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By R.C. Staab, AARP

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How I Got in Shape for My Adventure Vacation

After a hip fracture, I needed to build upper body strength and stamina to prepare to swim with dolphins.



R.C. Staab spent weeks preparing for a trip to swim with super pods of dolphins off the coast of Central America. As part of his exercise routine, he swam to get comfortable with his snorkel, mask and rash guard.

COURTESY R.C. STAAB

When I reflect on my favorite vacations, many of the most memorable moments came from a bit of hard work. I climbed a mountain to see young monks at a Bhutanese temple perched on a Himalayan cliff, and trekked across the hot Moroccan desert to rest on rugs beneath a [sky filled with stars](#). Then there was the November day when I was snorkeling in the Norwegian Sea, surrounded by a pod of killer whales more intent on eating herring than me. Now, at 69 years old, I have to push harder for that last snorkel and find the energy for the last step to the summit.

Just as I book a car, buy new hiking shoes or hire an expert tour guide well in advance, before embarking on an adventure vacation, I want to understand the trip's physical requirements so I can get in shape. My typical fitness schedule involves running three times a week, visiting the gym or swimming twice a week. The problem is that my good intentions have a way of evaporating around Tuesday afternoon, when deadlines loom and life intrudes.

Understanding a trip's physical requirements

Last summer I signed up for a five-day trip this winter to swim with super pods of dolphins off the coast of Central America. After speaking with the trip leader, Emmy-nominated filmmaker and wildlife enthusiast Patrick Dykstra, I learned that the trip's physical demands were less about swimming endurance and more about upper-body strength and stamina.



Prior to the trip, the writer worked on building grip strength for riding underwater Jet Skis and ladder climbs.

COURTESY R.C. STAAB

Several times daily, our small group would board tenders from the liveaboard vessel to search for dolphins. Once spotted, we'd jump into the water and grab onto underwater Jet Skis, which require a strong grip and upper-body strength. Dykstra said that while travelers are initially worried about deep water, rough seas or marine life, the biggest surprise is often the physical challenge of getting in and out of the tender multiple times each day.

According to the National Institutes of Health, adults 50-plus need to rebuild muscle mass, increase aerobic endurance and restore balance that naturally diminish over time. Without some pre-trip conditioning, spending three to four hours a day in and out of deep ocean water plus 24 hours a day on a relatively small boat means becoming fatigued more quickly and being more likely to experience joint and muscle injuries.

Dykstra's tips for preparing included:

- Build up to strength training three times a week.
- Stretch and work on core strength to maintain your balance on a boat.
- Swim to get comfortable with your snorkel, mask and rash guard.

Even for a less physically demanding trip, like a [cruise](#), some of the same issues will still be present for older adults. Ricky Trautwein, product manager at Windstar Cruises, says transitions in and out of the water often catch travelers off guard, especially in remote locations.

If you've booked a shore excursion or boat ride, he advises consulting the ship's sports coordinator or marina specialist to understand the physical demands of the excursion. He also suggests using onboard gyms, classes or a basic stretching routine to warm up to avoid falls.



One of his goals was to increase the weights and repetitions.

COURTESY R.C. STAAB

Check in with your doctor

Having fractured my hip 19 months ago, my pre-trip planning included checking in with my orthopedist, Dr. Lauren Borowski, a primary care sports medicine physician at NYU Langone and head team physician for the U.S. men's ski jumping team.

Borowski emphasized the importance of cross-training. "You need to prepare yourself with the activity that you're going to do," she said. "Being more well- rounded, getting two or three days of resistance training and two to three days of cardio are the best ways to approach it."

She added, "If your goal is to do a lot of hiking, you can't just walk" to prepare. "If walking [were] just the answer, we'd never have any problems. It doesn't do enough. ... We need to have a variety of different exercises that strengthen the muscles on an uneven terrain."

I also asked my family medical practice for tips to prevent injuries and stay fit. "Focus on consistency over intensity, as small daily efforts build lasting fitness," said Dr. Rocky Patel, medical director at One Medical Seniors. "You should also always listen to your body by prioritizing rest and recovery days so muscles and joints adjust to training."

