



Ocean swimming has experienced a swell in popularity during the past year thanks to Covid

WALLY MASON
 SPORTS EDITOR



They hauled in the lane ropes at the local pool as the tentacles of COVID-19 spread across the nation just over a year ago.

Park sporting competitions shut down and the doors slammed shut on gyms. Where to go to work up a sweat and stay in shape?

There was running, of course, and queues formed outside bike shops as thousands of people invested in shiny new carbon fibre machines and hit the road.

But perhaps the biggest exercise impact of the pandemic has occurred in the gently rising swells off the beaches of our coastal cities. If there's an activity that has found its moment in the pandemic's shadow, it's ocean swimming.

Sydney ocean swim coach Samantha Wolf noticed it almost immediately after the pools closed.

"Some of the beaches closed, too, but there were little pockets where you could go for a swim in the ocean," says Wolf, a Sydney property manager who is also a Bondi lifesaver.

"We all just got out and formed little groups and found places to swim.

"People who might normally go overseas were doing things like ocean swimming instead. People who had never considered swimming in the ocean started doing it."

There are few figures available on the surge in popularity in ocean swimming — it's a loosely organised sport with informal groups of enthusiasts and no national body.

Swimming Australia says five million Australians swim regularly and 3.1 million of them hit the water at least weekly for fitness or recreation.

And you only need to pop down to the beach to see the growth in numbers.

The Bondi Penguins used to be a handful of friends who got together for a swim on Wednesday morning. These days there are often 150 of them crashing through the waves at 6.15am. Farther north, at the southern end of Manly beach, the Bold and the Beautiful swim group attracts as many as 300 swimmers most mornings.

Many of them are in training for one of the dozens of organised ocean swims held around the nation. The oceanswims.com website, the bible for the saltwater crowd, listed 17 swims when it was established in 1999. By the 2019-20 season there were 658 individual events with a total of 45,071 swimmers. The numbers were even bigger the previous year, before the pandemic, with 957 events and 53,025 swimmers.

In a normal season, there are several organised swims each weekend — memorial swims, SLSC fundraising swims and mostly for the heck of it swims.

COVID up-ended the schedule last year but, by and large, things have returned to normal. Interruptions are more likely to be weather or swell related.

Michael Felgate, a presenter on



Sydney woman Lauren Tischendorf battled schools of sharks to swim the circumference of Lord Howe Island this month

BRADLEY FARLEY

CALL of the DEEP



Ocean swimmer Samantha Wolf



'You feel like you are doing something really nice, far removed from what your everyday life is like, so it's almost like a little break. It cleans your mind'

MICHAEL FELGATE (ABOVE, CENTRE) MELBOURNE RADIO HOST AND OCEAN SWIMMER

Melbourne radio station RSN 927 and Channel 10, noticed the increase in swim traffic out in the middle of Port Phillip Bay one day when he ran into another swimmer.

"I literally swam into someone and it gave me the biggest fright of my life," says Felgate. "I was like, fair dinkum, what are the odds of that, there were two of us out in the middle of the bay."

Felgate, a keen pool swimmer for years, turned to the bay — where the water temperature plummets to around 10C in winter — during Melbourne's lockdown.

"It's addictive and so refreshing. It can be a little bit scary at times because I am not overly comfortable with what could be under the water, but you try and push that to the back of your mind.

"If the sun's rising or it's a

beautiful day ... it's peaceful. You feel like you are doing something really nice, far removed from what your everyday life is like, so it's almost like a little break, a holiday.

"It cleans your mind, you're not thinking about anything else while you're swimming.

"You feel a lot better after having an ocean swim than after a pool swim."

Wolf, an ocean swimming instructor with fundraising group CanToo, agrees with Felgate on the appeal of swimming beyond the breakers. Through CanToo, she trains swimmers in surf skills and ocean swimming techniques needed to take on swim events.

"It's the only time I switch off and focus on just two things — the safety of the people around me and making sure I keep swimming. And it keeps me fit. In the ocean you are at the mercy of this great natural thing that you can't control."

