

LIVING THE DREAM

Being paid to swim in exotic locations sounds like a dream job. But is a day in the life of a swim guide more of a nightmare? **Alice Todd** sends us her diary from Greek island Mathraki

5.45am – Time to get up (groan), check the accuracy of our forecast and get in some exercise before the day begins. Everyone always assumes that as a swim guide you must spend your whole day swimming. That's not quite true! It's common to spend most of the day on the boat or watching and encouraging swimmers, so this morning it's a 10km run round the island, soaking up the view at the top and enjoying a bit of me-time. On this tour we stay on the tiny island of Mathraki, just off Corfu. With just 50 inhabitants (or so I'm told, I've only ever counted 19), I know the local population pretty well now; I'm even allowed to join the family for a Greek coffee before our guests wake up. Mama Nora's coffee is strong enough to wake the neighbours – but thankfully we don't have any.

7am – Yiannis, aka father, husband, plumber, driver, boat pilot, electrician, waiter, barman, mayor (I could go on) meets with my fellow guide John and I to go over today's swims. We come prepared with two forecasts, a laptop, a weekly weather planning chart and our suggested itinerary: north westerlies, beaufort 2-3. In contrast, Yiannis sits down and looks out of the window, letting us know that the wind will drop completely at midday. He's always right of course. Rule number one: never underestimate local knowledge.

8am – Time for breakfast, one of my favourite times of the day. Everyone is really excited about the swims we have in store, and we are lucky enough to have food freshly prepared for us by Mama Nora. We set a table on the



terrace, and our guests are soon tucking into fresh eggs, local Greek yoghurt, honey, bacon, bread and cereals.

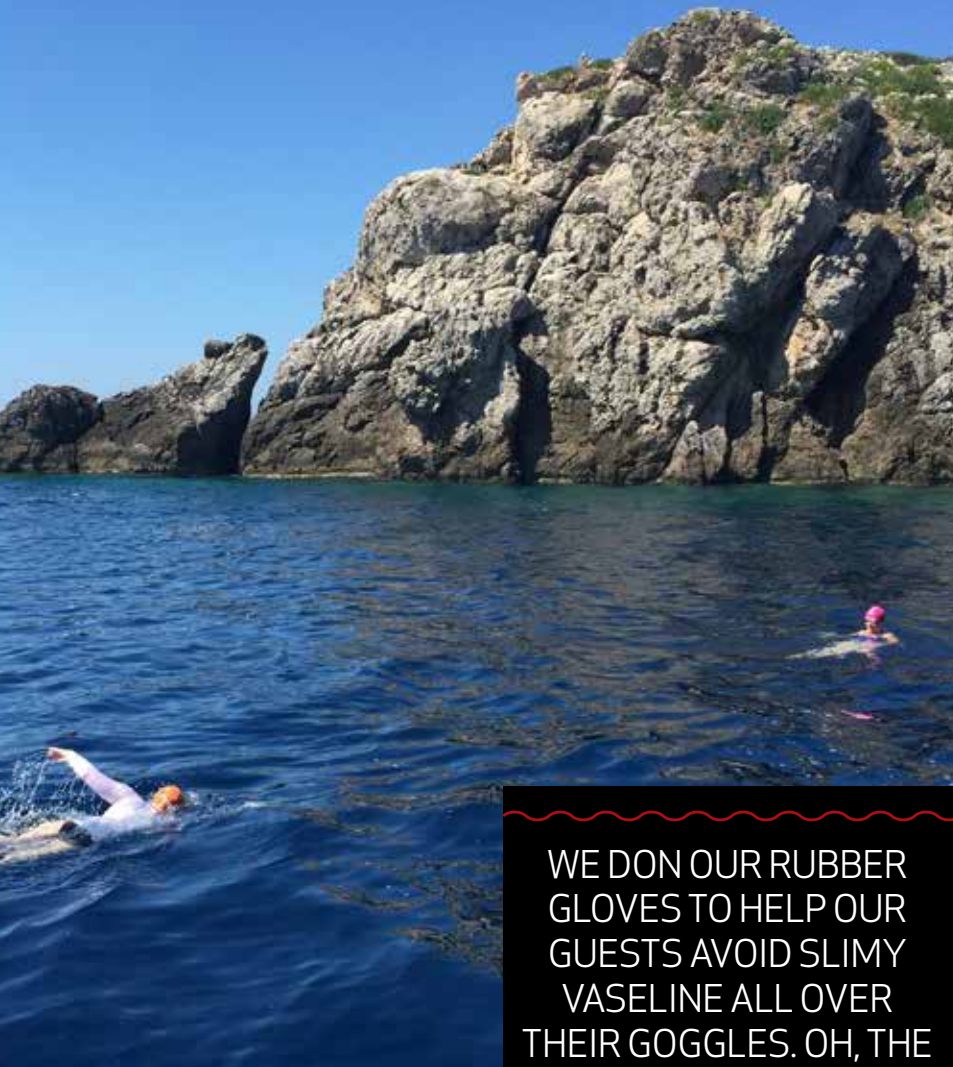
9am – Time for the pre-swim briefing, map-orientation and kit check. While I brief, John



