

has produced. At Beijing in 2008 she not only won a bronze in the 10-kilometre open event but also reached the final of the 800 metres freestyle in the pool. When a chronic shoulder injury forced her to give up competitive swimming she turned to coaching.

But it's one thing to know what's required, quite another to communicate this lucidly, which is where she excels. Cassie told us to imagine we were posting a letter, a luminous metaphor. She also taught me to breathe out as soon as my face hit the water – 'I want to see you blowing bubbles!' – and to rotate properly by using my hips rather than my shoulders, something I thought I was doing, but clearly wasn't. By the end of the holiday, like everyone else, I had made definite progress.

The coaching sessions took place in the shallows and were augmented by individual videos. We had ample opportunity to put what Cassie taught us into practice, swimming four or five kilometres a day in the limpid waters of



Barber with his wife and Cassie (centre)

the archipelago. If you despair of ever managing such distances it's worth emphasising how buoyant you are in the sea compared with a pool. Nor do you need to be super fit. Technique is what matters, not muscularity or great stamina.

Another point in Swimquest's favour: you can take a proper siesta, as essential in those latitudes as air-conditioning. On previous swimming holidays, I have

either eaten lunch aboard the safety boat or on a distant, often pebbly, beach, neither of which afforded much scope for putting your head down for a digestive break. Refinements like this, in my experience, make all the difference.

I realise, of course, that six inches of bath water are all the immersion that some oldies require. Others may feel that if God intended us to swim more than a length or two of a pool he would have given us fins. But if, like me, you want to keep active on your own terms and are looking for something a bit more challenging than a brisk walk, why not give open-water swimming a go? You won't need shedloads of expensive equipment, you will probably make new friends and you'll certainly see and experience far more than you would lying prone on a sun-lounger. ☺

• *Michael Barber was not a guest of Swimquest, details of whose holidays can be found on their website: www.swimquest.uk.com*

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