

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD



Kate Gillwood set sail on an adventure of discovery around the Hebrides and St Kilda

Within minutes of setting off on board the MV Cuma from Miavaig harbour on the Isle of Lewis, what had been a random group of swimmers quickly became friends. As we shared our swimming experience with each other, any anxieties I'd had about sharing a small space slipped away. The encouraging and inclusive ethos set the tone for the holiday. I made new swimmy friends in one of the most beautiful places in the world. The MV Cuma was perfect for setting out across the Atlantic waves to search for lost tales of eerie waters less travelled. As a former research vessel it is basic but cosy and holds an air of adventure in its sturdy frame.

The daily itinerary included an early morning swim before breakfast (even before coffee!) to wake us all up and get us ready for more excitement to come. Through the week we were lucky enough to reach the deep cove of Scarp, the stacks of St Kilda, seals at the

Images: Rex/Striscus



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A crab on Taransay



Blue jellyfish



THE DEEP WATER WAS SO CLEAR YOU COULD SEE TO THE VERY BOTTOM, 30 FEET BELOW.

Monach Isles, a famous Taransay bay and a beach on Harris like a treasured childhood memory. Each island had different and new things to experience.

EXCITING AND A LITTLE SCARY

Our first stop after a journey with porpoises as guides was a small cove on the island of Scarp. The deep water was so clear you could see to the very bottom, 30 feet below. Arriving after a 2-hour journey, it was exciting and a little scary to be jumping in but so refreshing. Our group had never swum together before but we were in the safe hands of Alice Goodridge of SwimWild and her swim safety expert Sarah Wiseman. I felt giddy with nerves

climbing down the steps at the side of the MV Cuma into the water to swim to the golden beach. We swam over jellyfish and the odd patch of sugar kelp with the sea bed rising steeply to the exposed sand. It looked like no one had been here before. I did a wee jig of joy on the beach before jumping back in.

The next day our daily morning dip was followed by a hearty Scottish breakfast with excited chatter about what new swims the day was to bring. When we learnt that we were to attempt to cross the high seas to St Kilda the expectation rose. Those of you with knowledge of this area will know that many a crossing is unsuccessful and boats regularly have to turn back due

Through the waterfall into the heart of the sea cave

to the weather. But as we set out on the intrepid 4-hour journey across the Atlantic I just knew we were going to make it. For some time, we could not see land at all, then we spotted the faint but distinct outline of the small islands. As we approached I could see the stacks rising out of the water, covered halfway up in a layer of misty clouds. It was mystical and eerie with a distinct feel that nature is truly in charge here. We were granted passage through thousands of gannets, fulmars, puffins and great skua. We eased respectfully in to Village Bay, climbed down the steps into the almost inky water and swam to the shore. It was the most iconic 300m swim I have ever done.

TRIP DETAILS

Kate travelled with SwimWild. The Outer Hebrides and St Kilda Expedition is recommended for people with a sense of adventure, who are looking for swims up to 1 to 2km multiple times a day, can cope with some cold, and enjoy the unexpected, as well as spots of brilliant sunshine if you are lucky!

Accommodation: Onboard the MV Cuma, with small cabins and hearty food. Captained by the highly experienced Murdo MacDonald and local crew.

Next trip: 25-31 July 2020

More info: swimwilduk.com



Kate swimming

AT MIDNIGHT WE CLIMBED BACK INTO THE WATER TO EXPERIENCE BIOLUMINESCENCE AT ITS BRIGHTEST, FIREWORKS SPARKLING OUT OF OUR FINGERS AND BODIES AS WE DIVED BELOW



The stacks of St Kilda rising out of the mist

A MAGICAL PLACE

Our two nights in Village Bay were filled with wonder, swimming through flocks of puffins resting on the surface of the sea only to watch them furiously flap away in a panic if we got too close, exploring caves with waterfalls tipping onto our heads and marvelling at sea gooseberries, almost translucent crystal jellyfish and comb jellyfish which light up as the edges ripple. I have never seen things like this in the UK. I now understand why people call this place the edge of the world.

Some of the group were sad to leave such a magical place, I was intrigued to see the next stage of our expedition. We motored out of Village Bay looking back at the remote line of cottages on Main Street. As we passed through the stacks I spotted a boat circling and instantly knew we were in for a whale-sized treat. For about 20 minutes we watched a pod of minke whales feeding, cruising round and breaching out of the water.

SPARKLING BIOLUMINESCENCE

A few hours later in the distance I spotted a lighthouse which rests on Shillay, one of the Monach Isles which lie to the west of North Uist. I could not believe my luck as we steered into the bay, the light green water with white sand distinct from below. The day and night we spent here was probably my favourite part of the trip. A small group of us who wanted to do a slightly longer swim set off across the bay with kayak

safety support, spying the nosy seals as their heads popped up out of the water. I could now see the origin of the green colour of the water as I swam over light green fluffy looking seaweed which floated gently as if in a breeze. The grey seals seemed to get braver and we dived down to see their speckled bodies shoot past close under us as we crossed to the next bay. Later I kayaked and ran along the beach, but the day ended with one of the highlights of the holiday. At midnight we climbed back into the water to experience bioluminescence at its brightest, fireworks sparkling out of our fingers and bodies as we dived below.

THE END OF THE ADVENTURE

Our last swim was off Harris with the MV Cuma anchored in the bay. We took it in turns to climb down the steps into the chilly, clear water and swam towards the empty, golden beach navigating our way round a rainbow of jellyfish. We looked out for each other, battling the incoming tide together, chop in our faces.

I cannot describe how perfect this holiday was. We were treated to the best Hebridean weather with sunshine, little rain and only a few clouds sheltering us. I revelled in being outside most of the time. This swimming adventure gave me just what I love of Scotland 🇪🇸

Follow Kate on Instagram: [@kategillwood4](https://www.instagram.com/kategillwood4)