Wolf swims several times each week in Sydney Harbour or off the



Clockwise from above, Tischendorf during and after her 35km lap, which she completed in 13 hours and 50 minutes

PICTURES: BRADLEY FARLEY



beaches. A typical weekend will include a training session with her training squad, then a 7km swim, maybe from Bondi to Coojee or Bradleys Head around to Mosman. But for some of the new breed of hardy saltwater swimmers a few kilometres in a loop off the beach is too easy.

Sydney schoolteacher Lauren Tischendorf, 37, enjoys big swells and long swims, which drew her to

take on a loop of Lord Howe Island earlier this month.

"I enjoy swimming in serious waves, it forces you to focus on nothing but the swell," says Tischendorf, who swims 135km in the average month.

South African-born Tischendorf has been swimming all her life but began getting serious when she moved to Sydney's eastern suburbs a decade ago, attracted to

the sense of community among ocean swimmers.

"It's an exhilarating feeling being in the water, it's calming and it's never the same. And there's generally a great community of ocean swimmers. We're all there in our caps and goggles from all walks of life, but we all have that one thing in common."

Searching for a challenge that didn't involve going interstate or

overseas and hadn't been done before, she settled on the Lord Howe Island swim.

"Everyone does the English Channel," she says. "Lord Howe Island was in NSW, so we didn't have to cross any borders. And the attraction of going somewhere to do something that at the time hadn't been done before was appealing."

Ultimately, Queensland-based swimmer Lynton Mortensen beat her to it, becoming the first person to swim around the island in February.

But earlier this month Tischendorf battled schools of sharks, 2.5m waves and powerful currents, in just a swimsuit and ocean grease, to complete a 35km lap of the island in 13 hours and 50 minutes.

"I won't lie — conditions were pretty miserable," she says. "There were eight-foot waves most of the way. I got stuck in a current for two hours and I just couldn't move. I tried swimming up, going down, but I couldn't get out of it.

"Sharks were circling me for three-quarters of the way.

"I went into the swim knowing there were sharks on the island. It's just one of those things with the ocean and nature. If they were to kill me, what a way to die."

Tischendorf is not the only ocean swimmer with a pretty blasé attitude to sharks and other creatures of the deep.

Wolf says sharing the environment with the monsters of the deep is a "calculated risk" worth taking.

"I'm pretty aware of the species of sharks in the areas where I swim," she says.

"Mostly species such as grey nurse and wobbegong. The first time you see one it is pretty daunting, but they are much more likely to go for a salmon than for us.

"Of course we choose the times we swim, we don't swim really early in the morning or late in the evening. But otherwise we take a calculated risk."

And what about the cold water? Felgate wears a full wetsuit and a thermal hat, and admits to retreating to the pool for a few weeks in the depths of Melbourne's winter.

"My hands and feet go white, but that makes it more invigorating," he says.

Swimming around Sydney, where water temperatures get down to around 18C at worst, Wolf is more relaxed.

"If it gets colder, we wear a wetsuit," she says. "It's a bit like boiling an egg — if you put an egg straight into boiling water it cracks, but if you do it gradually it's fine.

"If you swim regularly and the temperature gradually changes, you're fine."

Michelle Franks, deputy director of emergency medicine at Sydney's Northern Beaches Hospital and an ocean swimmer who goes out seven days a week with the Bold and the Beautiful, offers a medical view of the benefits.

It's all about white fat stores in the body being converted to brown fat in the cold water, she says. And brown fat breaks down more calories.

But when it comes right down to it, she just feels "pretty shitty" when she doesn't do it.

"There's an exhilaration you get from it that I put down to endorphin release," she says.

"You feel fantastic every time. Doesn't matter what the weather is, you have the same feeling.

"When you're immersed in water and you can't look at screens, you get into a meditative state. It really sets you up for the day. Psychologically it is very good for you."

Wolf believes the popularity of ocean swimming will be sustained, even as the pandemic subsides.

"I think it's here to stay," she says. "So many people have gravitated to it. It's free and it's such an adventure. I call it adventure swimming."