

COLD COMFORTS

A weekly pre-dawn dip off Henley Beach is winning fans from across Adelaide – and imitators right around the country

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If you live by Henley Beach you will have heard them. More than 450 squealing people charging into the ocean at 6.30am every Wednesday. But no one should be concerned. Behind every squeal is a happy human whose cup is being filled with the joys of personal connection, fun and a sense of adventure.

Let's face it, jumping in the ocean when it's 1C outside is challenging. "That's just the point," says Lily Biggs, one of the founders of Salty Sips, a community initiative that has won legions of fans from across Adelaide within three months of starting.

Biggs, a 23 year-old honours psychology student of Fitzroy, kicked off the idea with Nikita Trewartha, 25, a physiotherapist from Morphettville. The pair only met last December when "we literally bonded over the ocean", Biggs says.

They began taking ocean swims together. Biggs had heard of an organised group swim in Perth, known as Cold Nips, where people go for a dip in the ocean together at sunrise followed by coffee, all brought about by the idea of connection and meeting new people. Biggs contacted the organisers with the idea of working together to do something similar in Adelaide. The founders of Cold Nips replied they were welcome to join when they came to Adelaide at the end of this year.

"That was way too far away," says Biggs. "I thought, 'I want to do this now.' We started the next week."

That was in February, and they started with a group of six friends. Three months later, numbers have ballooned to 450 people, but the values are the same.

"The connection, that feeling of freedom when you're in the water and also that sense of feeling good about yourself because you're waking up early and jumping in the water," says Biggs. "All of the little bits together makes it one big happy connection."

Did they ever imagine this would become so big?

"When there were just 6 of us, Lily said 'Okay, I think our goal is to get to 100 people'. I laughed. Everyone laughed. 'Yeah right,' we said," says Trewartha. "And then less than a month later it was growing by 10,



then it was 40. It seemed to double each time."

Even before the women created their Salty Sips Instagram page, numbers were increasing, either by word of mouth or from someone posting an Instagram story about the morning swim.

When Salty Sips had grown to double figures they were still forming a circle and any new Salty Sippers were asked to raise their hands so they could see how big the group was growing. They don't do that anymore. But Trewartha and Biggs still talk to everyone at the start reminding them all of why they are there.

"We tell them it's an all-inclusive connection group initiative. It's a nice opportunity to meet someone new so we let them know to introduce themselves to someone and say 'hi'," says Biggs.

Getting a sip of coffee together at a local cafe after a cold dip in the salty sea is an important part of the Salty Sips ritual. People gather in groups but every week there will inevitably be a new face among them. There is a constant babble of chatter and laughter. Joe's Henley Beach, a popular local eatery has been the main meeting point – but as the coffee line started winding along the street into the neighbouring carpark, Biggs and Trewartha organised for other Henley Beach cafes, Sea Salt and Acacia, to be included in the Salty Sips family.

The dynamics have changed too. As the group has grown there is less opportunity for getting to know everyone really well.

“We don't care who you are or what you look like – come for a swim!”

"It's a shame it's not possible to know everyone's names now, but it's beautiful to see people building connections among themselves," says Trewartha.

Shaun O'Callaghan, who was one of the first six Salty Sippers, is hoping the social media frenzy won't put some people off coming.

"It has crossed my mind that there may be some people that feel they can't come because they don't fit the image of the CrossFit girls, the beautiful people getting photos in front of the ocean doing this cool thing," says O'Callaghan. "It was never the intention to be that. We don't care who you are or what you look like – come for a swim, let's just have a chat and get connected."

An essential ingredient is realising that you are stepping out of your comfort zone in some way. Meeting new people, especially a large group of

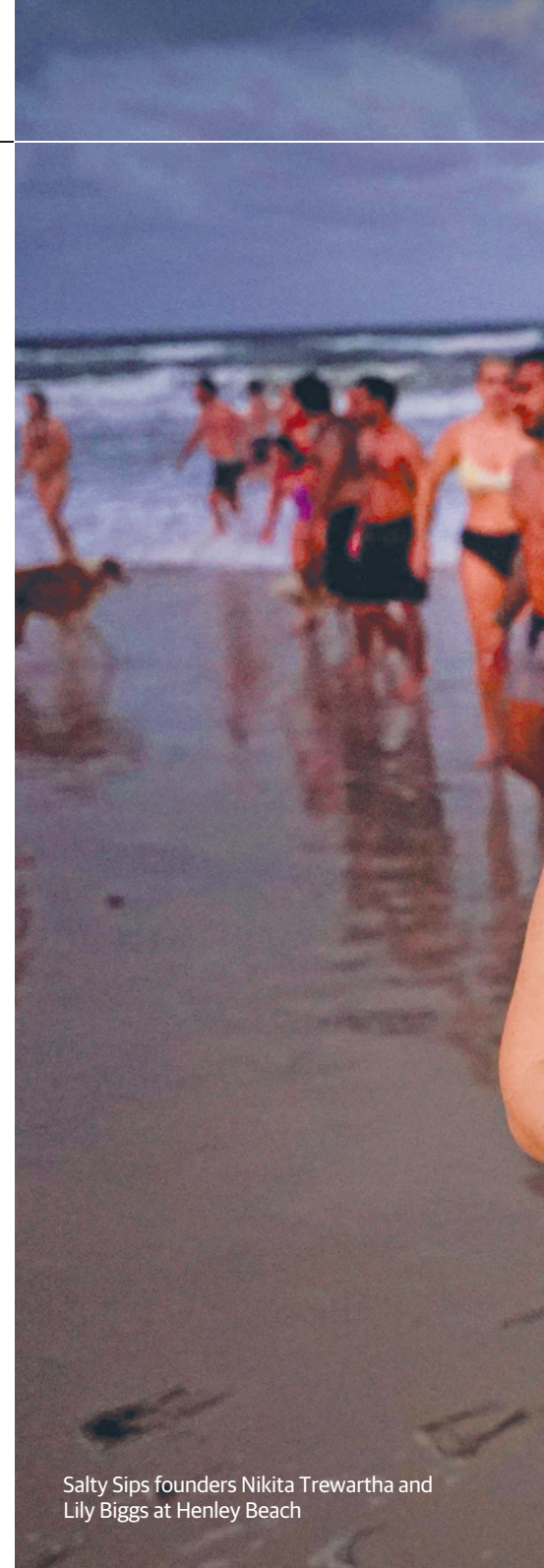
them, jumping into a cold ocean, and just getting out of bed early for some is a challenge. Even the founders, Trewartha and Biggs, are challenged each week now the group is beyond anything they could have prepared for.

