Swim Bag: Open Water Goggles

BY LAURA HAMEL  PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE GANEY PHOTOGRAPHY

If you swim open water and you’ve never tried a pair of open water goggles, then you’re missing out on a level of comfort and performance that the standard pool goggles can’t offer. Pool goggles are smaller and, particularly in racing models, are not designed for comfort but for speed. This is great when you’re trying to shave tenths of a second off of your 50 freestyle, but the comfort and visibility of a higher-volume goggles becomes more apparent out in the open. Even our hardcore competitive pool swimmers who have worn nothing but Swedes were won over by some of the open water goggles we tested.

Probably the most noticeable difference in open water goggles is the use of one-piece curved polycarbonate lenses, which offer an excellent 180-degree field of vision. By contrast, most pool goggles have sidewall lenses that allow light in, but are too distorted to see through. Open water goggles also offer some UV protection and some models are polarized.

For fit purposes, and to keep testers comfortable, we did an initial testing in the pool, before taking the goggles out into the chilly (65 degrees) Gulf of Mexico waters for several weeks. Testers quickly learned that many open water goggles do not work well in the pool, especially when streamlining off walls. The higher-volume models create resistance and the goggles can flood. We didn’t test any of the large facemask-style eyewear—just goggles.

All of the goggles we tested have fixed nose bridges—no adjustment available—so getting the right fit is critical. The materials used in most models are very soft and flexible—and all testers found models that worked for their face shapes—even if they had to try a junior size.
Aqua Sphere | aquasphereswim.com

Aqua Sphere makes quality goggles, and choosing between the Kaiman and the Kayenne boils down to fit and appearance. Most testers preferred the appearance of the Kayenne, with its racy triangular lenses. The Kaiman looks a bit more like fitness goggles. Both, however, performed amazingly well in the field. Crystal-clear 180-degree vision, no fogging, no goggles headache, and the silicone frames are super soft and comfortable. Strap adjustment is easy on both models and can be done by feel. Both models come in small sizes. Both also come in a great hardshell storage case for protection against the innards of the typical swim bag.

1. KAYENNE $28
   One test pair had a pleasing light blue lens, good for low-light conditions, and the other a smoke lens. Testers didn’t think the smoke lens would be dark enough to combat Florida’s bright sun, but it did the job, without being too dark for low-light conditions—a great all-purpose tint.

2. KAIMAN $20
   Our Kaiman test pair came with clear lenses, so they were best for early morning open water swims, overcast days, or other low-light conditions. Darker lenses are available.

Barracuda | skylinenw.com

Barracuda, known for its comfortable fit in pool goggles, sent us two models to try in open water. Both received good reviews once fitted correctly. Both models’ straps adjust like standard pool goggles—without any buttons or easy buckles—so getting the correct adjustment before a long swim is important.

3. ULTIMATE $19
   The Ultimate goggles are good to have if you can only have one pair—they will work fine in the pool and the open water. The chief complaint about the Ultimate is the construction of the lenses: flat lenses, with sidewall lenses that let light in, but are not clear enough to see through. This means less peripheral vision than with a one-piece curved lens.

4. PREDATOR $21–23
   Barracuda’s Predator didn’t fit every tester. The nosepiece is shorter than other models’, so testers with wide-set eyes or wide noses couldn’t get a good fit. Both the amber (low light) and smoked (bright light) lens tints performed well in the field. Like the Ultimate, the Predator also has flat lenses with sidewall lenses; however, the sidewalls are large enough to see through, so the field of vision with the Predator is much better than with the Ultimate.

Blueseventy | blueseventy.com

Blueseventy goggles were already popular with some of our testers, and the quality and variety make them an excellent place to start when shopping for open water goggles. They also come in junior sizes for small faces. Testers found crystal clear vision and no fogging with either model. Both models come in a handy plastic and mesh bag to keep them from getting scratched in your swim bag.

5. VISION $20–25
   The Vision has a bulkier frame than the Hydra Vision, and it has easy-to-use pushbutton strap adjustments. This is a comfortable model and, despite its bulk, accommodates a range of face sizes. The smoke lens is a nice mid-range lens for dark or light, and the yellow lens is great for low light. Clarity and field of view are also excellent. Several longtime Hydra Vision users reported leakage with the Vision.

6. HYDRA VISION $22–27
   The Hydra Vision has a sleeker and smaller chassis than the Vision and was preferred by most testers. The Hydra Vision also has quick-adjust straps, but the button is not as obvious as the Vision’s is—feel for it at the outside corner of the lens. Again, the variety of colors and tints, including mirrored, makes the Hydra Vision an attractive option. Our testers with small or narrow faces preferred the Hydra Vision Jr.
Swim Bag: Open Water Goggles

Finis | finisinc.com

Finis goggles were very popular with the open water crew. Testers appreciated the comfort, quality, and performance. They also appreciated the hardshell case that comes with each pair.

7. ENERGY $16

Testers were skeptical of the Energy at first, mostly because the packaging read “Fitness” on it. However, the Energy turned out to be good open water goggles. They’re comfortable, have a good field of vision, and fit a variety of faces. Our test pairs had clear lenses, but smoke lenses are an option. Like most pool goggles, the straps are not easily adjustable and should be configured properly prior to a long swim.

