

Curiosity & Challenges

Prologue

On Saturday 6 January 2024, I swam solo unassisted and non-stop from Kawau Island to Tiri Tiri Matangi Island in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf. It took me 7hrs 35mins to swim 18.5km which was about 2hrs longer and 2km further than I had planned.

Weather conditions varied between clear and calm, heavy rain with low visibility, through to strong headwinds and adverse tides.

In the latter stages I almost gave up several times, as I realised that my plan had fallen apart, the enormity of the self-imposed goal that I had set myself finally sunk in and self-doubt filled my head.

As a 55-year-old 'average guy', why did I do this?

And what – or who – motivated me to do this?

Let's start at the beginning...

Background

It was April 2023 and I was enjoying an evening drink with friends on Waiheke Island, overlooking Palm Beach, the Hauraki Gulf and as far as Great Barrier Island.

"Did you hear about that guy who's planning to swim from Great Barrier to Auckland?", asked my host.

"No! When is he doing *that*?", I replied. She had my attention. Like many other Auckland sailors, I had frequently sailed to & from Great Barrier Island and it's a big trip to do in a decent boat. The thought of swimming it was other-worldly.

Later that evening I returned to my own boat, *Fogg*, in which I had sailed over to Waiheke to see my friends. And I lay in bed browsing anything I could find out about this mystical swimmer, Jono Ridler.

He obviously had an impressive track record of open-water achievements but if he could pull this one off, it would be a new record in NZ by a long margin.

Equally interesting was the cause his swim was linked to: Swim 4 The Gulf, led by Live Ocean.

Again, like many Auckland boaties, I had witnessed a clear decline in the state of the Gulf over the 20 years I had been in, on or under those charming waters. And like many others, I felt a deep sense of frustration, hopelessness and despair that not enough was being done to remedy the situation. So, anything to raise awareness even further – and ideally in a headline-grabbing way like doing a crazy ocean swim – had to be a good thing!

I was now hooked and felt a drive to help, support, be involved, get closer and somehow learn more about both the cause and the man behind it, Jono Ridler.

I pinged an email off the organisers and to my delight received a swift reply from Jono himself. We managed to have a brief phone call the day before he was due to depart and unsurprisingly, there was nothing I could do to help the already well-organised Live Ocean machine.

But once Jono had started, I did set out in my boat, *Fogg*, to find Jono and his support vessel as they approached the Tiri Channel on the morning of day 2 of Jono's swim. By now it was a bleak and

windy day with nobody else on the grey water except a crazy swimmer, his dedicated support crew and this curious solo spectator bouncing up and down on Fogg in 2-3m swells, watching Jono from a safe distance.

You can read a full account of Jono's Swim4TheGulf here: [Swim4TheGulf, Part One: How to eat an elephant \(jonoridler.com\)](https://www.jonoridler.com/swim4thegulf-part-one-how-to-eat-an-elephant) and here: [Swim4TheGulf, Part Two: A great adventure \(jonoridler.com\)](https://www.jonoridler.com/swim4thegulf-part-two-a-great-adventure)

A New Chapter

A few days after Jono completed his swim, he sent me a text along the lines of, "I think I saw you on your boat whilst I was out there. Thanks for coming out to support - it was much appreciated!"

A couple of weeks later we met up for the first time and enjoyed a wide-ranging conversation about his recent swim, his recovery, potential thoughts on "what next?", and many other matters.

I shared with Jono my own love of the ocean and my concerns for its wellbeing from a lifetime of sailing, swimming, free-diving and occasional (though not very successful) fishing.

Like many people, I swam in the ocean as often as possible during the warmer months but tended to withdraw during the winter. I had even completed a couple of the Auckland harbour swim events including 4.5km from Rangitoto to St Heliers, some 20 years earlier. But that was the pinnacle of my swimming achievements.

When I reflected on this, it felt somewhat flat and unremarkable. Also, I remembered that as a child I had avidly read book after book by some of the greatest pioneers and adventurers ranging from single-handed sailors to mountaineers and polar explorers. I had always been fascinated by reading the small details of their exploits including both the physical and mental challenges of these heroes.

And here I was, sitting and talking with a modern-day hero, who had just pulled off a near-100km non-stop open-water swim taking 33hrs; and who was driven by an under-stated but deep motivation to personally challenge himself, ideally whilst also doing good for the world, notably in the context of ocean conservation.

Meeting Jono left me with a mixture of emotions. On the one hand, I almost felt inadequate and deflated that as 20 years his senior, I had achieved nothing like him in terms of 'remarkable' goals. Alongside Jono, my own achievements felt boringly ordinary and shared with millions of other people, namely build a career, buy a house, start a family etc.

But on the other hand, I felt a sense of excitement that all was not lost and maybe meeting Jono was the inspiration I needed to sit up, pay attention and do something different after all.

I didn't realise it at the time, but with hindsight my response was to pursue two parallel activities. Firstly, to resurrect my own swimming interests and explore something different there. And secondly, to find ways of supporting Jono in his future efforts to achieve positive impact around ocean conservation, in whatever ways I could.

The latter point about supporting Jono's future efforts remains a work-in-progress and we have developed a friendship over the last few months, as we explore new ideas. Hopefully Jono will be able to share more about this in the future, as things evolve.

The rest of this story is focused on my own swimming journey since the day I first met Jono back in May 2023, right up to the day in January 2024 when I completed my own 'marathon challenge', by swimming from Kawau to Tiri Tiri Matangi island.

