is outdoor swimming, and he seeks out beautiful locations for a dip – including lochs, rivers, waterfall pools and the sea.

Living with his partner Hannah Kettles in Aberfeldy, Perthshire, the broadcaster, photographer and film-maker has plenty of attractive locations right on his doorstep for swimming.

He also journeys widely in his home country to discover "special places to swim".

Calum, who was born in Tasmania but grew up on the island of Skye and in the Highland city of Inverness, is also keen to share his enthusiasm for outdoor swimming.

A Gaelic speaker, he has presented three BBC Alba series – *Dhan Uisge (Into The Water)* – during which he reveals a zeal for swimming in remote lochs and rivers.

He has a large following on social media, where he regularly posts about swimming. His Instagram platform has some 23,500 followers, while almost 17,000 people follow him on Twitter and another 12,000 people keep track of his Facebook posts. A recent TikTok video of Calum swimming in Britain's deepest freshwater





Left: A sunset dip at Islay

Below: Underwater running with rocks



## “Outdoor swimming brings people together”

body, Loch Morar, “with 310 metres of water below me”, attracted an incredible 14 million views in just two days.

This summer, Calum’s book, *1001 Outdoor Swimming Tips*, was published by Vertebrate Publishing as part of an expanding series of *Adventure Books*. He says sales are “doing well”.

He acknowledges there has been a huge growth in the popularity of outdoor swimming in recent years, although when he first started it was a less well-known hobby.

In 2010, while travelling in his birth country, Calum cycled a wide bridge over the River Derwent in the capital city of Hobart.

He says, “For some reason, I looked down at the river and wondered if it might be possible to swim from one shore to the other. It looked a long way and I wasn’t sure if it was allowed – or even safe – but it represented a challenge.”

One early morning soon after – and while it was still dark – Calum completed the swim. He says, “I know now it wasn’t the safest thing to do because I was on my own and I didn’t really know what the water held, but it felt so good. I was doing something that others weren’t and that felt great.

“As I ran back over the bridge in my wetsuit there were commuters driving to work and they must have wondered what on earth I’d been doing. I thought then, ‘I want to do more of this – I want to find other places to swim.’”

Returning to Scotland, Calum began exploring places to swim near his Inverness base. He says, “I discovered there were so many beautiful places to swim, whether for a longer outing or a quick dip. I was hooked and it was the start of my addiction to outdoor swimming.”

In those days, Calum’s top haunts were lochs Duntelchaig and Morlich, as well as Nairn beach. He says, “Duntelchaig was handy while living in the city. It’s a long loch – you can’t see one end from the other – so it’s a good place to go if you want to do a longer swim.

“But it also feels safe because there are several bays for access. I really enjoyed this loch when I was starting out and building my confidence.”

While Calum reports that Loch Morlich, near Aivemore, is now much more popular with swimmers, he still rates it as a top destination. He says, “When I was first getting into swimming, Loch Morlich was less visited. I still like it now even though more people swim there. >>

Calum MacLean



“It’s an impressive location, with the backdrop of the Cairngorms, and easy to access because of the beach.”

Nairn offered the chance to swim in the sea, yet still with the advantage of being close to Inverness, and with picturesque coastal scenery.

These days, Calum’s experience, knowledge and list of favourite swimming locations is vast. He has also explored far and wide in Scotland.

He says, “Part of the enjoyment of swimming for me is the adventure of going to find new locations. Sometimes I set out for what I hope might be a great location, but it turns out to be much less inspiring than it looks on the map.

“At other times, I am walking or running in the hills and mountains and I chance upon an incredible loch or pool for a swim. I have been lucky to swim in many impressive locations.”

An ambassador for the Outdoor Swimming Society, Calum is keen to inspire other people to give outdoor swimming a go.

He says, “It’s not for everyone, but many people who give it a try fall in love with it.

“There are also a variety of ways to enjoy it. For some swimmers, it’s a challenge and they aim to compete in races or do long-distance swims. For others, the swim is more of a dip or a dook.

“But for many people there is a huge sense of community – outdoor swimming brings like-minded people together. The mental and physical benefits are now more researched and widely documented, too.”

Calum swims year-round and he enjoys the contrasting seasons.

Recording a swim with a waterproof camera



Outdoor swimming brings a sense of community

*“I love the adventure of going to find new locations to swim”*

He says, “In summer, it’s so much easier to swim because the water is obviously warmer and I can safely stay in for longer.

“I don’t usually wear a wetsuit and I like it when the sea, river and loch water warms up enough to stay in for a while. I like both the aerobic and meditative benefits of a longer swim.

“I also enjoy being in a natural place, amid a fantastic landscape and just swimming. When it’s peaceful and you are simply swimming, you get into the rhythm of a place.”

Calum claims that he also enjoys swimming outdoors in winter. He says, “It’s a different experience and I am obviously not in the water for as long. The water can be very cold and I have swum in icy lochs, but there’s a challenge – both mental and physical – that I like.

“There is such a buzz with tingling skin and a sense of achievement. I think that in summer I always forget how challenging it is to swim in the cold of winter, but then I have learned to embrace what it offers – to get on with it – and then know that afterwards I will feel such an amazing boost.

“When I’m swimming, I always think, ‘Wow, I feel so alive.’” **S**

## Swimming Safely

- ▲ Wear season-appropriate swimwear/wetsuit.
- ▲ Check the area is safe and never swim alone.
- ▲ Focus on breathing to avoid hyperventilation caused by repeated sharp intakes of breath.
- ▲ Bring warm layers to put on afterwards.
- ▲ Use a tow float for visibility and buoyancy.

## Calum’s Top Swim Spots

### Loch Coruisk, Isle of Skye

“It’s a popular tourist attraction, but it does require a boat trip or a walk to reach it. I love the location, with the Cuillin as the backdrop and the clear water of the loch to swim in.”

### Loch A’an, central Cairngorms

“I usually walk over Cairn Gorm mountain to get here. When you finally get a view of Loch A’an, set in an incredible high plateau landscape, it feels so exciting. The loch has the clearest water, sort of a light blue hue, and it’s really cold.”

### Achmelvich Bay, north-west Highlands

“Even on a horrible weather day, this location is still so beautiful. It’s a lovely stretch of coast for swimming, with different bays and lots of rocks to swim around.”

Pictures: CALUM MACLEAN, HANNAH KETTLES

