The water is cold, the tides are strong, and this is one of the busiest canals in the world. Yet every year people come here from all over the world to try a unique challenge: to swim the Channel. “It’s the bit of water everyone wants to conquer,” says long-distance champion Julie Bradshaw.

MADFISH
Bradshaw has 20 world records. Her most recent is the 46-kilometre swim around Manhattan in New York. It all started when she swam Lake Windermere – England’s largest lake – at the age of just 13. In 1979, at the age of 15, she swam the Channel in 10 hours and 9 minutes, which remains a British junior record. She also holds the record for the fastest Channel crossing by butterfly stroke, which is one of the most difficult swim techniques. Her nickname is Madfish. Does she become a different person when she enters the water?

ON LAND
It’s ironic: Bradshaw now lives in the Midlands town of Loughborough, which is about as far from the sea as you can get in England, but the university there is famous for sports and is the headquarters for Team GB Olympic preparations this summer. When she is not training for long hours in the university pool, Bradshaw is swimming in her back garden: she uses an “Endless Pool”, in which she swims against an artificial current, a bit like a runner’s treadmill.

IF YOU’RE SERIOUS...
Most Channel swims are organised by the Channel Swimming Association. Bradshaw is currently secretary. First of all, the British organisation wants swimmers to complete a supervised swim of six hours or more in water of 15°C or below. It also recommends pilot boats, which cost around £2,500, but are essential for navigating the tides and avoiding ships. “You don’t need to see a boat,” says Bradshaw. “You can hear their engines in the water. As the big boats go past you can see their waves coming towards you. It’s like being a cork bobbing around in the water.”

GLOSSARY
1 tides: correnti
2 challenge: sfida
3 junior: giovanile
4 butterfly stroke: farfalla (stile di nuoto)
5 nickname: soprannome
6 as far from the sea as you can get: nel punto più lontano dal mare
7 headquarters: quartier general
8 endless pool: piscina infinita
9 treadmill: tapis roulant
10 a cork bobbing around in the water: un tappo di sughero che galleggia sull’acqua