Crazy Cold

It was May and whilst Jono had completed his 33hr swim in sea temperatures of around 17C, we were heading towards winter and daily averages in the 12-15C range. This was no time to resurrect my passion for swimming.

Or was it?

As well as his long-distance activities, Jono had also undertaken several 'ice swims', which is generally regarded as water temperatures below 4C. And whilst fresh water obviously freezes solid at 0C, sea water can get as low as -4C before it freezes, due to the salinity. These are insane temperatures to expose the human body to for any amount of time.

Or were they?

Jono's blog included an account of building a home-made ice-bath using an old chest freezer. He used this not just to train for ice swimming but to improve his general adaption to cold water.

I spent the next few weeks researching everything I could find about the science of cold-water immersion and the benefits to both physical and mental health. I became a self-confessed cold water bore to my family and friends. But more importantly, I put this into action by continuing my daily swims in the ocean, even as the temperatures started dropping, instead of staying on land and wrapping up warmly like most normal people.

Just to be clear, pretty much every single day of the year and regardless of weather, I would get into the ocean and swim wearing just my normal summer togs. No wetsuit, no hat and not even goggles (they annoy me for some reason)!

I would badger Jono with occasional texts like "How long do you think I should aim for at 14C?" and "How would I know if I'm heading towards hypothermia?" etc. Jono would patiently answer my texts by sharing his own experiences and wisdom, which gave me the confidence to keep going and stop questioning my own sanity.

In fact, the opposite was true. I noticed a new feeling of calm confidence in my routine which included my daily dip in the ocean. Sometimes it would be a relatively short 15 mins especially if conditions were rough. But on those beautiful calm, cold and sunny winter days that Auckland does so well, I was routinely spending 45-60 mins swimming around in 12C water. And I was typically covering 1-2km a day.

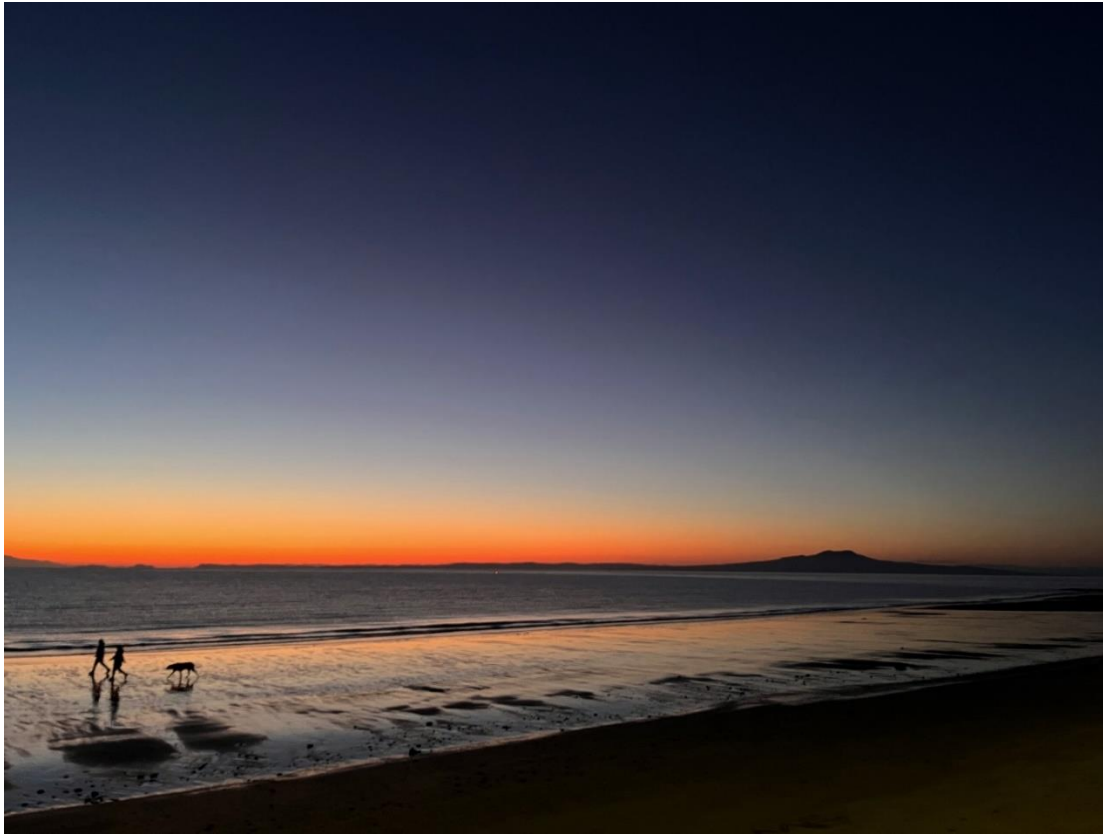
I think that part of my calmness came from the certainty of my cold-water regime. There was no longer any decision to be made. Instead of getting up each day, looking out of the window and torturing myself with the indecision of "Will I or won't I swim today?", I simply knew I was going. It was a done deal. It represented the removal of one daily decision from my life and it is the many micro-decisions made throughout the average day that tire us. I took some small satisfaction from taking back control of something, all be it with chilly consequences!

I became addicted. My day felt it had not started properly until I had swum. In the same way many people feel until they've had their daily run or shower or even coffee.

