



PAUL KALAS

When the first picture of a black hole at the centre of our galaxy was featured on the front pages of major newspapers on 13 May, I couldn't help thinking... that's in my favourite swim story!

I call it 'The Galactic Night Swim' and the idea is to marvel at the billions of stars shining from the centre of our galaxy while swimming at very dark locations with clear skies. In my swimming travel guide *Crete Swim*, I recommend the southern coastline of the Mediterranean island of Crete, with its excellent weather all summer long and skies so dark that our galaxy, also known as the Milky Way, appears like a patchy cloud stretching up from the southern horizon.

THE MILKY WAY

The centre of the Milky Way is in the constellation Sagittarius, which traces the shape of a tea kettle, though it's supposed to be a mythical centaur. To the right of it a curving path of stars forms the constellation Scorpius the scorpion. A black hole is one of the most remarkable objects in the universe because its gravity is so strong that light never escapes it. The 13 May image captured the hot material that surrounds our black hole just before vanishing into it.

SWIMMING IN STARS

The humble outdoor swimmer can gaze at the night sky between the tea kettle and the scorpion and appreciate both the beauty of the stars that can be seen with the naked eye and the profound nature of the unseen. For example, you are looking at a place where time itself is distorted by the black hole's gravity. If you could fly close to it for just a few hours, just like the fictional astronauts in the 2014 Christopher Nolan film *Interstellar*, when you return to Earth you will find everyone is decades older than you.

My Galactic Night Swim is special because the stars follow swimmers into the water! Wearing clear-lens goggles, you will see hundreds of fleeting white flashes of light as your arms move through the water in front




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of you. These are the microscopic bioluminescent plankton called dinos (dinoflagellates). You can float on your back and look underwater at your kicking legs as pinpoints of light swirl chaotically around them, and then look up again to appreciate the vast expanse of starlight.

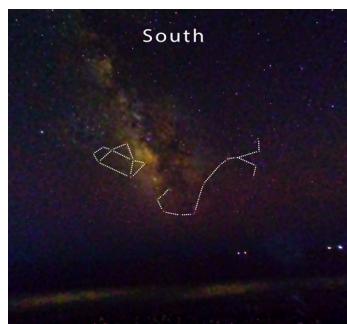
NO MOON SWIM

For maximum effect, I recommend choosing a day and time when the moon is not in the night sky. For 2022, new moon occurs on 28 June, 28 July, and August 27, and the swim can begin one hour after sunset. Remote locations will be the darkest, though I prefer having a few nearby lights. All night swims should be practised first during the day. I would choose very easy and safe spots for water entry and exit, placing your own light on the beach as a reference point in the darkness. For safety, I do not swim more than 30m from my entry point and stay within chest-deep areas.

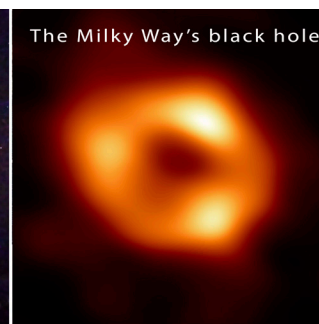
Indeed, the Galactic Night Swim is hardly the same as a long workout during the day. Instead, consider it a collection of surreal moments that may be no different than a dream, where the weightlessness of your body in the darkness releases your mind to travel among the smallest and largest things in nature, and years later you might realise the experience was as timeless as that black hole up in the sky. 

What's your Swim Story?

Email: editor@outdoorswimmer.com



Credit: Crete Swim - An insider's guide to sightseeing from the water



Credit: Event Horizon Telescope collaboration