

Go wild in the water

MICHAEL BARBER *makes a splash in the Ionian Sea*



Swimming in the open sea is an adventure, where technique matters more than muscularity or stamina

FOR A FEW glorious months in 1966, I used to swim every morning before work at Bondi Beach. Ever since then I've regarded swimming up and down a tepid, chlorinated indoor pool – now, alas, the only strenuous exercise I regularly take – as distinctly second-best. No wonder more and more people, inspired by books such as Charles Sprawson's *Haunts of the Black Masseur* and Roger Deakin's *Waterlog*, have taken up open-water swimming.

But however seductive in prospect, open-water swimming can prove daunting if you've never done it before. The water may be chilly, you're probably out of your depth, at the mercy of the elements and with only the foggiest idea of what's beneath you or how long it will take to reach the shore. More than once I've concluded that Alan Sillitoe got it wrong: the loneliness of the long-distance runner can't compare with that of the long-distance swimmer when he finds his fellow swimmers have mysteriously disappeared, leaving him bobbing along in not so splendid isolation.

Fortunately there exists a company called Swimquest, whose founder, John Coningham-Rolls, combines a missionary zeal for open-water swimming with an understanding of what's required

to prevent an adventure becoming an ordeal. A cross-Channel swimmer himself, JCR knows that the vast majority of his clients have much more modest goals. On the six-day intensive coaching holiday from which I've just returned, there was a woman who had never managed more than 50 metres of the crawl before needing to take a breather. Within less than a week, courtesy of an inspiring young coach called Cassie Patten – about whom more anon – she had completed swims of more than two kilometres.

Of course it helps if the conditions are benign, which was certainly the case with the crystal clear Ionian Sea in late July. Our base was the tiny island of Mathraki, part of a small archipelago off the north-west coast of Corfu. Getting there meant a 20-minute crossing from the harbour of Agios Stefanos.

Our family-run hotel, the only one on the island, was unpretentious, but the rooms were air-conditioned and the staff attentive. Given that almost everything we ate, except perhaps the fish, had to be ferried across from Corfu, the meals were surprisingly varied, with vegetarian options. I found the local wine a bit thin but there was plenty of beer and retsina. We also had jolly evenings out at a couple of tavernas, reached in a wheezing

minibus of about the same vintage as its owner's grizzled mullet.

But who were 'we'? Well, there were eight of us: two males and six females, ranging in age from 13-year-old Anna, whose mum was there too, to 72-year-old me. The range of abilities, though not quite as wide, was still substantial. Half the party, including my wife Susanna, were what I would class as 'proper' swimmers – they either belonged to clubs or competed in triathlons. Young Anna, though not as fast as the speedsters, had obviously been well taught. That left the woman I mentioned earlier who found the crawl a challenge, another lady with the same problem, and myself.

When first confronted with Bondi's booming surf, I too found the crawl a challenge, eventually developing a sort of flailing stroke. Five years ago this very crude technique helped propel me – just! – across the Hellespont exactly 200 years to the day since Byron managed it. But I had only to see a 'proper' swimmer surging past me in my local pool to realise my limitations. Once or twice, at Susanna's urging, I had a lesson. To no avail. You can't, I said, teach an old sea dog new tricks. I was wrong.

Which brings me to Cassie, one of the best all-round swimmers this country