Jono and I were still in contact and occasionally we met up for an early morning cold-water swim during the winter months. On one memorable day, I recall driving over the Auckland Harbour Bridge on a bitterly cold Sunday morning in August and hearing the 'gong' of my car's ice-alarm to warn me that the air temperature was now below 4C. It was 6.30am and still dark as Jono and I met at a

beach on the North Shore and stripped down into our togs before wading into the frigid waters. But at 11-12C the sea was markedly warmer than the air and it was one of those occasions when it felt more comfortable to stay in the ocean's 'warm embrace' than climb out and feel the even colder winter morning air.

Winter: A chilly dawn swim at Mairangi Bay.



Another helpful habit I developed from Jono was the practise of sipping a hot drink immediately after getting out of the cold water and dressing. This was to help re-warm the body from within, which was far more effective than climbing into a hot shower and scalding your skin off, which was the obvious temptation. By now, I had developed both a good understanding of the science of cold-water adaption, as well as putting this into practise to become well-adapted to winter waters myself.

My wife started joining me on a regular basis, after becoming curious about why I was returning home from my daily swimming routine with a cold-water 'high', even on the most inclement days. We even enlisted a couple of our more adventurous friends who liked the sound of the benefits, popularised by Wim Hof ("The Ice Man"), even if our regime was somewhat more down-to-earth.

During one of my daily swims, I noticed a niggling pain in my right shoulder. Again, Jono helpfully directed me towards a physio who specialised in swimming injuries. I was surprised, and somewhat reassured, to learn that the majority of swimmers suffer some kind of shoulder injury at some point.

I acquired a new set of exercises to perform on land each day, whether I'm swimming or not. In parallel, I sought help from a swimming coach to observe, video and provide feedback on my stroke, to help improve my swimming technique. This was a form of 'pre-hab'. My primary goal here was not speed but injury avoidance. If I also made gains in speed and efficiency, that was a bonus. But I was not interested in entering races anymore. The only challenge I wanted to explore was with myself.

During my research into the physical and mental health benefits of cold-water immersion, I had read about the growing trend for people to seek out new thrills. This made sense to me, because our technology-led modern-world lifestyles have developed much faster than our human minds and bodies can keep up with. This means that whilst our lives today are far easier and more comfortable than for our ancestors, there is a deep-rooted part of us that is now bored with modern life. Our daily routine is no longer focused on the rituals of hunting and gathering, on honing basic physical survival skills and protecting our families from the wild environment. And apparently these raw and basic activities provided us with a deep sense of inner satisfaction, which a visit to the gym won't.

The evidence for this boredom is the massive growth in thrill-seeking activities in the form of extreme sports, the growing queue of people wanting to climb Mt Everest, the surge in popularity of 'wild' swimming etc.

This helped me contextualise some of my own drive to challenge myself with swimming.

But maybe there was more to it than that?

What Next?

As the weeks rolled by and winter gave way to spring, sea temperatures slowly climbed from the low-point of 11.5C that I had recorded on my watch. And again, I felt a strange mix of emotions.

On one hand, I felt I had 'conquered' winter. Previously, I had surrendered my summer swimming activities to the natural cycle of the seasons, but this year I had taken back control and found a new way to carry on. This gave me a strong sense of satisfaction and almost 'invincibility'.

I recall one early winter morning when I was swimming towards the Auckland Harbour Bridge. It was barely dawn, the water was about 12C and the air even colder. And it was windy and raining. About as nasty as you could get. As I bobbed around in the dark and choppy Auckland Harbour waters, I looked up at the procession of car headlights heading over the Harbour Bridge towards the city. I imagined their occupants sitting inside their warm and dry cars, listening to the radio and sipping coffee. And possibly heading towards a warm office in the city.

I thought to myself, "Nobody driving over that bridge has *any* idea that I'm down here right now!" The fact that I was doing something so crazy made me feel like a mini-hero to myself. And the fact that I could now look at any body of cold water on any winter day and say to myself "I could swim in that if I wanted to", made me feel somewhat invincible. That was a feeling I had been used to in my 20s but rarely felt now I was in my 50s.

But as most people looked forward with eager anticipation to spring and summer with rising temperatures, I felt a strange sense of disappointment that the challenge was now over.

What next?

I considered heading down to the bottom of the South Island where the sea temperatures were still reassuringly low, just to extend the winter season. But I knew that would just be a temporary solution.

I needed something new.

New Limits

During the winter, the challenge had been about “How *low* can you go?” During this period my swimming had been limited to swimming a few 100m each way from a particular beach – usually Herne Bay in Auckland’s Waitemata Harbour or Takapuna Beach on Auckland’s North Shore.

I could never go particularly far from land, in case something happened and I needed to stop. And I needed to avoid risk of collision from boat and jet-ski activity, which increased as things warmed up.

As we hit summer and the ocean reached the balmy heights of 20C+, I was no longer being driven out of the water by the risk of hypothermia. I was getting out because my watch told me it was time to get on with the rest of the day.

I found myself casually measuring distances on the same navigation chart App that I used for sailing, wondering how many km I had swum each day and each week. And I realised the next obvious challenge was to find out “How *far* can you go?”

Obviously, I had developed a good base level of fitness over the last few months from my daily swimming but how could this translate into distance and endurance limits, if I pushed myself?

It was time to hassle poor Jono again. Off went my text. And back came another patient reply.

“I would recommend swimming double the target distance each week. And to have swum 2/3 of the target distance in any one session during the 2-4 weeks prior.”

I conservatively calculated that I was averaging 8-10km per week. And on a good day I was staying in the water for an hour and covering close to 3km. So, this meant I should be ready for a 4-5km swim, right?