Create a fitness plan

Armed with details of my trip and doctor consults, I asked Rhonda Murphy, a good friend and longtime gym owner and fitness instructor in Fresno, California, to work with me to create a fitness plan. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Murphy has pivoted her business to develop fitness programs aimed at combating the effects of aging, and has offered me regular physical therapy advice since my [hip surgery](#).



The 69-year-old focused on upper body strength, leg strength, core strength and balance prior to his trip.

COURTESY R.C. STAAB

“I’ve got to train you different for this trip than I would train someone for a cruise, when I just have to make sure they can get through the buffet line,” Murphy joked. “First, I need you to work on increasing your upper body strength: a full range of exercises for your chest, back and shoulders. Then, for endurance, I need you to concentrate on lower body strength, like upper thigh exercises and lateral leg exercises. ... You have to work to constantly [maintain balance](#) on unstable surfaces for days, and that requires mid-body and leg strength.”

In terms of what to do in the water to prepare, I spoke with Sheyne Grullon, aquatics department manager for The Wright Fit, a fitness and gym management company based in New York City. His suggestion was to “start with breath work in a pool. ... Repeating the exercise of exhaling will help you prepare and get your lungs ready for swimming underwater. Build your endurance by treading water” and swimming regularly, about 20 laps every few days.

For this trip, my goals were:

Prepare a weekly fitness schedule to which I would commit.

Spend more time than usual working out by adding stretch/cardio sessions before a gym workout or my run/swim.

Push harder by increasing weights and the number of repetitions.

Get in the water regularly if possible.

Laying the foundation

For the first week, Murphy recommended starting with at least three hours of exercise. Do two sets of 10 repetitions for each exercise of strength, stretching and core.

Each stretching/core session includes four exercises: stretching of the hips, legs (chair squats) and shoulders, plus simple core moves like side bends and controlled single-leg lifts.

The strength training is focused on one day of “press” exercises, such as chest and leg presses, and another day on “pull” exercises, such as arm rows with weights and leg extensions.

Ramping up for the second and third weeks

Increase the number of sets from two to three. Increase weights when possible, or increase the number of repetitions. The point is to have a slow, steady progression rather than big jumps.



The writer, right, was on a Jet Ski with a dolphin and his brother-in-law.

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Reach maximum effort by the fifth week

Murphy's plan included increasing the number of workout days and adding exercises that would mimic the trip's demands. I worked on building grip strength for underwater Jet Skis and ladder climbs, and improving my balance for a rocking boat.

- Increase stretching and core to four times a week with three sets of repetitions.
- For strength training, work out three separate days: one day of press exercises, one day of pull exercises and a separate day for legs.
- With water exercises, Grullon also suggested bringing snorkeling gear to get comfortable.

Post-trip debrief

The expert advice that prompted me to focus on upper-body strength, leg strength, core strength and balance prepared me for a thrilling wildlife adventure, both physically and mentally.



The increasing intensity of his workouts prepared the writer to take on new challenges. Here, he gets ready to jump in the water.

COURTESY R.C. STAAB

When I dreaded climbing the skimpy ladder to the boat, I remembered to push from my legs and pull with my upper body in one fluid motion. After an unplanned swim without flippers, my breathing became hard. Focusing on the techniques from my pool workouts, I relaxed, controlled my breathing and plunged back into the ocean water for a fascinating spectacle of hundreds of tuna, dolphins and 6-foot manta rays repeatedly striking at a giant bait ball of red lantern fish.

Some other lessons I learned:

During the trip, continue to practice stretching and core exercises. There was no need for more intense workouts. Save your energy for the trip's adventures. Relax and have fun. When given a choice to go beyond the program to rigorously swim with pilot whales or jump in for bioluminescent night snorkeling, say yes. You've trained for it. The benefits of your new workout mean you can take on new challenges.

Near the end of five weeks of advanced workouts, I rode a horse one morning and played my first game of [pickleball](#). Instead of waking up sore the next day, I surprisingly felt fine.

Bring warm clothes, even in tropical climates. Adrenaline-filled activities that last several hours can drain your body's energy. Suddenly you're shivering without realizing it, like runners at the end of a marathon. Mark your calendar for when you'll start working out for your next vacation. I did.

R.C. Staab is a travel writer, book author, playwright, adventure traveler and wildlife enthusiast. He has been swimming and running for five decades.