

Outdoors

Today's Changing Room: How a lockdown sea swimming ritual turned into a book

A new photography book by Rachel Hazell records her daily sea swims off the coast of Iona during lockdown – a period when time seemed to stand still.

Interview by Roger Cox



By Roger Cox

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Rachell Hazell is describing what it was like living on Iona during the pandemic – an island usually bustling with tourists, particularly in summer, suddenly turned eerily quiet due to lockdowns in the UK and beyond. "You'd recognise other people's footprints in the sand," she says, "and the footprints of the otter and the mink, because there were so few people on the beach."

Hazell had been a keen open air swimmer long before Covid-19 took hold (she prefers not to use the term "wild swimming"), but it was during the enforced stasis of lockdown that she embarked on her Today's Changing Room project – a series of photographs charting her daily Iona swims, with each image showing the spot where she's left her clothes and her distinctive yellow wellies before plunging into the bracing waters of the Atlantic.

As the days and weeks rolled by, Hazell started sharing these images on social media, and now she's turned them into a book, due to be launched at the annual Artist's Bookmarket at the Fruitmarket Gallery in **Edinburgh** on 10 February.



Rachel Hazell swimming off the coast of Iona PIC: Hannah Nunn

Most of the pictures in Today's Changing Room were taken on the beaches near to Hazell's home towards the north end of the island, notably Traigh Ban, which was once a favourite haunt of the Scottish Colourists due to the dramatic contrasts offered by its black rocks, bright white sand and impossibly turquoise water. However, the book also contains one or two surprises, including a shot of Hazell's Dryrobe and wellies perched beside something that looks a lot like Fingal's Cave, on the nearby island Staffa.

"Yes, that was a little wildcard I put in there," she says. "Quite soon after lockdown some friends took a boat trip over to Staffa. Most people rush to the cave and then rush over to see the puffins, but we weren't going to be rushing anywhere. We walked at a leisurely pace along to the cave – we'd brought thermos flasks of tea with us, and we were sitting there having a drink and I suddenly realised that there was nobody around, it was high tide and there was no swell, and so I just went in.

"It was amazing – although the water was deep and dark and cold in the cave, so I didn't stay in very long. And of course, because of the shapes of the basalt rock, it was literally like having steps into the water."

The images in the book run through the year in chronological order, not with one image per day, but rather with a selection of images representing each month. To leaf through the book, then, is to see the seasons gradually flow into each other, page by page, the light becoming brighter and the colours more vivid as summer approaches, then fading away again as autumn gives way to winter.



Speaking of winter, some of the January shots in particular seem to have been taken in somewhat bracing conditions – presumably there's more urgency to get the shot and get on with the swim in the colder months than, say, in the middle of July?

"Definitely," Hazell laughs, "but I do now have hand-warmers, the little battery-operated ones, for the winter – and oh my goodness, they're a game-changer."

Originally from Somerset, Hazell initially studied English Literature at Edinburgh University, but during her time on the course she discovered that she was just as interested in books as physical objects as she was in their contents, so she went on to study bookbinding at the London College of Printing. Now splitting her time between Edinburgh and Iona, she offers bookbinding workshops in both places, and in other locations around the world, introducing students to a craft that's been around for a couple of thousand years at least.

"If you can sew on a button and fold a piece of paper in half then I will get you making books," she says.

Some of the needlework does look quite fiddly though – does she ever get any tantrums on her courses? "I had one man in Cornwall who threw his book across the room, went out for a three-hour walk and then came back and apologised," she says, "but that might have been the only time."

Proceeds from sales of Today's Changing Room, meanwhile, will be donated to Bluetonic, a mental health charity dedicated to enabling experiences in, on or around the water. "There are so many benefits to cold water swimming," says Hazell. "I might be in a bad mood, but if I go for a swim I'll come out of the water sparkling, invigorated, clear. It's magic, it's free, and it's amazing, and I realise how lucky I am to have access to such beautiful clear water. This charity encourages accessibility to water for everybody – even just to sit by a lake. There are lots of different ways of awakening your blue mind."

Today's Changing Room will be launched at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, on 10 February, see www.thetravellingbookbinder.com. Proceeds will go to Bluetonic, a mental health charity dedicated to enabling experiences in, on or around blue spaces, see www.bluetonic.org. [uk](#)