Getting Started

So, the planning started for my first ‘big’ swim. I didn’t want to swim laps along the beach (again). I was keen to actually make a small journey from A to B, so I searched for a point-to-point route that matched my criteria for distance and safety. The safety criteria were mainly about avoiding the busiest areas for boat traffic (collision risk) and fishing activity (shark risk). I realised this was quite a challenge in itself, especially coming into the peak summer boating season of the Hauraki Gulf.

I settled on Long Bay on Auckland’s North Shore to Little Manly beach on the southern side of the Whangaparaoa Peninsula. On paper this should be easy – it was just 4km across a relatively quiet piece of water which should take me around 1hr 15mins swimming at my average speed of about 3km.

With the route chosen, it was now a matter of finding the right day when the stars aligned for:

1. Weather (ideally calm conditions or light wind from behind)
2. Tides (slack tide or flowing with me during daylight hours)
3. Support crew (a boat to travel alongside me)

A friend with a boat agreed to provide support and the date we landed on was 9 December. The night before, Jono sent me a good luck text, “You’ve got this.” As it turned out, he was right. We departed Gulf Harbour marina on my friend’s boat at 0630hrs on a flat calm blue-sky morning and headed to Long Bay. I slipped into the water, swam to the beach and then started my ‘official’ swim at 0730hrs – the tides favoured this start time and my preference is to swim in the mornings so this suited me fine. It was an uneventful swim which took 1hr 18 mins from beach to beach. Job done!

I had started the swim at a relaxed and gentle pace and maintained this for the 78 minutes duration. I stopped a couple of times to check my watch and ask my support boat to adjust position relative to me, to avoid diesel fumes in the light morning breeze. This might sound like a small detail but when you're trying to maintain a relaxed swimming stroke, a lungful of diesel fumes is the last thing you want!

As I finished, I still felt relatively fresh. Afterwards, my wife who had been on my friend's support boat commented, 'You made it look easy.'" With the false bravado of a seasoned athlete, I casually replied "You know what they say, train hard and race easy!"

Who was I kidding?

The beginning: Reema shares my joy after finishing my first 4km 'long swim' from Long Bay to Little Manly.



All joking aside, I had found this 4km swim pretty easy. I recalled that almost exactly 20 years earlier, I had swum the Rangitoto to St Heliers Bay race, a distance of 4.5km, in exactly 90 minutes. I congratulated myself that despite being 20 years older, I was still on the pace.

So, what next?

I channelled Jono's earlier advice that I should swim 2/3 of my target distance as the peak training session. So, what if I considered this 4km swim as the peak training session? Didn't this mean I was ready to swim 6km sometime in the next couple of weeks, as soon as I felt recovered and could make the stars align again across weather, tides and support crew?

An Island

Once again, I browsed my navigation App looking for something suitable in the Hauraki Gulf. This time, I liked the idea of swimming *around* something, and I landed upon Motuora Island. This would be exactly 6km to circumnavigate and should take me approx. 2 hours – maybe a bit longer allowing for stopping times.

Again, I consulted Jono. He confirmed that the plan sounded good but advised me to consider my nutrition more carefully for this 6km swim than I had for my first 4km effort. He said that in principle I should plan to stop and re-nourish with electrolytes and calories at least once every hour.

Apparently, it is virtually impossible to consume the same amount of energy that you burn whilst swimming, hence you are always going to start digging into reserves. But by taking suitable and timely nutrition you are helping your body's metabolism to reduce this deficit most efficiently; also reducing the chance of cramps, which are one of a swimmer's worst fears because once they come on it can be hard to clear them in the water.

The date was set for 19 December, which would be 10 days after my 4km swim. I had spent the period in between swimming lightly each day, focused on technique rather than building more endurance. I threw in the occasional sprint back to the beach just to see how long I could sustain it – partly out of curiosity and partly in case I found myself swimming into a significant headwind – which for a swimmer is anything over about 10-15 km/h.

Fogg: My support boat which I came to view from many different angles.



A headwind much above that can create a wind chop that seriously reduces progress over the ground, and depending on your breathing pattern it can potentially signal the end of the swim. This form of preparation was what Jono referred to as “the taper”.

On the day in question, I felt ready. The difference this time was that whilst we would travel to Motuora Island on my boat, Fogg, we would then anchor Fogg and I would be supported by my 9 year old son, Charlie, and a friend, Marcos, who would glide around in the 3m inflatable tender. I say “glide” because we have a small electric outboard on our dinghy – equivalent to a 3hp petrol engine – and this is perfectly suited to escorting a swimmer. The biggest benefit is zero emissions meaning I didn't worry about breathing in exhaust fumes whilst swimming. It is also quiet and can literally go at snail's pace, which means matching my

swimming speed is far easier than using a conventional outboard.

We dropped Fogg's anchor into crystal clear waters under the blue sky of the midday sun. Hypothermia was certainly no risk but sunburn or even sunstroke was. I applied sunscreen liberally and kept myself out of the sun right up until we climbed into the dinghy to the drop off zone, a few minutes away, at the northern end of the island.

Approaching Motuora: Was I really planning to swim all the way around this?



As we had approached Motuora Island on Fogg, I had been struck by how big it looked. A part of me wondered, "Am I *really* planning to swim all the way around that?" The logical part of my brain kicked in and I reminded myself that I had done all the calculations and preparations. On paper, I should be ready to swim for 2hrs+ and cover 6km at my normal average speed. With a couple of stops for nutrition.

