

# SARK SWIMS

**Susanne Masters followed a 1914 guide to the coast, caves and bays of Sark**

**S**ark is like Gormenghast for swimmers; there are certain times at which things must be done. In Les Fontaines Bay, swimming through ‘The Fairy Grotto’ is only possible at the highest of the high tides. In contrast, exploring Jewel Cave as a scrambling swimmer needs a low tide. On this little island with one of the biggest tidal ranges in the world, the La Trobe brothers’ 1914 ‘Guide to the Coast, Caves and Bays of Sark’ is handy for exploring the right places at the right times. Old sketch maps remain accurate guides on this island untouched by roads and cars, and yield a sense of kinship with swimmers who enjoyed Sark waters long ago and those yet to come.

## WILD ASPECTS

Our first swim after arriving on the boat from Guernsey was in Le Creux, the old harbour, within minutes of landing at Maseline. Our second swim, the day after we arrived, was planned for us by the weather. Buffeted by wind we looked down from the headland between Plat Rue Bay and Clouet Bay at the sea rushing past L’Etac – a rock islet – in a glacial blue slipstream while waves surged and crashed on rockpools. We knew we would not be swimming in Jupiter Pools that day. However, Sark is a small enough island that when the sea presents a wild aspect there is usually a nearby spot sheltered by opposing orientation that offers a safe swim. We walked back up and around on a trail through bracken and brambles to reach Rouge Terrier. Steep terrain would make it a terrifying place to reach, but posts and rope provide a steady anchor as the path gets steep and on the rocks there are railings and a choice of following a railing into

the sea or using a ladder to get straight into deep water.

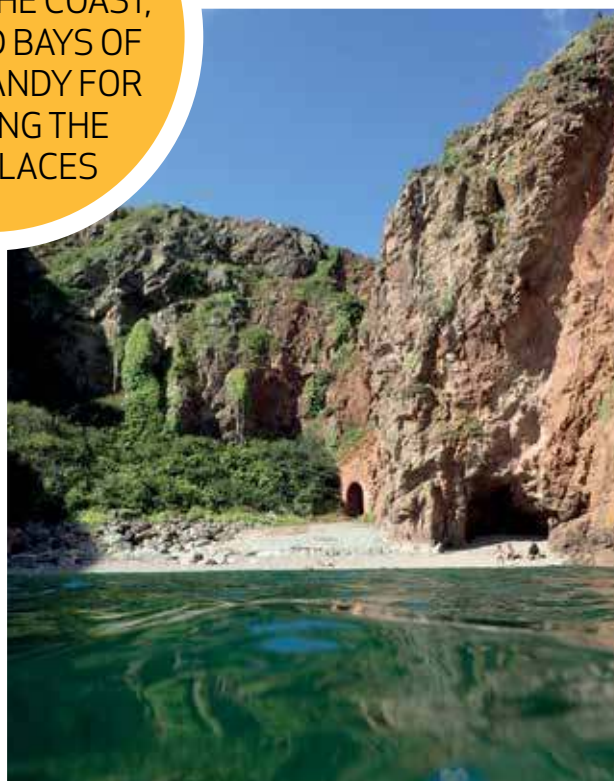
## A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Every day we explored the island from different marine perspectives. We left our clothes at the bottom of the steps down to Grève de la Ville then skirted the shore walking in and out of caves taller than houses, including the Gulls’ Chapel, a cave that pierces a promontory. Swimming back across the bay, shoals of lesser sandeels silvered the water and ballan wrasse patrolled their territories. At the bottom of the western flank of La Coupé, the narrow isthmus connecting Little Sark to Sark, Grande Grève is a sandy beach aligned with sunsets. Here we body surfed on tidy parallel waves and explored rock

LA TROBE BROTHERS’ 1914 ‘GUIDE TO THE COAST, CAVES AND BAYS OF SARK’ IS HANDY FOR EXPLORING THE RIGHT PLACES



*Cystoseira tamariscifolia*



pools with the rising tide at our heels. A perfect way to enjoy sunset.

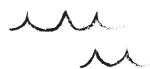
## FOAM PARTY

We reached Les Fontaines Bay as planned at a particularly high tide, which meant we could swim through ‘The Fairy Grotto’, a natural rock arch rising out of the water. Wash from a passing boat jiggled us in the arch like a bruising foam party. Returning to the beach back through the arch,



rocks were felt as scratches and stubbed toes before seeing them. Next time I will remember to wear my swimming shoes.

A steep scramble down to Jewel Cave under the Gouliot headland is rewarded by entering what must be as close to a natural cathedral as possible. Immersed underwater at high tide and providing deep shade at low tide this cave creates unsurpassed conditions for sea anemones. Like segments of a



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Jewel anemone



Cork wrasse



Jewel Cave

FLOATING IN THE POOL WAS LIKE BEING IN A WILD SENSORY DEPRIVATION TANK

### If you go

- "La Trobe Guide to the Coast, Caves and Bays of Sark" available at Sark post office
- Hire a bicycle on the island - whizzing around on two wheels makes it easier to fit in more swims than the slower transport options of horse and cart or walking
- Caves, cliff jumps, kayak trips and current-assisted swims with knowledgeable local guides at Adventure Sark [www.adventuresark.com/coasteering/about-coasteering/](http://www.adventuresark.com/coasteering/about-coasteering/)
- Société Serquaise and the tourist office are useful ports of call to find out about après swim star watching on the world's first Dark Sky Island, brewery tours etc. [www.socsercq.sark.gg](http://www.socsercq.sark.gg) and [www.sark.co.uk](http://www.sark.co.uk)
- Accommodation: Stocks Hotel if you feel fancy, B&B at Le Vieux Clos and Pomme de Chien and La Valette
- For exploring rocky shores, swimworthy shoes are essential

← stained glass window the cave walls gleamed red and green in the light of our torches. A shaft of sunlight fell into the water, an invitation to swim past high walls carpeted in sponges out to swathes of kelp on rocks in the sunshine.

### VENUS POOL

While propping our bicycles out of the way of tractors and horse carts at the entrance gate to Gorey Common a man told us Venus Pool is hard to find. He also said there were lots of people there. Armed with local knowledge and our plan to swim in the lesser-known pools neither of these pieces of information was useful or off-putting. Although Venus Pool can't be seen from above on the headland, rock cairns mark a zigzag route skirting down to reach it. To reach Venus

Pool it is a climb down natural ladders composed of rocks. This plunge pool is not for swims lengthy in distance, more for unhurried exploration of underwater scenery. At a shadowy side, Rainbow wrack looked khaki green from one angle, from the other tipped with turquoise – the result of colour made by structural formation not pigmentation. A closer look at a flash of orange partly concealed at the base of a clump of kelp revealed jewel anemones. Floating in the clear water of the pool was like being in a wild sensory deprivation tank – cool but meditative.

Peace and quiet, plenty to do on dry land, and a variety of swims including everything from sandy beaches to scrambling through a cave are enticing. For those happy to hand over swim plans and schedules to the rhythm of tides and dictates of winds Sark is a perfect retreat 🌊