



LEGAL HIGHS

Emma Freud on feeling ‘the call’ of cold-water swimming

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For half the year I live in a seaside village in Suffolk. Every morning, whatever the weather, groups of villagers, many in their eighties, walk to the beach and take a North Sea dip before breakfast. They are some of the healthiest and hardiest people I know, and they put their vitality down to this.

The idea of willingly freezing your arse off has always seemed incomprehensible, so despite the daily invitation for the past 60 years I’ve always politely declined.

Cut to September 2022, when my youngest child left home for college, and after 27 years of being a mother I was made semi-redundant. Determined to dive into the unknown next stage of our lives, my boyfriend and I celebrated the end of decades of the school run with a road trip to the west coast of Scotland. We were barely off the sleeper train when suddenly, with no warning at all, I got what wild swimmers describe as “the call”. Several times a day, as we drove from beaches to lochs to waterfalls, I found myself pulling over, stripping nearly off and diving in, to the horror of my cold-blooded boyfriend who stayed in the car shouting, “Judas!”



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The Scottish water was 13C (7C colder than the North Sea at this time of year) but somehow it felt vibrant rather than ridiculous. I couldn't get in quick enough, was buzzing for the next few hours, and the sensation on and under my skin as it slowly heated up felt like being gradually supercharged from a high-voltage socket normally reserved for a Tesla.

I have no idea why this has happened at my age, but there are two excellent highs involved. The cold shock provides an adrenaline kick and releases endorphins to help you to cope with the "pain". (But shhh, it isn't actual pain, and if you welcome the cold as a means to a free endorphin, it still gives you the buzz you no longer deserve.) And the post-swim high comes from an increase in heat production inside the body that forces blood to the surface to warm it, which in turn flushes your veins and stimulates the circulatory system, which ultimately boosts immunity.

It's win/win, and then win. I know, I thought it was nonsense too. But cometh the time, cometh the drug - and cold water for the (almost) elderly might just be the new Viagra.