I briefly channelled Jono, who had again sent me a good luck text with, "You've got this."

With that, I slipped into the water, did my usual thing of swimming to the beach, walking up above the high-tide mark and then re-entering the water to start my 'official' swim. And I was off.

My previous swim from Long Bay to Little Manly had been in sufficiently deep water that I had no view of the bottom. I spent most of my time staring down into the greeny-blue waters of the inner Gulf. In contrast, my swim around Motuora Island was in far shallower water and I had a stunning view of the rocks and reefs for most of my swim. Sometimes the water became too shallow and I had to double-back and turn out to sea to avoid a threatening-looking area of oyster-covered rocks. The last thing I needed was to be dumped onto their razor-sharp edges by the gentle swell, causing me to bleed into the water; that would increase the potential shark risk too much and force me out of the water immediately.

My zig-zag course meant it was difficult to work out if I was actually making progress but Marcos, in Fogg's dinghy a few metres away, assured me I was covering good ground. The first 30 minutes passed quickly and conditions were perfect. I calculated that by then I needed to be about $\frac{1}{4}$ of way around the island and from my perspective this seemed to be the case. I then found myself checking my watch more frequently as I mentally counted down the minutes to the top of the first hour, when I knew I would stop for my first nutrition. For some reason I was looking forward to it.

Perfect conditions: Halfway around Motuora.



At the 60 minutes mark I stopped swimming and signalled to my support crew that I wanted a drink. They closed the gap and tossed me a bottle of 750ml sports electrolyte hydration, which I had mixed in advance. This was my first experience of gulping anything other than sea water whilst in the ocean. It was a bit harder than I expected and it took the best part of 5 minutes treading water to finish it all.

Whilst I was treading water, I was suddenly hit by a severe cramp in my upper left thigh. Arrrrgh! This was exactly what I was trying to avoid. Immediately, I pushed off to straighten my body out and try to swim off the cramp. It lingered for a while but over the next few minutes it subsided enough that I could continue OK. This was a wake-up call to review my treading water technique for next time.

By now I had turned around the bottom (south) end of Motuora Island and immediately I found myself swimming into a 5-10 km/h headwind and chop, as the afternoon sea-breeze had kicked in. This was exactly what I had hope to avoid but I reminded myself that I had swum in way worse conditions over the last few months. I set the goal of finding a good rhythm in the new, bouncier conditions and to review progress after 15 minutes. At the checkpoint, I could see that I had made progress. I reminded myself that the tide was running in my favour and whilst this created a mild wind-over-tide chop that made my swimming look far from smooth and elegant, I was still covering good ground.

The next milestone was seeing Fogg come into view, as she sat alone in the anchorage. It seemed to take an age to reach and then swim past Fogg, but I realised this represented the $\frac{3}{4}$ mark and I felt a boost of confidence that I still had enough in the tank to complete the full distance.

The last few minutes were a bit messy as I became disoriented whilst searching for my finish point. In the rising chop I could not reliably identify the starting point and it took several calls to my support crew of "Where am I going?", to get directions through the maze of shallow reefs and rocks.

Just when I thought I could see a straight line-of-sight to the end, I swam into another reef and had to divert another 50m to swim around it. I became slightly frustrated but realised I just had to keep plugging away and I would be OK.

Charlie watches me finish my Motuora circumnavigation.



In the confusion of navigating the final stages, I had swum through the 2-hour mark without noticing and as I climbed out of the water and triumphantly raised my arms, I stopped my watch at 2 hours 18 minutes. This was a new personal best by nearly an hour and it felt good.

I scrambled back into the dinghy and Charlie and Marcos drove me back to Fogg, where I gulped down more energy drink. For the first time, I noticed a really,

salty dryness in my mouth and the only thing that would ease it was slowly eating a children's fruit yoghurt. How appropriate.

Motuora: Happy to have finished.



Stretching Out

Even whilst heading home from Motuora Island, I was wondering “How much further *could* I have gone?”

In the days following I felt some mild muscle soreness that told me I had done something different to my usual daily swimming routine. But it subsided within a couple of days.

I felt I was on a roll. If I continued applying Jono's principle of covering 2/3 of my target distance in any one maximum session, then surely I could extend from 6km to 9km in the next couple of weeks?

This was now becoming a familiar routine. Find a route. Check for weather and tides. Line-up support crew. And meanwhile, maintain my ‘taper’ with a gentle swim each day.

I selected Orewa Beach to Army Bay, a straight-line distance of 10.2km. The difference between 9km and 10km should only be about 20 mins and with an estimated time of 3 ½ – 4 hours, I felt this should be doable. Also, 10km represented the magical “marathon” distance of an Olympic open-water event. I wasn't interested in comparing race times, but it would be a good accomplishment to simply complete an Olympic distance. The equivalent of a Marathon run, if you like.

It was a straightforward and uneventful swim. On the morning of Saturday 27 December, I touched the wall of the Orewa Surf Life Saving Club, entered the water and started the swim. Charlie was

waiting in the dinghy and escorted me into deeper water where Fogg was waiting, with my wife and another friend onboard. Their duties were as follows.

My friend Dan's role was to drive Fogg as straight as possible directly towards Army Bay. His biggest challenge would be going slowly enough because even in 'slow ahead' Fogg would glide along at about 2.5 knots. Whereas my average swimming speed was around 1.5 knots (3 km/h). So, Dan spent the next few hours alternating between 'slow ahead' and 'neutral', to keep Fogg within 50m of me at any one time.

