

Robson Green's Wild Swimming Adventure



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Robson Green on his Wild Swimming Adventure

"I've always been drawn to water. Maybe it's all the fun it's given me, all the adventures. Perhaps it's how I feel when I'm in it – I feel free." Robson Green

Actor Robson Green undertakes an aquatic journey through the wild waters of Britain in this new two part documentary series for ITV1.

From a decidedly shaky start in the Tyne to his ultimate goal to swim to Holy Island off the coast of his native North East, the programme charts Robson's adventures as he swims his way through lidos, tidal pools, lakes, rivers and seas.

The journey is at times an emotional one as Robson talks about his late father who instilled his love of swimming in his son, and it is this memory that keeps Robson going during some of the extreme swims he attempts.

He tells the programme that recent loss of his father has inspired him to attempt to swim to Holy Island. For Robson, the challenge is about reconnecting with his father, who regularly swam in the North Sea, and his own boyhood identity.

Come rain or shine four million people swim in Britain's wild waters every year and during his journey Robson meets many interesting characters who have left the chlorine of swimming pools behind for natural waters.

From the tranquillity of Britain's lidos and tidal pools to Scotland's daunting Corryvreckan whirlpool and the extreme cold of Llyn Lladraw Lake in Snowdonia, Robson challenges himself mentally and physically during his wild swimming adventure.

Programme One

Robson starts his wild swimming adventure in the river that dominated the area where he was raised – the Tyne. He says: "If I'm going to swim around Britain I want to start at home."

But his attempt ends abruptly when he gets into difficulties and has to be rescued by a lifeboat.

He says: "Well it wasn't the best of starts. My body shut down after 200 metres. The temperature saps you. I asked the lifeboat guys when was the last time anyone swam in here. He said, 'Friday night, but they were absolutely off their heads!'"

"No one of sane mind has swum the Tyne in the past 50 years. But it's woken me up and now I'm ready."

Robson Green returns to the place he had his first wild swim - Seaton Burn, the watery playground of his childhood, which he describes as "a beautiful little river, with bulrushes, swans and water hens".

The river was just yards from Robson's childhood home but on his return he discovers that the idyllic stream is now neglected and overgrown.

Robson visits a place that has emotional memories for him: Seaton Sluice on the North coast, where that his father taught him to swim, or, as Robson recalls, "where he hurled me into the North Sea".

He says of his father: "He was a big, big powerful man my dad, and involved in the most dangerous occupation in the world. Worked down the mine – worked down a black hole for 42 years. That sort of job moulds a certain type of man and my dad was that man. He was one hell of a swimmer – he could swim for miles in ten degree water – in his swimming trunks! I lost dad recently and I think that's why I'm doing this journey – reclaiming identity and family."

Robson's experience in the River Tyne has made him realise that he needs to start his wild swimming adventure in a gentler fashion.

He starts his journey at Plymouth's Tinside Lido, where he meets lido enthusiasts Bob and Dave. Such is their love of Britain's lidos they have

swam a mile in a hundred of them. They tell Robson that their next plan is to go around Britain's coastline swimming in the coastal tidal pools.

This gives Robson the idea for his next wild swim and he finds the perfect tidal pool at Porthowan in Cornwall. After his swim in the pool that he describes as "paradise" Robson moves on to choppiest waters.

He travels to Burgh Island in Devon, where, with a group of tri-athletes, he swims the one mile circumference of the island. Halfway through the swim he comments: "Once you get over the fear of being splattered onto the rocks and ending up like strawberry jam ... I'm starting to enjoy it. I'm at one with the ocean."

Robson's next swim is at the Henleaze swimming club where he takes part in their long swim event. As he prepares for the race at this exclusive private club he asks the lifeguard for advice on the correct swimming attire – should it be shorts, speedos or the 'budgie smugglers' that were a gift from his wife?

Robson then meets Kate Rew the founder of the Outdoor Swimming Association and author of the book *Wild Swimming*. The motto of the Association is: "We have been held in chlorine captivity for too long, we need to strip and dip whenever the mood takes us."

Robson joins Kate and fellow wild swimmers for a moonlit swim – followed by a dip in their portable wood-fired hot tub!

After the warmth of the hot tub Robson faces a much colder challenge. He heads for Wales and Britain's coldest lake, Llyn Llydaw, in the Snowdonia National Park.

The lake is the training camp for extreme cold water swimmer Lewis Pugh who swam at the North Pole in 2007 to highlight the effects of global warming. Robson is hoping that Lewis will be able to prepare him for his Holy Island swim.