rips off to get the powerboat with Yiannis's son, and the two of them bring it round to the beach ready for our swim start (James Bond eat your heart out!). This morning is a coastal swim along Mathraki's sheltered east coast, followed by a crossing to the isolated Trachia Island.

9.20am – The powerboat arrives at the beach and we help the guests on board. While sea swimming, we advise guests to apply Vaseline under the arms, and on any potential chafing sites. Much to Yiannis's amusement (or disgust – I'm never sure which) we don our rubber gloves to help our guests avoid slimy Vaseline all over their goggles. Oh, the glamour!

9.30am – Swim one begins. Swimmers set off in speed groups, with the aim of finishing at the same place, at the same time (this is a bit



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of a balancing act, and takes some practice.) We watch our pod bob across the big blue in their brightly coloured swim hats. It's so serene out here in the middle of the ocean, with just the faint slap of the sea on the boat. I remind myself that 'this is work'.

Midday – Back to the hotel for lunch. Greek salads, dips and homemade bread followed by Mama Nora's delicious mousakka. Life is good.

1.30pm – While guests have a well-deserved break, we check the afternoon's weather again, plan the next swim route and give the local taverna owner a call to find out what's on the menu for this evening (it's BBQ night, if you were wondering).

2.30pm – Time to check emails and look at details for the following week's group. As

Mathraki is so remote, we order in any special foods in advance, which are brought over from Corfu on a local boat. It's also important to know guests' expectations and swimming background before they arrive so we can hit the ground running.

3.30pm – Time for the second swim. As Gianni promised, the wind has dropped and the sea is glass-flat, which means we can zip over to Platia Island. Those who want a challenge can swim back, and those who want a short swim can bob around the island and get back on the boat. We have a little surprise for the group too: just south of Platia Island is a 100m drop off; the ocean turns from a green-turquoise to a deep, sapphire blue. Without telling the group, we take the boat out into the blue and turn off the engine. We tell our swimmers that they can hop in for a look if they wish. It's a



completely different experience swimming in deep water, and I love it. I dive down into the blue, offering guests a perspective on the depth as I get smaller and smaller beneath them. Not everyone likes swimming in the deep, it's amazing how many opt to sit on the boat for this bit!

5pm – We call for a secondary boat to take those doing the shorter swim back to the hotel. Those who want to swim back can, alongside our main boat. After the swim we have a bit of time for paperwork, risk assessments and planning for tomorrow.

7pm – We hop as a group into Gianni's spluttering mini-bus, and he takes us for an evening drink at the island's only bar. Kostas has opened early for us (usual proceedings start from about 10pm) and invites us in warmly, encouraging us to serve ourselves, as we'll 'feel more at home'. I love this island. There are only two tavernas on the island and, after drinks, we head up to Levante for an evening BBQ, with views across to Corfu. The Levante family have kindly agreed to open up for our group, so we have the restaurant (and the view) to ourselves. Perfect.

9.30pm – Back to the hotel. I sit in the front of the minibus and listen to guests laughing and chattering happily in the back as we wind our way down to the sea again, watching the fireflies flashing like stars in the pine trees. Bliss.

10pm – A quick call home to catch up with friends and family. After a busy day in the sun, sleep comes easily.

SwimQuest run tours to Mathraki Island, just off Corfu in May, June, August and September. £795pp. Visit swimquest.uk.com/mathraki for details.