"I'm terrible at public speaking, I get super nervous and now there's 400 people out there, standing up and saying a few words is a big step out of my comfort zone," Trewartha says. "But it's important that we do, as it brings people together telling everyone the purpose behind what we are doing."

There is no age range, but most are in their 20s. So far there are more women but diversity is encouraged. One woman brought her dad along. He told Biggs that after he dived into the cold water, and popped up again he found himself laughing out loud, delirious with the exhilaration of it all.

Along with friendships being made and strengthened, romances have sprung up too. One couple met through Salty Sips and their first date was back at Henley Beach where it all began.

A strong focus behind the group is mental health. As part of that, Trewartha and Biggs have introduced yoga and meditation sessions along with mindfulness talks for those that want them before they go for their ocean dip. They are all free from instructors who provide these services professionally outside of Salty Sips. The sessions have proven to be popular.



Salty Sips founders Nikita Trewartha and Lily Biggs at Henley Beach



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“The fact that we have 150 people moving their bodies together at 6am in the freezing cold is a pretty epic thing,” says Biggs.

They have had offers from many other providers too, from personal trainers, pilates and other yoga instructors, even a cycle business offering bikes to keep Salty Sippers warm while they wait for their coffee. Together Trewartha and Biggs have learnt to embrace opportunities where they can and which fit with their values. They navigate their way through it all together, supporting each other in managing a much bigger venture than they had ever imagined.

Both women, though thrilled with the success of Salty Sips, are glad it’s getting colder. “At least with the onset of winter, it might slow the process down a little to allow us to catch up,” says Trewartha.

But there are no signs of that yet. Biggs and Trewartha have been bombarded with inquiries from all over Australia from people who want to start a Salty Sips movement. At the end of last month, Salty Sips was operating at Henley Beach, Port Noarlunga and Port Lincoln, along with the Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and Darwin.

So, what is the key to its popularity?

“It is something very different. It’s not about partying, it’s not exercise, you don’t have to physically exert yourself for it, it’s free and it’s once a week – so it’s not something that happens all the time and

gets repetitive.” says Natalia Leon, a 23-year-old nurse from Plympton who has been coming since the second week.

O’Callaghan agrees. He also believes that Covid-19 has left people with a greater appreciation for the outside world. As for personal connection, “I think there’s always been a need for it but now people are actively taking steps to make sure that need is met,” he says.

Trewartha and Biggs have recently affiliated with Batyr, which describes itself as a preventive mental health organisation, created and driven by young people for young people. They have also joined with local fashion business, ORTC Clothing Co, to produce Salty Sips merchandise, with 20 per cent of proceeds going towards Batyr and the rest to help Salty Sips build a website and manage the multiple requirements of a growing not-for-profit business. Local cafes have lent support by agreeing to donate 10 per cent of proceeds towards Batyr. Trewartha and Biggs want to highlight Batyr’s workshop “Being Herd”, which is about sharing your mental health story and letting people know it’s okay to talk about your experiences.

Trewartha learnt this the hard way. “When I finished school and went to uni I had a bit of a rough year,” she says. “I really struggled at the start because I didn’t talk about it to the point where I felt like I couldn’t function or study. I

was really foggy. But then I reached out for help and realised how much better I felt once I did.”

“That’s the stigma right there,” says Biggs. “Just avoiding the conversation. The message is that it’s OK to tell your story.”

It’s not a surprise to hear then that the thing that warms Trewartha and Biggs’ hearts the most about Salty Sips is getting messages from others telling them what a positive effect it’s having on their lives.

So, how does it feel taking the plunge? “I’ve been describing it as a disgusting amount of joy!” says Biggs. “I smile the whole morning.”

“My cheeks hurt by the end,” agrees Trewartha.

Ben Stocks, 24, of St Peters – a devotee since the first week – says of Salty Sips: “If you can get out of bed at 5am to go for the coldest swim of your life, there’s not too many obstacles in the day that can slow you down.”