

As a child we spent holidays at Porthmeor Beach, St Ives, me, my brother and 4 childhood friends. Days consisted of cossie on, over the wall and onto the beach, the only instruction was to return when hungry. We built pointless and intricate dams amongst the rocks to hold back the sea, swam and played in the waves until blue with cold.

Since then I have swum in many places. During my childhood, we were lucky enough to be members of a private lake in 'Wokingham Without.' A man-made beach, a pontoon with a slide into the water and three islands to explore, it was heaven. We swam, canoed, sailed and swam..and swam...fished and camped, like a mini Swallows and Amazons without the rivalry. This was the place where I nearly drowned, I dived straight off the pontoon and snapped my elbow, the excruciating pain rendered me almost unconscious and I was unable to swim for several weeks.

Somewhere along the way I qualified as an HSE (Health and Safety Executive) Commercial Diver for SCUBA and learned to use surface supplied air and hard hats as well as learning to weld and braze underwater. That was a while ago now and a fascinating time.

The sea has always had a strange, unfathomable draw. I swam often in Stokes Bay when living in Gosport, once joined by a seal, curious and effortlessly shadowing my puny human strokes. I swam in Falmouth during my oceanography degree field trip, daily, wondering why so few people did the same.

I spent a year in Georgia not long after the breakup of the Soviet Union. At this time people dumped vast amounts of litter into the sea as much of the civil system was on the verge of collapse. However, I just HAD to swim, watched by perplexed locals. I remember asking someone whether the jellyfish I could see were stingers – the helpful answer was no, as long as you don't touch them.... 😊

Then several years ago we moved to the isle of Wight, the most wonderful place to live if you like to sea swim. There is always somewhere to swim on the island. Sandown Bay, for me, is the best beach and even when it is really rough it is possible at low tide to take a dip. I can go into the water feeling stressed, depressed, anxious and come out with problems changed to challenges, depression suppressed and anxieties ameliorated. It is for me, the best way to cleanse my soul, it is my mindfulness, laying in the water watching the sky, watching the patterns in the waves, understanding that I am such a small part of creation yet still a part of something far bigger than my own life. It helps in every way.

I thought it would be nice to swim with others and one name kept coming up, 'Sandy Ciccognani'. I discovered a Facebook page called Outdoor Swimming – Isle of Wight started by none other than Sandy C, and the rest, as they say, is history. A small group of us began to meet and swim, chat after our dips and drink tea wherever we happened to be. That Facebook group now has over 1000 people. It isn't a club, there is no membership or fees, it is just a group of people who love to sea swim and would like to do so with other people – always a good idea!

After a few years of swimming all year round, in all weathers and sea states I found that I was often being asked for help and advice (as an oceanographer I have a slightly better understanding of the sea than some.) In order to give credibility to my experience I decided to qualify as an Open Water Swimming Coach and found the STA (Swimming Teacher's Association) but the course was expensive. I had given up full-time work to look after my husband so money was tight but I was lucky that the Isle of Wight Foundation (<https://iowsports.org>) generously funded me to do the course. Dates were changed because of Covid-19 but the resourceful STA and course coach, the wonderful Keri-anne Payne, adapted the course so the theory was done via Zoom and we managed to do the

'wet bit' when lockdown eased and hey presto, I am now a fully qualified STA Level 2 Open Water Swimming Coach!

I was also fortunate to find the Pop-Up Business School (now the Rebel Business School) who advocate starting a business for as little as possible. A huge amount of the course is really confidence building and encouragement and it worked. I had an epiphany and called Sandy mid-course and as a result we started Swim The Wight to provide coaching and guided swimming experiences for all around the island and use the profits to help people with any form of disadvantage, physical disability, learning difficulty or mental health issue to access the beach and sea. Outdoor swimming has done so much for me and I now want to give others the same experience and opportunity.