

FRIENDS LIKE THESE

What do you get when you cross an actress, comedian and writer with a travel expert? Ella Foote finds out...

Doon Mackichan, British actress, comedian and writer, known for award-winning comedy series *Smack the Pony* and BBC comedy *Two Doors Down*, met *Travel Matters* founder Karen Simmonds at the school gates when their children were in primary school. Doon and mutual friend Jenny convinced Karen to join them swimming at Tooting Bec Lido. They would swim all-year round and in all weather. "Tooting lido seemed cold to me, even in the summer," says Karen.

"All the mums in the playground would be saying, 'please tell me you're not going to the lido today' as it was pissing down with rain," says Doon.

After some light bullying Karen joined them and fell in love with it. "I loved the community," she says. "People say it is like being a member of church. It is a place to really connect with other people and swimming at the lido has become a discipline I love so much."

Doon, although largely known for her television, film and theatre appearances, swam the English Channel in relay in the late 90s and took part in the 2005 Cold Water Swimming Championships in Oulu, Finland which went on to inspire the events at Tooting Bec Lido in London. "I learned to swim in an outdoor pool," says Doon. "I remember the swimming costume I was wearing; it had a white band and a flouncy skirt. My mum just let me go of me in the deep end, I was swimming! When we moved to Scotland we lived near Largo Bay, I started swimming with my dad in the North Sea when even in summer it was freezing. I

think that was the real proving, the joy of the ice-cold water, the shells, rock pools and it was so clean then."

When Doon moved to back to London she discovered the lido at Tooting Bec. "I always just wanted to jump into a river, waterfall or a lake – I just wanted

to be outside," she says. "I got involved with the Channel relay by sheer fluke. I was meeting someone who I wanted to be in a play I had written, and she said, 'I just can't do the first weekend of August because I am swimming the Channel' and I thought, wow! I had just

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Doon divides her time between London and Hastings



Photo credit: David Levene

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read a book about a woman trying to swim the channel, I wanted in. They all trained at the lido, so I started joining in and then one of the team members got ill and suddenly I was on the team. I never swam competitively or was taught how to do front crawl; I was just sort of into swimming outside.” Training for the Channel relay led to joining the South London Swimming Club trip to Finland. Doon would swim for an hour at Brockwell Lido or Tooting every morning before rehearsing all day. “I have no idea how I had the energy to do that all day,” she says. “Swimming in the Arctic was an amazing experience. Afterwards I just remember thinking, I could swim anywhere in the world safely. I know about hypothermia; I know about my feet going yellow and fainting after getting out the water.”

When Doon moved to Hastings in 2016, she kept on swimming, now in the sea. She met up with three other women which today is a group of more than 100. “We got the RNLI to give us a safety briefing and we try to keep away from the fishing boats being launched,” she says. “But there was this whole weird tussle between us and the fishermen who have had that beach for 600 years and now we have claimed it as a women’s beach as well. There can be 30 women on the beach at 9am, whatever the weather, so it has been about learning about the sea and tides.”

During the pandemic it was a total game changer for Doon. “I met loads of people I had never met since living in Hastings.” Doon lives between London and Hastings, one of her daughters is still at school in London. On one of her moves back to London in 2020 she met up with Karen and they talked about lockdown and the beach at Hastings. “We talked about what a revolution swimming had been and how much it had helped people,” says Doon. “First thing in the morning, all socially distanced on the beach. To scream, whoop and swim and feeling better all day.” It was at this point that Karen and Doon came up with an idea for a retreat.



Photo credit: David Levene

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Karen also learned to swim in an outdoor pool, she learnt with her granny. She was never really into cold water until she was enticed into the lido by Doon and friend Jenny. During the pandemic Tooting Bec Lido was closed and Karen missed swimming so much she brought a pool for her back garden and tethered

herself to a tree. “On-the-spot swimming isn’t the same as doing a length at Tooting, but it was about immersion and the joy of swimming,” says Karen. “When I met up with Doon that year, it felt so Zeitgeist to do a swimming retreat.”

Travel Matters has been in business for over twenty years and, conscious of

a loose agenda which followed Doon’s perfect day structure – swimming in the morning, walking back up to the house for breakfast then writing. The afternoons were free to do as people wanted. “To be cooked for was incredible for all the women,” says Doon. “To wake up to the smell of food that you haven’t bought or chopped was the best. We would swim in the loch each day, have an incredible breakfast and then there would be a silence. No tapping of computer keys, just writing in journals.” There is no pressure to write anything specific, or to be a writer. Some even chose to paint. There were a couple of writers who had ideas they wanted to work on and some wrote letters. “It was cathartic for them,” says Doon. “Each day there was someone who would reveal this amazing skill, an intrepid mountaineer who took people off up a mountain. Or there was a mushroom expert who brought all these amazing mushrooms back one day. There were tears and laughter, it was brilliant. So healing.”

The retreats are for anyone, it was coincidence it was all women on the first trip. Karen and Doon are seeking funding to be able to offer bursary places to those who need it. The first group are still connected. There is a WhatsApp group named after a line in a poem one woman wrote, Tethered by Kindness, from the words, ‘women ahead of me, women behind me, tethered by kindness’. Some of the group have rebooked for this year’s trip. Karen says, “The fellowship, friendship, connection and community – I love the fact that you can just come as you are.”

For more information visit:



Every morning of the retreat starts with a wild swim



The retreat on the banks of Loch Tay, Scotland



Swim pals Karen and Doon