Lewis tells Robson that the water in the lake at 7° is only 2° warmer than the waters the Titanic went down in.

Robson asks Lewis how painful the North Pole swim was. Lewis tells him: "It was extremely painful. When I got out of the water I remember looking down at my hands and my fingers were like sausages, because we are made of water and when water freezes it expands so the actual cells in my fingers had frozen and expanded and burst. I was absolute agony and I couldn't feel them again for four months."

As the water is so cold Lewis suggests that Robson wears a wet suit for his swim across the lake. Lewis also tells an apprehensive Robson the importance of keeping his mind clear and focused. With Lewis running along the bank shouting encouragement, Robson completes his swim, but Lewis then wants him to do it again – without a wetsuit.

He says: "I'm going to give you a bit of time to recover and I'm going to psych you up properly."

Robson is shocked and says he can't do it saying, "I only lasted five minutes in the Tyne."

Lewis replies: "Trust me on this and I'll do it with you."

Robson agrees to take the plunge, and with Lewis swimming alongside him he sets off across the lake.

He describes how he felt during the swim: "My body was on fire and telling me to give up but something inside was saying, 'Carry on.' Every time I looked up there was Lewis. He reminded me of my dad - my dad just pushed me along when I was young."

He tells the programme that all he could remember as he came out of the water was 'the valley spinning, the ground started to morph, started to stretch and then I felt incredibly nauseous, I wanted to be sick'.

Lewis tells the programme: "I think what he's trying to achieve by swimming to Holy Island is a great thing to do. For an untrained swimmer to do this is absolutely magnificent. To swim all the way there for his father, I take my hat off. I think it's a great thing,"

Robson reflects on the experience of his swim with Lewis and says: "He will be there with me at Holy Island. I think that's what shapes us. They'll all be there with me – all the people I've met on this journey."

PROGRAMME TWO

Keen to get a few more 'pleasant paddles' under his belt before things get serious, Robson travels to Cambridge where he meets Jordan Savage and Gloria Dawson – both committed wild swimmers.

They take Robson swimming at Grantchester Meadows, which is described as 'the most beautiful place to swim in Cambridge'. Robson then has a lone swim in the River Cam in the middle of a torrential thunderstorm that he joyfully describes as the "bonniest sight!"

Robson travels to Dover to meet Freda Streeter, also known as 'the general'. Freda has trained hundreds of cross channel swimmers and Robson joins a group of her students for a swim across Dover Harbour. He insists on wearing his wetsuit – which Freda describes as a 'wimp' suit.

Freda's years of experience make her the perfect person for Robson to confide his worries to.

He asks her: “How do I get over the fatigue, the anxiety, the fear that I am going to have a heart attack?”

She tells him: “You are a fit man. Think positive thoughts. You are not going to have a heart attack. When you hit a brick wall push through it.”

Robson’s next stop on his journey is a location that is surrounded by myths and legends – Loch Ness.

Robson sets up camp at the side of the Loch as evening falls, but decides against a swim in the dark because “that’s when the beasties come out!”

After an unsettled night he wakes to a beautiful morning and dives in naked because “there’s only one way to enter that water that’s going to make you feel alive, awake and liberated”. However, he swiftly changes from birthday suit to wetsuit – a more sensible option in the cold, murky waters of the Loch.

Robson’s next challenge is a big one – to swim across the mighty Corryvreckan whirlpool located between the islands of Scarba and Jura in Scotland.

He meets with Simon Murie who has spent years discovering and realising swims. His greatest accomplishment has been to plot a swimming route across Corryvreckan, the world’s third largest whirlpool.

Robson and Simon take a boat trip to see the whirlpool before they attempt swimming across it. After seeing the raging waters, Robson comments: “That was some serious piece of wild water, I have never seen anything like that in my life. I think you can admire the beauty of the ocean, the biggest swimming pool in the world, but my goodness, ignore its ferocity at your peril.”

As the day of the swim arrives, Robson is prepared but the boat taking them out has mechanical problems, and there is a chance they won’t be able to get out to the whirlpool.

The boat is repaired at the last minute and Robson now has only thirty minutes to swim the whirlpool before the tides turn it from tame to treacherous.

The pair complete the swim, despite encountering some massive jellyfish on the way.

An emotional Robson tells Simon: “There are only a few things I’ve been proud of in my life and I’ll tell you what, that is one of them. Honest. I cannot believe what I’ve just done. If I can do that - I can do Holy Island.”