My wife, Reema's, jobs were spotting and nutrition. She would keep an eye out for other boats or jet-skis on a potential collision course and agree a response plan with Dan. And she would keep me supplied with my sports electrolyte drinks when I asked for it – the plan was again for each hour.

Orewa to Army Bay: Passing Stanmore Bay.



It was another glorious, almost calm day and the minutes and hours just ticked by. The halfway mark, Big Manly Beach, came and went and before long the familiar sight of Army Bay appeared from a distance. This was where I had been training for the last few weeks and it felt like returning home after a normal day of swimming.

People often ask me, "Don't you get bored swimming for hour after hour on your own?"

My somewhat glib response is "No, I don't tend to get bored with my own thoughts!"

In reality, my primary focus is on swimming stroke technique, to ensure that even when I'm on 'autopilot', I don't fall back into bad habits, compromising efficiency or risking injury. I also do lots of maths – meaning I'm regularly counting how long I've been swimming, how many strokes I've done, how much further to go, how long that *should* take, what time will I finish, will the wind and tide still be favourable by then etc.

And when all of that is exhausted, I sometimes drop into a mini-trance and just keep plodding away until something distracts me. So, no time for boredom here and certainly no need for an underwater personal stereo for this swimmer!

The only other small but notable event during this swim, was when I noticed Reema and Dan looking slightly excited and pointing at something in the water. I suspected they had seen a large fish, possibly a fin of some kind. I made a conscious effort to peer around me as I was swimming for the next few minutes but saw nothing. This was typical. Later, they confirmed that they had seen a small

shark fin but it came and went quickly and didn't show any interest in me. Therefore, as per our agreed plan, they allowed me to continue swimming uninterrupted.

Nearly there: Approaching Army Bay after 3:30hrs.



After 3 hours 30 minutes, I climbed out of the water onto a crowded Army Bay beach. Everybody was going about their usual 'beach business' and nobody paid the slightest bit of attention to just another guy emerging from the water.

But once again, I felt good and that I had more in the tank.

I texted Jono to share the news and told him, "I felt I could have continued for at least another hour or so. So I'm not really sure where my limit is."

He replied, "You seem to have developed a bit of endurance swimming itch to scratch Rob!"

The Big One

OK, before we get into my final swim of this story, let's get the whole shark thing out of the way.

Alongside "What do you eat?" and "Don't you get bored?" this is probably the most frequently asked question of open-water swimmers. I can't speak for anyone else, but here's my take on things.

During 20 years of recreational ocean swimming in NZ, I've had just two minor shark encounters. The first was in the Bay of Islands when a small group of School Sharks took a quick look at me as they swam past a few metres away. I was swimming in a narrow and tidal channel favoured by fisherman and therefore, probably sharks too. No surprise there. I carried on swimming.

The second sighting was in Army Bay, Whangaparaoa, when a Bronze Whaler whizzed past in the opposite direction as I was swimming away from the beach one morning. When I looked more closely, I noticed someone had placed a set-net in the shallows and so the Bronzie had obviously heard that a free breakfast was on the menu at Army Bay that morning, and he was not remotely interested in me. Again, I continued my swim incident-free.

So that's my experience to date. In terms of the risk, my belief is that in NZ waters, most if not all shark attacks are a case of mistaken identity. My research tells me that every victim has been doing some or all of the following: wearing a black wetsuit; in the water at dawn or dusk; in close proximity to fishing activities; in water with poor visibility e.g. near surf breakers.

This suggest to me that most incidents in NZ are when sharks think they are closing in on a seal or some other food source that regularly features on their menu. Which humans do not.

Given that most of my swimming is during daylight hours, wearing colourful togs, avoiding popular fishing spots and in clear water, I believe the risk of me suffering an attack, due to mistaken identity, is very low. I am certain no shark could mistake my 1.9m long white body for a seal or tasty fish.

Having said all of that, of course it crosses your mind on occasions. And being in the NZ summer we were into the 'silly season' for news story. Or in the case of NZ media, I should say 'even sillier season.' This meant that shark stories were headline news most days. This usually involved either fisherman who had lost their catch or their lure to an opportunistic shark passing by. Or sightings of sharks perusing the waters a few metres from busy NZ beaches on clear, calm days. To me, this reinforced my belief that the sharks were not interested in humans. Otherwise, they would be munching these swimmers for an easy feed on a regular basis. Which wasn't happening.

Ok, back to swimming.

For several days after my 10.2km / 3 ½ hour swim, I felt sore, as I had after my 6km swim. But it was not debilitating and I was not injured. I soothed my muscles with a gentle ocean swim each day and treated this as another 'taper'. I was continuing to apply Jono's 2/3 rule and thinking about attempting a 15km swim in the foreseeable future.

A few days after my swim, Jono and I met for lunch at Orewa Surf Club, the site of my most recent departure. We had a brief dip in the sea and then enjoyed lunch whilst discussing our respective swimming activities and aspirations.

I confessed that I was curious about finding "my endurance limit", because I had felt I had more in the tank after all my swims, to date. But the question I had for myself was, "How much more?"

As we gazed across the sparkling waters of the Hauraki Gulf, we could see both Kawau Island and Tiri Tiri Matangi Island. They looked a long way apart. I fired up my navigation App and we measured the distance – it was 16.5km between the southern end of Kawau and the northern tip of Tiri. This was a bit more than the 15km I was targeting but again, the extra distance seemed do-able.

