

21st ROTTNEST CHANNEL SWIM 2011

The Rottnest Channel Swim, is a popular (2300 swimmers 2011) organised marathon swim from Perth's iconic Cottesloe beach to Rottnest Island (Rotto), a place for day excursions or longer holidays. The swim is held in the second half of February each year. The challenging swim caters for teams of 4 as well as duos but it was solo swimmers that started this swim and the greatest challenge is to get the solos to Rotto, 19.7km due west of Cottesloe beach.

For me, a 52 year old male attempting my first solo, the organising and training started long before the event did. Firstly, all swimmers must have a boat over five metres long and a paddler to escort them on the crossing, so a quick scout around secured a paddler, boat and skipper. I also asked a mate to help out on the boat, looking after my dietary needs and to assist with the navigation of this sometimes tricky crossing to Rottnest.

I then joined a squad of just Rotto swimmers away from my Masters club, where I normally swim, so I could concentrate on longer distance training with likeminded (crazy) people. This serious training started in November and our coach soon had us training up to 30km per week in both pool and ocean sessions. Our diverse group of about 40 swimmers included doctors, lawyers, a nurse, police inspector, a baker and a guy who climbed Mt Everest a few months before. The training included talks on our nutrition, hydration and our race day plan for the event as most of the solos would be in the water for a minimum of seven hours.

Part of doing a solo swim to Rotto is qualifying over a distance of 10km. Our squad chose a swim along the coast a few days after the organised event was cancelled due to a cyclone off Perth. Unfortunately we chose a day when the stingrays and bluebottle jelly fish were out in force. Our squad was decimated with stings and welts from these creatures with a good number of swimmers withdrawing and having to qualify at a later swim.

As race day drew closer, last minute preparations took place with food, gels and drink requirements, and checking the schedule with the boat skipper and paddler. A checklist for on the beach including tape for the suit, sunscreen, body glide and vaseline to protect from chaffing, clothes for the boat, clothes to be taken to the island, spare goggles, bathers and cap on the boat. Then of course the last week was glued to various websites for the weather, swell, wind direction and any other climatic information able to scramble my thoughts leading up to the event.

Race day was exciting getting up at 4am for a cuppa and toast and at the beach by 5am to register and then start the sun screening and other rituals before the start. My start time was in the 2nd wave at 6am with another 90 solo swimmers. It seemed to come around quickly and before I knew it I was being farewelled by family and friends and waiting for the hooter to set us off in front of a large crowd who had gathered to watch the spectacle of solos, duos and then teams starting and then seeing boats snaking out to sea for kilometres.

After the start I settled down well and found my paddler with ease who, in turn, at the one km mark found our boat, so the biggest meeting of the day was over. I now had to leave it in their hands to get me to Rotto the shortest and quickest way possible in what was a North West swell. All was going well and I was stopping for drinks and food every 25 minutes. At the 7km mark I felt a sharp pain in my right upper arm and at the next stop mentioned this to my crew. The arm was sore as I

got going after the short break so at my next stop I asked for the Panadol I had packed in my bag, just in case something like this came up. I went through the 10km mark at 3.20 hours so I estimated a 7- 7.30 hour crossing which I was happy with. After the 10 km buoy my crew took me slightly to the South for a number of kilometres and with a North West swell and a current running North to South near Rotto it was not the best possible position to be in.

To get to the finish I needed to round the northern side of Phillip Rock which is two km from the finish. With our position being well South and the running current I ended up swimming to Phillip Rock directly into the current for 2.5 hours. Once around Phillip Rock the swim was easy as my mind was on the last 400 metres and the thought of a cold, sweet lemonade to get the salt taste out of my mouth. I finished in a surprising time of 9.38 hours. My paddler had tracked me swimming 23.7 km on his GPS. I had no idea I had been in the channel that long but I had made it.

The recovery after the finish was slow and my arm injury was obviously referred pain as within an hour of finishing I was having trouble lifting with my arm or moving my right shoulder. The week after was spent at GPs, physios having ultrasound and a cortisone injection. I am now resting the shoulder for the next 6 weeks before swimming again and contemplating whether my days of swimming to Rotto are over.

Should I have swum this event in my 30s when I was asked? Maybe. Should I have stopped at the seven km mark? Possibly. Would I do it again as a Solo? I think yes. What was the best part of the Rotto experience? Seeing all those volunteers turn out to help the swimmers in teams, duos and the Solos realise their dream of crossing the channel.

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