Experience

Experience: I swim to work

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It started two years ago. I run a summer arts festival in Munich called the Kulturstrand, at the Ludwigsbrücke, a bridge that stands over the river Isar, where I have an office. I work there most days and when I do, I swim there. I'm one of those people who likes to swim in all conditions – I'll swim in the Atlantic when it's 10 degrees, which my wife thinks is a little strange. Sometimes I swim the river with a group of friends in the autumn or winter, but I mainly swim to work in the summer.

I live two kilometres upstream from my office. The river at that point is too wild to swim down unaided; it's like an Alpine river. I wouldn't even consider it without a flotation device, but then I learned about a designer in Switzerland who'd invented a thing called a Wickelfisch. It's a waterproof bag that you can keep your stuff in; it also locks in air so acts as a float. When I saw it I bought one, and the next day I swam to work for the first time.

I've lived in Munich for 34 years, so I know the river very well. And I really hate traffic. I hate the aggression and the fighting for space. When I'm not swimming,

I usually go to work by bike, but even that's become very difficult. Munich has grown rapidly in the past seven years. There are seven bridges across the river and all these different forms of transport are jostling for space. So being a pragmatic person, I figured why not take the river to work?

I check the conditions the night before. In summer, the Isar can be anything between 14 and 23 degrees centigrade. About 95% of days, it's safe to swim but occasionally we get a surge after a thunderstorm in the mountains and the current is too strong. That's when you get thick tree trunks drifting down the river - you don't want to be floating around in that. The state of Bavaria provides updates on the river level and the water temperature every 15 minutes, and gives a prognosis for the next 24 hours, so I can check my phone and decide if I'm going to swim the following day.

The fastest I've managed is 12 minutes, but usually it takes around 27. I pack my laptop, suit and phone in the bag and jump in. In summer, I just wear trunks and rubber shoes because there are things on the river bed that can cut your feet like broken glass and old bicycles. When I'm in the water, it's absolutely beautiful. It's very calm and peaceful, even though it's like a rapid river. Sometimes I hear commuters yelling at each other up on the riverbank while I'm having fun watching ducklings and squirrels. In the 1970s, when they deepened the river basin, there was a project called the Renaturierung to give the downtown river a more natural appearance. So it's a beautiful stretch of water with these huge salmon-like fish called huchen that have come back in the past few decades. If I wear goggles, I can watch them because the water's so clear. The river has drinking-water quality these days, so if I get thirsty I can just take a mouthful.

When I arrive at work the first thing I do is pick up a cappuccino, sit in one of the basket chairs by the riverbank and dry out in the sunshine. Being the boss means I can do things like that. Recently I've become a kind of local celebrity, the strange guy who swims in the river. In the past few weeks, other people have started coming with me. There's probably a few dozen of us altogether. Now that more people are joining in, we've published advice on our website about how to swim safely. If you're not prepared, the Isar can be very dangerous.

My eldest son, Xaver, who's seven, even swam with me a couple of times this summer. He wore a wetsuit and felt a bit chilly when he got in but he soon warmed up. A few days ago, there was a school class on one of the bridges and they pointed down and called out to me, so I got out and gave them a little talk about what I do. It's become a great story about people, nature and civilisation, and how they can coexist.

As told to Gordon Darroch

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