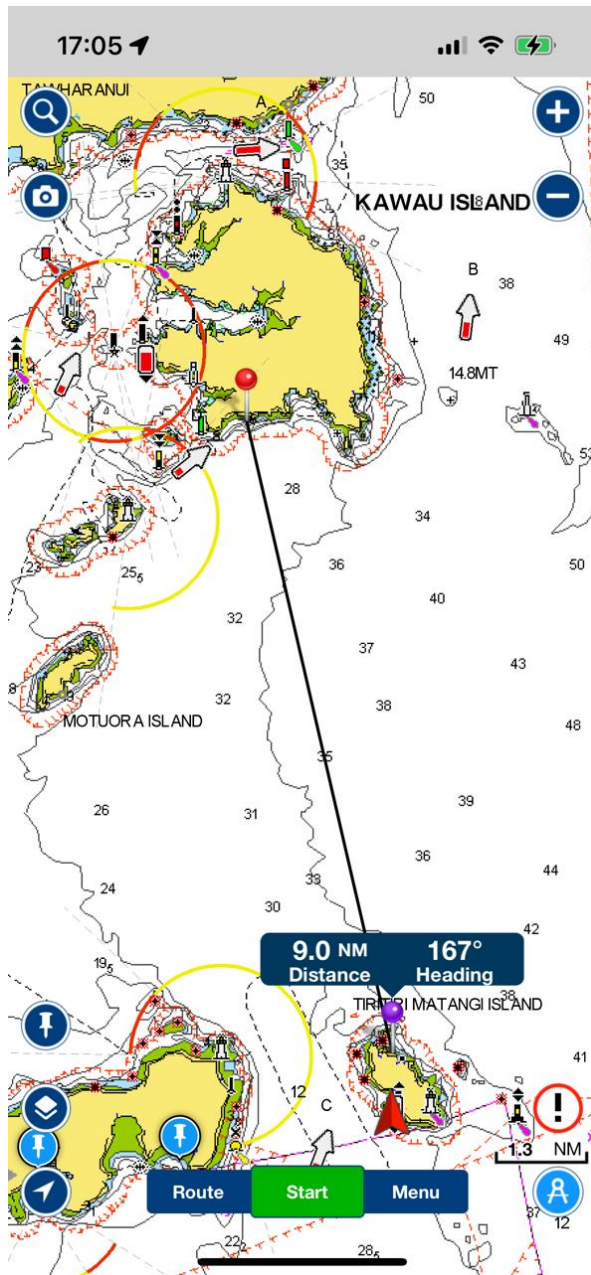
"Kawau to Tiri would be a cool swim", said Jono. He probably didn't realise it at the time, but with Jono's seal of approval, this meant it was now 'locked-in', in my mind. I had to find a way to make this work!

I went home and told my family of my plans. And I promised that once I had done this, I would take a break from obsessing over swimming routes and weather-windows and that we would enjoy some quality family time, ideally cruising around on the Hauraki Gulf on our family boat, Fogg. And I would be *on* the water more and *in* the water less.

I also felt ready to relax a bit, if only I could 'knock off' the Kawau – Tiri swim. I enjoy a drink as much as anyone but I had chosen to do a 'dry December' in a bid keep swimming fit. I do this most years and then relax my dry regime on Christmas Eve. But this year, I had not felt the usual urge to pick up a drink again as we hit the festive season with family and friends. I knew that Jono observed a no-alcohol approach for most of the time and I felt I was at the peak of my swimming campaign.

I was also aware that I had been asking a lot of my 55-year old body over the last few weeks. And so far, it had delivered the goods without complaining. Out of respect for my own physical body, it just felt the right thing to continue taking care of myself and alcohol was not going to help. This was not a difficult decision at all. In fact, I was kind of surprised how easily the dry period continued.

Kawau to Tiri: Straight line distance of 9.0nm (16.5km). But on the day I swam 10.0nm (18.5km). Notice Motuora Island which I had swam around.



The usual preparation routine kicked in. Maintain my ‘taper’ of swimming fitness; look for the next weather and tidal window; and secure a driver for Fogg because again, my wife and son would have plenty else to do throughout the day.

With a straight-line distance of 16.5km, I had calculated that I should complete the swim in between 5 ½ – 6 hours, based on my normal average speed. With hindsight, this was the first mistake.

Unlike my previous swims, the tides flows were not directly with me or against me. There would be a few hours when they would be with me but also several hours when they would push me sideways. Combined with winds that blew from every direction throughout the day, this would become a bigger problem than I realised.

For nutrition, I planned the usual routine of stopping and drinking my usual electrolytes each hour. And I simply budgeted for more stops than in previous swims. With hindsight, this was another mistake. But more on that later.

Saturday 6 January was emerging as the next weather and tidal window, and this would be 10 days after my 10.2km swim. After that, I could see a period of easterly winds blowing into the Hauraki Gulf which would delay me by at least another 7-10 days. I was therefore keen to target 6 January.

The final challenge was finding a friend to drive Fogg. All my usual options were unavailable mostly due to family commitments – it was the height of the NZ summer holidays and who wants to give up a day of their holiday to watch their crazy friend thrashing around in the water for no good reason?!

As the days counted down, I was running out of options but I still calmly planned and hoped it would happen. The night before, it was still looking doubtful to get a driver but then out-of-the blue a friend whom I thought was overseas texted to ask if I was around this weekend for a catch-up and beer.

