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Tibetans dive into Aussie swimming culture on Sydney's Northern Beaches

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Tibetans dive into Aussie swimming culture on Sydney's Northern Beaches



Learning to swim is a rite of passage for many Australians and the new Tibetan community of Sydney's Northern Beaches is no exception.

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By Pema Dolkar

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Tibetan refugees on Sydney's Northern Beaches are preparing for summer by learning to swim. The ten-week Tibetan Community Swim Program runs annually, this year on Saturdays from October to December in the coastal suburb of Dee Why.

Sydney's Northern Beaches are home to over one thousand resettled Tibetan refugees. Hailing from mountains and high plateaus, most of the Tibetans don't know how to swim and had little-to-no water safety knowledge before arriving in Australia.

Since 2012, the not-for-profit [Water Skills for Life](#) has been running this program with the support of various grants and community volunteers. The program is free for new arrivals, and just \$20 for those who have been in Australia for a few years.

Swimming is a way of life and a basic survival skill so, it's very important for the Tibetans to adopt this culture for their own well-being. -*Dhondup Tsering, Community Northern Beaches*

Tanya Carmont, the founder and president of the organisation, remembers she was inspired by a chance meeting with adult Tibetans who had come to learn swimming while she was teaching at Warringah Aquatic Centre.

She soon realised that most of the Tibetans arriving in Sydney couldn't swim. So, she started the swimming program to introduce the Tibetans to basic swimming skills and water safety in Australia.

"One of the other reasons I started this was because it's so expensive to go to a swimming lesson," Carmont tells SBS Tibetan. "The cheapest at the moment I find is about \$10 for a half hour lesson. It's really not a thing that most Tibetans when they first arrive here can afford."



Tibetan mum's group listening to their swimming instructor
SBS Tibetan

This swimming program is distinct because there is no age restriction to register. Tibetans of all ages learn to swim at the same time and in the same pool. A total of 63 Tibetans from the age of five to 55 have registered for the currently ongoing program.

Dhondup Tsering, a settlement service supporter at Community Northern Beaches, says that many Tibetans have been brought up and lived in high Himalayan mountains as nomads that there is a lack of awareness about water skills.

“Now that they are in Australia, swimming is a way of life and a basic survival skill so, it's very important for the Tibetans to adopt this culture for their own well-being,” says Tsering.

The numerous health benefits of swimming and an active lifestyle are another plus for the community members, plus the program presents a path for refugees to integrate into Australian society and traditions.

It really is humbling to think that what we take for granted as Australians, we do as a natural course of living here, that we are able to give it to somebody who isn't able to do it. - Tanya Carmont, founder and president of Water Skills for Life

What's more, for the Tibetan refugees who have been through traumatic experiences of imprisonment and torture, swimming can help in a long, sometimes painful healing process.

“It gives you a sense of freedom,” says Carmont. “It's very relaxing to float in the water.”



Tibetan kids learning how to float with the help of volunteers
SBS Tibetan

Jampa Dhonden is a middle-aged Tibetan who has been in Australia for four months. He didn't know how to swim when he first arrived but tells SBS Tibetan that he has taken on the challenge of learning to swim as a beginner.

“I think in Australia everyone is very health-conscious and swimming is one way of achieving a healthy body and mind,” says Dhonden. “Geographically Australia is surrounded by ocean, so swimming is a basic survival skill for your own safety.”

Despite the challenge of learning to swim at an older age, he is determined to progress and register his kids for the next program.



Adult Tibetans learning basic hand movements
SBS Tibetan

Tenzin Kyinzom, 11, came to Australia with her parents and she's also learning to swim with her younger brother. She says she wants to learn because she noticed that even the kids younger than her can swim in Australia.

"Everyone here says swimming is their hobby," she says. "It is embarrassing not to know how to swim. I don't want to drown so; I must learn swimming."

Tsering says that the Tibetan community on the Northern Beaches is blessed by the strong support of volunteers who make this swimming program possible.

"The locals here are mostly well-established and highly educated so they can afford the time and resources to support the needy community like our Tibetan community," he says. "It is humbling that every time we seek volunteers, we get excellent responses from the locals ready to commit. I really appreciate that about the Northern Beaches."

Over the years, Carmont has come closer to the Tibetan community thanks to the swimming program and says that she loves seeing the Tibetans down at the Dee Why's rock pool.

"It's rewarding for us because they are very appreciative of what we're doing," she says. "It really is humbling to think that what we take for granted as Australians, we do as a natural course of living here, that we are able to give it to somebody who isn't able to do it."

Water Skills for Life's Tibetan Community Swim Program is funded by the Dee Why RSL, Manly Lions Club, and Fitness First Dee Why. The Tibetan participants are provided with swimming kits including goggles and caps.

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