8. SHOCKWAVE $18

The Shockwave, also billed as fitness goggles, is about the same size as the Energy, but has a slightly different shaped frame and features quick-adjust straps. The dark orange lens option is great for low light, and performed moderately well in bright light, although not as well as a dark tint. Overall, testers liked the Shockwave.

9. SURGE $40

Testers enjoyed the Surge goggles. They reported that they’re comfortable and have easy-to-adjust buckles. Some liked the slightly insectoid design and others not so much. The Surge was among the few goggles that have polarized lenses, which really helped with the glare on bright testing days. The Surge fits a bit flatter on the face, and a few testers said that their eyelashes grazed the inside of the lenses, so it may not be a good fit for anyone with protuberant eyes.

Speedo | speedousa.com

10. AIRSEAL TRI MIRROR $20–25

These goggles are one of two that have super-soft air-filled gaskets to cushion around the eyes. They are slightly smaller and the field of vision is not as wide as with some of the larger lenses, but fans were willing to give up a little panorama in exchange for the cool sunglasses-like appearance and soft comfort.

The one thing testers universally disliked was the strap system: just a standard pool goggles strap, but with the most annoying tiny, slippery little buckle that easily popped off at the slightest provocation. All the testers either tied knots in the strap or replaced it with a bungee. The wide-open sides made it easy to attach any type of strap, and the standard goggles bungee offers an especially good fit.

11. BAJA $20

Speedo counts the Baja as a recreational item, but like the Finis models labeled for fitness swimming, the Baja performed admirably as open water goggles. Testers found that the Baja is similar in shape and comfort to blueseventy’s Hydra Vision, with a slightly less elegant, although just as functional, strap adjustment. The Baja is available in a junior size for small faces.

12. OFFSHORE $25

Speedo’s Offshore functioned quite similarly to the Baja. It is similar in size, shape, and comfort, and it also comes in a junior size. The Offshore’s adjustable buckle is slightly larger and easier to manipulate than the Baja’s. A range of colors and tints are available in the Offshore as well.
Putting goggles up to your face and gently pressing them on, without using the strap, is a good way to start finding a fit. If the goggles seal nicely and you have a good view, try putting the strap on. Does the strap change anything? Do you have to loosen or tighten it to keep from getting distorted vision or gaps between the seal and your skin? Do you feel like the goggles are stretched across your nose bridge and may rub or press down too much? Pay attention to these details and you’ll likely find a good fit. The only way to find out for sure, however, is to swim for more than an hour in them. If the goggles fit correctly, you shouldn’t get a headache or deep suction marks around your eyes, even after an hour or more.

Although not as important as fit, color matters—both lens and body color. Several testers didn’t like any of the goggles we tested. This caused two interesting issues: When testers donned the goggles, the nosepiece flexed and pulled the eyecups too far apart. This was usually resolved with a strap adjustment. The other issue was a slight amount of distortion when in crystal clear pool water. This was not a problem out in the open, and the visibility above water is superb. These goggles can be ordered in any color combination, so they are a great choice for team goggles.

Choosing OW Goggles

TYR | tyr.com
13. SPECIAL OPS $30

The testing pairs arrived in what can only be described as rainbow glory. With each component a different bright color and the wild tinting on the lenses, these goggles have a groovy 1960s look. But they’re not just pretty goggles—they were great out in the open water. The polarized lenses cut glare and testers reported great comfort and visibility. The straps adjust like regular pool goggles, no on-the-fly adjustments (even the two buckles were different colors!). With Special Ops, extra care should be taken to make sure an exact fit is achieved prior to venturing out for a long swim.

The Special Ops lenses are a bit more curved than any other goggles we tested. This caused two interesting issues: When testers donned the goggles, the nosepiece flexed and pulled the eyecups too far apart. This was usually resolved with a strap adjustment. The other issue was a slight amount of distortion when in crystal clear pool water. This was not a problem out in the open, and the visibility above water is superb. These goggles can be ordered in any color combination, so they are a great choice for team goggles.

Zoggs | zoggsusa.com
14. PREDATOR FLEX $50

Only one of our testers had used Zoggs before, but several testers were interested after using this model. Supreme comfort and great 180-degree view made these goggles a tester favorite. Our testing pair had polarized lenses and a tint that was fairly dark, although not too dark for early mornings.
15. **PREDATOR FLEX REACTOR $70**

This model has reactive lenses that darken as conditions brighten. Testers went from a low-light dawn to full sunrise in the face with these and reported that they were comfortable in both. One tester wore them in a 5K race in which swimmers swam directly into the rising sun and she reported flawless performance and comfort.

Zoggs sent us only one of the Reactors and it went missing several times from the giant mesh bag of goggles we toted to the beach each weekend. The thief was usually caught and the goggles entrusted to another tester, who would “lose” them the next week. The fate of them after testing is still to be determined—they are currently hidden in a locked cabinet.

16. **OPTI-FIT $25**

These goggles appealed to testers who also like the Speedo Baja, Finis Energy, and Finis Shockwave—all lower volume goggles that are similar to pool goggles. Female testers with small faces liked the women’s sizes. Opti-Fit has great field of vision and is comfortable to wear.

17. **ULTIMA AIR $25**

The Ultima Air is similar to the Speedo Airseal Tri Mirror. It features soft, air-filled gaskets around the eyes. Like the Speedo Airseal, the view is slightly less optimal as the eyecups are smaller and the rims and seals are visible in peripheral vision. Comfort is outstanding.