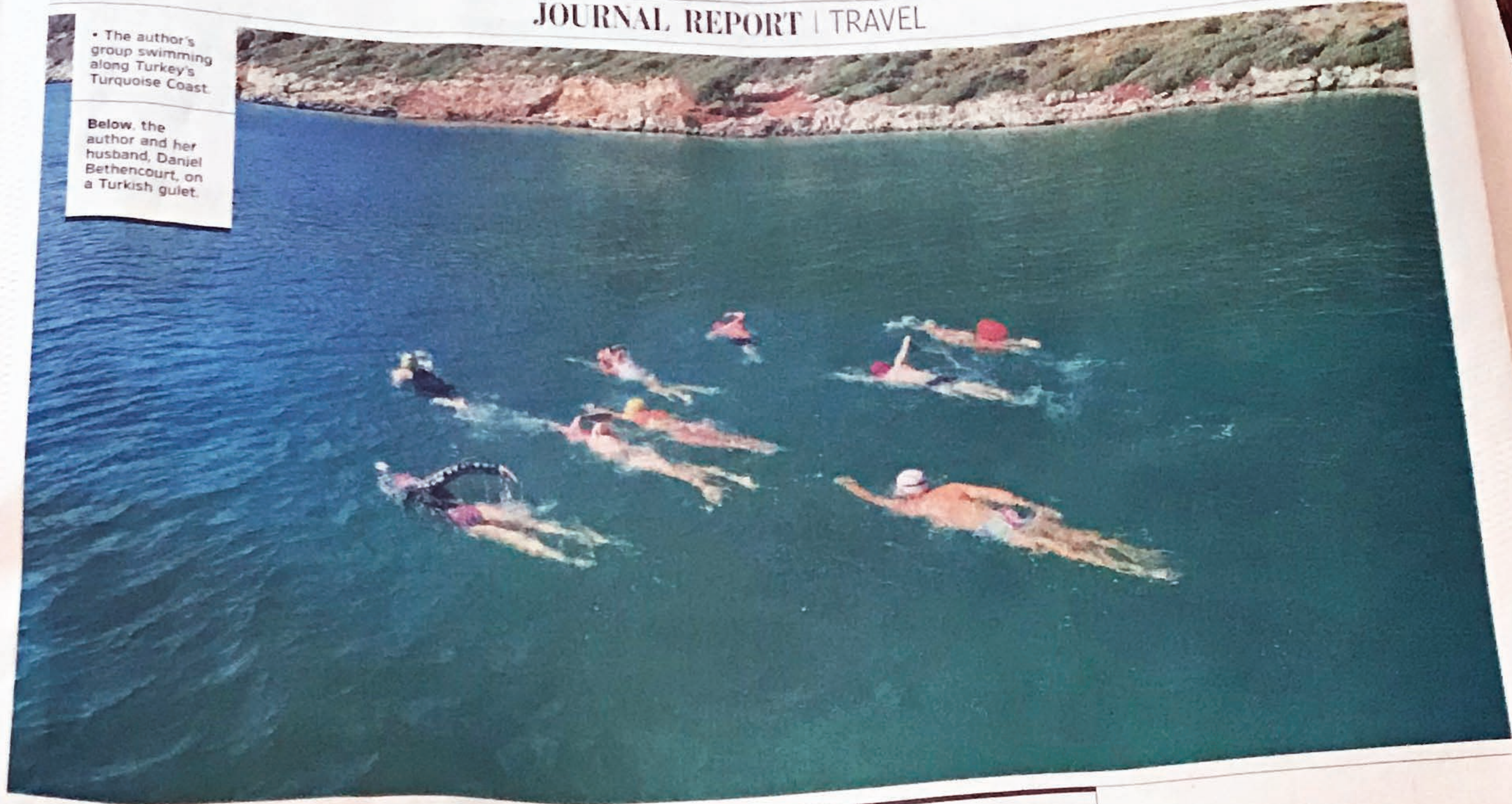


JOURNAL REPORT | TRAVEL

• The author's group swimming along Turkey's Turquoise Coast.

Below, the author and her husband, Daniel Bethencourt, on a Turkish gulet.



Swimming in Turkey During a Pandemic

I'VE BEEN OPEN WATER SWIMMING IN CALIFORNIA DURING LOCKDOWN. BUT THE TURQUOISE WATER IN THE MEDITERRANEAN WAS A WHOLE DIFFERENT THING.

BY KATHLEEN A. HUGHES

“WE WILL HAVE the sea to ourselves!” said our swim guide, Aoife Doran, a 30-year-old, tall, fit hydrotherapist from Dublin who was welcoming us to Kas, Turkey, overlooking a vast expanse of turquoise water in the eastern Mediterranean.

“It’s so fantastic that you all took the risk to come here. You will see that it was worth it.”

We were 10 swimmers from the U.S., the U.K. and Switzerland who had signed up to swim more than 11 miles along the Turquoise Coast over six days in mid-October—in the midst of the global pandemic.

It was admittedly a strange time to be going on a swim trip in Turkey.

But after seven months of isolation with my husband in Palos Verdes, Calif.—I’m 64, he’s 67 and we have been married for 30 years—I desperately wanted to go somewhere, pretty much *anywhere*. Most of our friends were either getting puppies or renting RVs and driving off to national parks.

Instead, I had signed us up with Strel Swimming Adventures, one of a small group of companies offering swim vacations in Turkey, Croatia, Greece and other scenic spots. I had wanted to try this since a friend posted photos of swimmers gliding through clear, turquoise water on a similar trip last year. And Turkey was one of the few countries open to Americans this fall, with no pandemic restrictions.