Simon tells the programme: “He did fantastically. He swam one of the toughest crossings in the British Isles and he did it on a spring tide – one of the toughest tides. All I can say is I’m in awe of what he did today.”

Robson reflects: "Everything seems to be progressing to one defining moment. It's all taking shape. There's a sort of story here, this isn't just about coming across the idyllic and the beautiful of Britain. It's about dealing with self-doubt; it's dealing with achievement, endurance, human endeavour - bordering on life changing actually.

Robson is reaching the end of his wild swimming adventure and he faces his final challenge

The previous swim has taken its toll as he explains: "I'm in a lot of pain actually, elbows hurting, knees are really shot, I think not only has the ocean been talking to me, my body's talking to me as well."

Holy Island will be a challenge, as Olly Jay, Robson's pilot for the swim, tells the programme: "I hear he's not wearing a wetsuit which I'm a little bit surprised about. It's a tough swim. I think if it takes much more than 40 minutes the cold will start hitting him."

Olly has kayaked the sea around Holy Island for 11 years and tells Robson he has never seen anyone swim to it.

"Good, it's a first!" Robson replies.

As Robson sets off on the 10 mile swim the current keeps taking him off course. He says: "Thank goodness Olly was there – he kept saying the current will take you eventually, go with it. Don't fight it. let the current take you. And it did."

As Robson reaches the rocks of Holy Island he can hardly stand as he completes what he describes as "one of the biggest things I've ever done".

The swim has taken its toll on Robson's body and he collapses as his body goes into shock. He tells the programme: "I was in trouble, I didn't think I was in trouble, I was in trouble."

The Holy Island swim was incredibly tough for Robson and he tells the programme that there was one person in particular who helped him achieve the challenge.

"All the way through this I've had people helping me. But I kept saying at Holy Island I'm going to be on my own. But I wasn't. Immediately you start hearing the voices. There was so much imagery during that swim but there was one overriding one – and it was my dad, the person who taught me to swim. Father, teacher and protector, and he was protecting me out there."

Robson has one more swim he wants to do.

He returns to Seaton Sluice with his son, to swim together at the place his father first taught him to swim.

Robson Green on his Wild Swimming Adventure

What started out as a travelogue celebrating the beautiful, idyllic and undiscovered parts of Britain, using the self propelled mode of transport known as wild swimming, turned out to be one of the most worthwhile and profound experiences of my life. It was also the first time I didn't have to fake it in front of the lens.

it also became a voyage of overcoming self doubt, reclaiming one's identity, commitment, the importance of home and of course family. A notion that many people watching will share.

I ventured so far outside my comfort zone during the filming of this story but in a strange and ironic way it brought me back to the comfort of my own home.

During filming so much imagery started to present itself and began to remind me of the happy times I use to spend with Mum and Dad on holiday (which was always near water; be it alongside rivers, lakes or oceans) and realising it was one of the a rare occasions when work and money worries, didn't have to be the main topic of conversation.

My father taught me to swim. His teaching methods were simple, but effective. He hurled me into the North Sea at the age of seven and then took great satisfaction at watching me thrashing the water to a froth. However, the method worked!

Just to give you an idea of the temperature of this stretch of water just up the road as the crow flies is the Arctic Ocean! Ten degree water tends to focus the mind and I took off like a motor boat towards the shoreline.

What draws us to water? Whether I'm fishing, floating or swimming in a river I am happy. Mainly I am someone who likes to have fun. All my memories connected to rivers, lakes and oceans are happy ones. The older I get the more fun I have, the more I enjoy life and the more I learn about myself.

The Holy Island swim was all about climate and conditions and who better to lower ones temperature with other than the Ice bear himself, the Indiana Jones of wild swimming Lewis Gordon Pugh. If I thought the river Tyne was cold think again Robson! I was about to enter the world of Extreme Wild Swimming.

During my journey Lewis Pugh was a person that really stood out for me. He prepared me psychologically for something that was way outside my comfort zone. His introduction to the notion of committing to an objective, becoming unstoppable and reaching that objective was life changing.

There was no swim I couldn't do after meeting Lewis because anything is possible if you COMMIT!!

It seems the link between Lewis and I is that we want to swim where no one else had swum before, a major reason why I wanted to do the Holy Island swim. There must be a fear factor involved. Someone told me that there are two types of people who think swimming in freezing temperatures isn't dangerous and they are fools and liars.