

VENTURE

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**TESTING
THE WATER**
Cross-country
swimming in the
Lake District, UK



On the up: Allenby and Munro-Bennett warm up with an ascent of Loughrigg Fell; (opening page) taking the plunge in Rydal Water



“Plunging underwater, I start my front crawl, grateful for the added buoyancy, my feet now as responsive as two breeze blocks”

Charlie Allenby, adventure writer

My feet slip on the Easter egg-sized rocks as I stumble for stability. I stub my toes on an unforgiving stone, but the freezing temperature of Rydal Water has already numbed them in seconds; instead of a shooting pain, the only discomfort is a burning sensation on any bare skin not covered by my wetsuit. I want to leave this limbo and fully immerse myself, but the water remains too shallow. Grabbing the floating dry bag holding all my belongings, I continue the slow, clumsy path to greater depths.

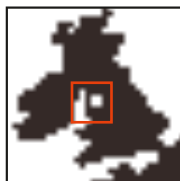
With ground temperatures hovering around 7°C, and the water not much warmer, the Lake District's second smallest lake might seem an odd place for a dip in early April. But I'm here to try out cross-country swimming – a mix of backpacking and wild swimming. It was

dreamt up by two brothers from Yorkshire who wanted the rivers and lakes they encountered on an adventure to be an opportunity rather than an obstacle. The siblings created the RuckRaft – a packable, lightweight two-piece tow float and dry bag that enables you to travel from A to B, across land and water, without any restrictions.

My local guide, open-water swimming coach Lauren Munro-Bennett, points to a bank roughly 200m away. A keen runner and cyclist, in recent years I've

added swimming and triathlons to my CV, but while the distance would usually constitute a warm-up, the cold conditions are making even breathing a challenge. Plunging underwater, I start my front crawl, grateful for the added buoyancy of my RuckRaft, my feet now as responsive as two breeze blocks.

Five hours earlier, I had been warm and dry, waiting in the foyer of a hostel overlooking Windermere – although the weather had done its best to obscure the view of England's largest lake. The vibrant skies of the previous evening's sunset had been replaced by a low-lying fog and persistent drizzle, turning everything a glum grey. With an area of 2,362sq-km – just slightly smaller than all of Luxembourg – the Lake District is notorious for changeable conditions year-round. At least it would add some



Direct trains run from London to Oxenholme, with transfers to Windermere. But a car provides the best access to the National Park's lakes and fells

VENTURE Travel

Changing tack:
Allenby readies his
RuckRaft for the
open-water swim



Beneath the surface:
water temperatures
of 7°C make even
swimming difficult



atmosphere to today's proceedings: a 12km hike-swim loop that includes summitting Loughrigg Fell and paddling across Rydal Water before circling cross-country back to the start.

Met by Munro-Bennett, we drive to the trailhead, her makeshift camper van making short work of narrow lanes lined with dry stone walls. I'm handed a cross-country swimming kit, which I pack snugly in my day bag among extra layers and a wetsuit, and I'm pleasantly surprised by how light and compact it is.

Setting off along a bridle path, it's not long before the trail starts to climb the foothills of Loughrigg Fell. Although a speed bump compared with the region's tallest peak – the 978m Scafell Pike – the ascent isn't without its difficulties: the boulder-strewn path becomes greasy in the mist, with a gradient more akin to



In it to swim it: Allenby and Munro-Bennett set off across the cold expanse of Rydal Water

Anatomy of a RuckRaft

Above Below's two-piece tow: a cross-country swimming essential

The float's U-shaped design was inspired by rib boats, keeping it stable and streamline with up to 15kg of load

The dry bag has a 120L capacity – more than enough for a weekend of multi-modal adventuring

The two-way valve allows you to inflate it by mouth in 30 seconds flat

The whole design weighs less than a kilo and packs down to the size of a sleeping bag

Marine-grade materials and tough welded seams make it equally at home in high seas and calm waters

traversing a near-vertical waterfall than a footpath. As we rise into the clouds, the track we've already covered disappears; soon it's only possible to see within 10m.

With lactic acid burning my calves, we reach the rocky outcrop that marks its 335m summit, its trig point having been blown over by a storm last winter. Due to the conditions, there are no panoramic views to drink in as a reward, and given what happened to the last thing that hung around for too long on the exposed top, I'm keen to keep moving.

We bound down the northwestern side of the fell, and the trail drops away as dramatically as it rose. The surrounding haze makes it difficult to tell how far we've descended, and I have to do a double-take as Grasmere comes into view – my mind is convinced that its small lake is a continuation of the cloud. The adjacent village was once home to the Victorian poet William Wordsworth, who would spend many hours walking on the very paths I find myself on. Although I don't spot any of the daffodils noted in his most famous work, it's easy to see how the area's natural beauty was a source of inspiration.

Our path hugs the River Rothay, which connects Grasmere to Rydal Water, and my mind races to what's coming next. Changing into my wetsuit and concealing my hiking gear in the dry bag, I'm ready for my first A-to-B swimming experience.

Despite the off-putting temperatures, after a few minutes of splashing around my cold limbs thaw out and I find my flow. Hikers stop and stare as the two of us make our way across the water – hi-vis blobs in hot pursuit. The rain even stops

momentarily. But the mist clings fast to the wooded slopes of Nab Scar, a fell on the lake's northern bank.

I'm confident I can keep going, but, with an increasing risk of hypothermia, Munro-Bennett is keen for me to get out. Reaching our planned exit point, this is easier said than done. The base of my legs feel like stumps, and I trip my way across the shoreline's light shingle before collapsing onto a log. As I fumble to get my dry clothes back on as quickly as possible, the circulation starts to return, the ground beneath my feet turning to hot coals.

Continuing with the hiking loop, the pain quickly subsides and I'm left with the warm endorphin high that year-round open-water swimmers talk about. Now sold on the concept of cross-country swimming, I start to plan more temperate, obstacle-free adventures.

Charlie Allenby is a London-based running, cycling and adventure writer; Instagram: @charlie.allenby. Above Below, creators of the RuckRaft, will be hosting weekend events in Devon and the Lake District in July and September 2023; abovebelow.sc



Double-header: two swimming caps help keep out the worst of the chill