My husband and I are both swimmers, but we’re different. He’s a competitive pool swimmer, and I became addicted to the thrill of open water after taking up triathlons seven years ago. While pool swimming is safe, controlled and predictable, open water is the opposite, a vast expanse of surprises, a chance to be outside, immersed in nature and to feel the power of the ocean, different every day.

When pools closed during the pandemic, I switched entirely to ocean workouts—along with a tidal wave of



get to Dalaman OK and without travel issues...October is a great month to swim in Turkey in a warm sea.”

I finally signed up, adding travel insurance.

The cost of the trip was roughly \$1,000 per person for six nights and seven days. That included the hotel, breakfast, a Turkish gulet, a traditional wooden boat, two swim guides who would follow us in dinghies, lunches and tea on the boat, and an underwater video analysis of our

thon swimmer, two masters swimmers from Wisconsin and—luckily for me—a couple of recreational swimmers from the U.K. Most had signed up for other swim trips first, but wound up in Turkey by default.

Turkey wasn’t requiring a long quarantine or negative test results, although I had brought ours with us.

Julie Cox, 56, a learning technology specialist from Portsmouth, England, says she signed up for three swim trips in Turkey after a Croatia trip was canceled. “You have to enjoy life while you can,” says Ms. Cox. “I live on my own and I want my swim holiday.”

After the evaluation, I received a yellow cap, marking me as one of the four slowest swimmers. My husband received a pink cap, placing him in the faster group.

That afternoon we did our first real swim around a peninsula, hugging the rocky coastline in the beautiful turquoise water I had craved for so long. There were plenty of small fish, a few turtles and hillsides dotted with resorts.

It was all going smoothly until my husband—used to following the clear, black lane lines at the bottom of a pool—swam away from the other pink caps at high speed, seeming to disappear on the horizon.

“He still needs to learn how to sight,” I called out to the guide, later explaining we had practiced in

the ocean just a few times, watching videos on learning how to swim in a straight line by keeping landmarks in sight.

Our fastest swimmer, Nigel Goldsworthy, 59, who lives in Switzerland and was on his eighth swim trip with Strel, raced after my husband, finally grabbing his ankle.

“I wasn’t lost,” my husband later said. “I just wasn’t hugging the shoreline closely.”

Each morning we boarded the wooden boat, wearing masks until we were out of the harbor. After each swim, the Turkish couple operating the boat served hot Turkish tea, followed by spectacular lunches with Turkish mezes and freshly caught fish, grilled on the boat.

“This is heaven. We should stay here,” I told my husband. Turkey has reported less than half the number of coronavirus cases in California and with twice the population. (To be sure, health officials have challenged Turkey’s reporting.)

Our second day of swimming would be “sublime,” our swim guide promised. As we swam, we started to see ancient ruins directly beneath us. We hovered above the rectangular, crumbled walls of Aperlai, an early Lycian city thought to have slid into the sea following earthquakes.

The next day we braved the “five island swim,” swimming in a horseshoe pattern around five islands, hugging the inner shoreline of each island, and then crossing the deeper bright blue water to get to the next.

My main focus was simply trying to keep up with the 4,000-plus yards we were swimming a day.

“Just make sure there’s no sea lice where you’re going,” my swim coach had warned. Sure enough, we felt tiny stinging sensations on several swims. Sea lice bites, I learned, are from jellyfish larvae.

And then came the jellyfish themselves. “Julie has been stung!” Angie Walker, 61, a retiree from Portsmouth, England, called out. Andrew Green, 31, a pink-capped lawyer from London, also suffered a “very painful” jellyfish sting on his left, upper arm. Both recovered quickly.

On the last day, we all agreed that the risk had been worth it—but no one seemed ready to post photos on social media. “I just told people I was going to be gone,” says Peter Allen, 61, a consultant from Neenah, Wis. “I wasn’t sure what the response was going to be, whether there would be a little judgment.”

We all made it back safely, checking in after quarantines.

“When you do this once, you know you’ll do it again,” says Mr. Allen.

Ellery McGowan, 74, a retired swim coach and a marathon swimmer from Godalming, England, has done 20 swim trips, mostly with SwimTrek, to locations including Baja, Vietnam, Mallorca and Sardinia.

“When I’m swimming,” she says, “I’m in a happy place.”

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other swimmers.

While I love the camaraderie of my ocean swim group in Redondo Beach, Calif., the water often feels cold, choppy, murky and full of seaweed.

But signing up for a swim trip now isn’t easy. Most of the tour operators have cut back as swimmers canceled and travel restrictions kept changing.

My husband and I debated the Covid risks of international flights and a week spent with a group of strangers on a small boat. “Why don’t you just bungee jump or go skydiving?” my brother texted sarcastically. Even my friend who recommended the trip said, “I just don’t feel comfortable getting on a plane right now.”

But the owner of Strel, Borut Strel, was reassuring. “I am positive you will

swim techniques.

We flew Turkish Airlines to Istanbul, then to Dalaman, arriving in Kas a few days early. It was nerve-racking. Airport lines weren’t socially distanced and the plane was packed, but we wore N95 masks, switching to cotton masks to sleep.

After meeting our fellow swimmers at the small, family-run, Kas Maki Hotel on a Sunday night, we gathered the next morning at 7:30 a.m. for a swim evaluation that would divide us into groups based on speed. The water was warm, in the mid-70s, but there were patches of extreme cold as we swam to a rocky point and back.

Our group ranged in age from 28 to 74, and included a British mara-

FROM TOP: AOIFE DORAN; PETER ALLEN