

LEAPING FOR THE JOY OF SWIMMING



Ella Foote meets Alexandra Heminsley, author of *Leap In*, an emotional account of her venture to tackle the sea, from learning to swim properly to swimming from island to island in Greece

Photos: Chris Floyd

“Running taught me you get to choose to have a level of self determination about the person you want to be, swimming taught me that you can be this far into your life and decide you would quite like to learn to do it well” says author and journalist Alexandra Heminsley who has recently mastered outdoor swimming.

If you have read Alex’s new book, *Leap In*, the first thing you will notice about her in person is that she is now close to the arrival of her first child – the book ends with her questioning if she would ever have children. The second thing you will notice is her passion and persistence to constantly challenge herself. *Leap In* follows the success of *Running Like a Girl*, a book that tells her story of starting to run and making it part of her life. “If you are like me, trying to do something different, there is always a question mark whether you will actually do it – part of the experience is to question it, especially with swimming,” says Alex.

Alex and I met on Brighton beach, where her swimming story begins. It is a beautiful day considering storm Doris had blown through the day before. The sea is calm, with gentle waves hitting the pebble beach. The sun creates a shimmering path on the water and creates an inviting spell over me. The beach is busy considering it is a weekday afternoon, children play at the water’s edge and surfers lurk besides the steel skeleton that once was Brighton’s West Pier. The sun is warm enough for Alex and I to be sat outside on the sea front, the splashing sounds beyond us a constant reminder of what brings us together today.

Leap In chronicles Alex’s venture to

tackle the sea, from learning to swim properly to learning to work with the water to pull herself from island to island in Greece. The story begins on her wedding day and describes the joy of leaping into water just in front of her Brighton home she had lived in for nearly five years. The opening descriptions of being supported by the salty sea, the tingle the chill brought to her skin and sense of magic she felt as she left the water are all feelings and sensations many swimmers will relate to. It was this magical feeling that got her to back into the sea the day she returned from honeymoon only to discover how fickle the sea can be. She describes how the water, colder than before, steals her husband’s wedding ring from his finger with the force of one big wave. Although she has now forgiven the sea, “It has given me so much more than it ever took. Much, much more,” says Alex. “That day

showed where my mind-set was, if I just threw myself at it and with a positive attitude, swimming would just happen, like it did with my running. But I soon learnt being a have-a-go-hero wasn’t quite enough, there was a massive readjustment to make mentally.”

Alex joined a local swimming course with the main goal to be able to swim Pier to Pier along the Brighton shoreline. She learnt with people who were also learning with a view to swim outside, a motivation aligned with hers. “Running had taught me – you get to decide, you get to say I want to be this kind of person, there is enough life for you to keep trying to do new things and you don’t have to have mastered it by a certain age,” says Alex. “I found it really satisfying learning a new skill in my late 30s.” The course was spread over the year and throughout the book Alex describes struggles all

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swimmers can relate to, which is part of the beauty of the story. There were so many times you could nod along with the challenge you can face in water, no matter how good a swimmer you are. "Everything was pointless until I sorted out my breathing," says Alex. "You can inefficiently drag yourself through the water if you can get the breathing right. You can have the most beautiful stroke in the world, you can have your arm in the perfect position and have the body of Greek god, but if your heart is hammering because you are not breathing right it won't mean anything. It was worth learning to swim, even if I never got back into the water, it was worth learning that lesson – the self reliance that you can master your own breathing by deciding to."

So much of what Alex learns and experiences is anchored in her experience of running. But she is quick to remind us that just because you are strong and fit, doesn't mean you can just pick up swimming – many triathletes might agree. "My worst marathon nightmares were either about pain, which can heal or shame – which will pass," says Alex. "I would negotiate myself mentally around those two things, but with swimming my nightmares were about dying! The loss of control can be so fast, that is what I learnt the day with the wedding ring – I could feel a complete lack of control with the environment I was in, which I had never felt with running." The book appeals to so many different types of people tapping into the minds of those learning to swim, those embarking on outdoor swimming events, body acceptance, winter swimming, joy of swimming and the collection of people you meet through all different types of swimming scenes.

Swimming events provide much opportunity to swimmers to tackle distance events across bodies of water that otherwise they might not have the opportunity to immerse themselves into. "You can leave your house and run 26 miles through a city at any point you like, but swimming in some spots you can only do with the support and knowledge of experts," says Alex. "But swimming also has that wonderful sense of adventure and the chance to meet the characters who have been keeping lids open. They are the ones that kept swimming as a viable thing while it wasn't having its moment in the sun."

Much like with her book about running, Alex is quick to remind us of the mistakes we often make when considering sport. "It is the most consistent and pernicious mistake that sports marketing make – selling sport to women is about how they feel about their body and improving it," says Alex. "It is getting better, but for men, advertising has scenes of men involved in sport because it is time with the lads, part of their social life, while for women it is about getting thin. What became even bigger with swimming for me, because there was so much happening to my body during IVF treatment, is that it is easy to feel disconnected or not in the club. If you are not the swishy ponytail girl running 10k with pink knee-high socks, you can't do sport. But what we should be focusing on is how sport helps you find people who you can walk around the park when you are at your lowest ebb. They are the people that don't just get you around the park, but they get you through some of the darkest times in your year. That integration between the

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two is so important because if people can see you can get that from exercise, they would join in more."

The community that has since become Alex's regular swimming company have continued to be a space for support and friendship. This connection has helped Alex continue to swim during the winter months and even during pregnancy. On returning to the water once she becomes a mother Alex has ambitions for UK swimming trips and expeditions, but also

experiencing teaching her baby to swim. "I am really fascinated how a baby can instinctively swim – the geekiness of that, how they learn to control their breath," she says. She also has sights on learning to surf, wanting to disrupt the surfing clichés of what it means to be a surfer. "I want to be surfer/middle aged mother/having a go," says Alex. "There is actually very little swimming and moving much more in a dynamic way. There is a lot of free spirit tied to surfing, but I think any relationship with the water and the sea can be spiritual."

Alex's appetite for living doesn't stop with running, swimming or even surfing. She is easily inspired and we talked about climbing, poetry and other watery writers. "I have a desire to go off on a trip to surf, but that might just be the bit in me terrified about being a mother!" she says. Her infectious sense of adventure will be what drives her through the next challenge of motherhood, I am sure. Her book will resonate with so many about why we swim and usefully ends with how. Leaping into the sea at Brighton after meeting Alex was even more enjoyable knowing that is where it all began.