I called my friend – coincidentally also called Rob – straight back. He’s big on fitness and sport and had even joined me for a couple of cold swims over the winter months. So, he knew the back-story to what I asked next. *“Hey Rob, yes for sure let’s catch up and have a beer on Saturday! But I’ve got a crazy idea for something we could do first. How does this sound...?”*

I outlined the plan and to my delight, Rob agreed to rise to the challenge of a hands-on crash-course in handling a 50-foot yacht, navigating an accurate straight line from A to B and accompanying a swimmer, all at the same time. In return, I assured him that by late afternoon it should all be over and we would be sitting on Fogg, anchored in a quiet bay, enjoying a relaxing sunset beer and BBQ.

If only we knew!

We departed Gulf Harbour marina at 9am on Saturday morning and headed straight for Kawau Island. During the 2 ½ hours it took to get there, Rob sat at the helm and calmly and competently absorbed all the information I threw at him. He is a self-confessed data-geek and I could tell this was right in his wheel-house (literally)! By the time we arrived at the drop off zone at Kawau, I could see that Rob was handling Fogg competently and safely; he was even slightly ahead of me as I pointed out the next thing on his to-do list.

This was a huge relief and meant I could now relax and focus 100% on the swim.

Kawau: Charlie drops me off at the beach at 11.20am.



In a now familiar routine, my son Charlie drove me in the dinghy to a small beach at the southern end of Kawau. The water was calm and clear and in the shallows, Charlie spotted a stick that he had been playing with a few days prior when we visited the same beach to check its suitability. “Please can you get me that stick, daddy?”, he asked. Of course. And with that, I was into the water, pressed the start button on my watch and took the first few strokes back out of the bay towards Fogg.

Immediately, I hit the first snag. My goggles fogged-up. I don’t like goggles and normally don’t wear them for my daily swims. My eyes are accustomed to salt-water and I can open them and look as much I need to, without soreness, for at least an hour. My friends don’t know how I do this. I had recently bought a new pair of ‘anti-fog’ goggles specifically for my longer swims and this was therefore only the 4th time I was wearing

them. They had been crystal clear for the first three swims but today was no good. I swam to Fogg and called for some anti-fog drops. They tossed the bottle to me and I spent the next few minutes treading water whilst clearing them. This was not the perfect start I was used to.

I resumed swimming and the first hour arrived. I stopped for my first drink of 750ml electrolyte which took the usual 5 mins to get down whilst treading water. I looked around and Kawau still looked large and close, although by now it should be 3km away. And I didn’t even try looking at Tiri as I knew the view would essentially be unchanged from the start and provide no encouragement.

Departing Kawau: My goggles fogged up immediately.



As I resumed swimming, conditions were good but not perfect. The forecast had been for light N to NW winds but it was now from the NE. The difference was that instead of bringing me waves from across only 3km of sheltered water – the distance between me and Kawau – it was bringing me bigger waves from across 50km of open water. It was manageable but not ideal. Less manageable was the fact that I was now downwind of Fogg and getting regular doses of diesel fumes blown onto me.

My natural breathing side is to the left and I prefer to swim on Fogg's right side, so I can easily see my support boat and crew on every other stroke. For about 30 minutes we experimented with Fogg running ahead of me or behind me – but it made little difference. Eventually, I switched to swimming on the other side of Fogg. This meant I could no longer easily use Fogg as my directional guide and instead I switched

to sighting Tiri Tiri Matangi itself, every few strokes. I told the guys on Fogg that they should now follow me rather than the other way around.

In the back of my mind, I knew this might mean I was no longer swimming a perfect straight-line course. This was because as the tide started to sweep me sideways, to maintain my original course, I would need to swim slightly across it. A bit like watching footage of an aircraft landing in a strong cross-wind and it turns slightly to 'crab' over the centre of the runway.

Again, this was not perfect but the only option I had.

Sometime later, I hit the next hiccup. I had dropped into one of my 'swimming trances' and with Fogg on my non-breathing (right) side, I failed to notice that I was now on a diverging course away from Fogg. Rob was trying to maintain the shortest straight-line distance to Tiri Tiri Matangi but I was wandering away to the east. Apparently Reema and Rob shouted to me several times but failed to get my attention. The first I realised was when I heard a whistle being blown from Fogg. My heart skipped a beat because this was the signal we had agreed for alerting me to sharks. Rob shouted and gesticulated for me to swim back towards Fogg to close the gap. This kind of lateral drift was a contributing factor the longer distance I ultimately swam but did not realise how much at the time.

As I entered the 3rd hour of swimming, the breeze switch from NE to NW and strengthened. It also brought rain with it and a severe reduction in visibility. This meant that for the first time in my open-water swimming 'career', I could no longer see land. We had departed in perfect visibility and the forecast included occasional light showers, but this was quite heavy. I realised I was now not just swimming *with* Fogg, but also *in* a fog. My little joke.

This meant I now moved back to my usual right-hand side of Fogg and asked them to resume guiding me towards Tiri Tiri Matangi – which was invisible to me in the murk but was of course visible on Fogg’s navigation systems.

I hit the next snag. In the strengthening wind, Rob was now finding it even harder to match Fogg’s speed with mine, because even when gliding in neutral, Fogg was being blown forward faster than I was swimming. We had discussed this possibility before the swim and my instruction was for Rob to instead drive Fogg in large, slow circles around me. He started to do this but we had not agreed a signal to tell me this was the case. In the reduced visibility I had lost all sense of direction and was focused on swimming parallel to Fogg.

The first I knew of it was when I heard a shout from Rob. “Sorry, Rob, we didn’t mean to confuse you but I’m now steering Fogg in circles and you’re swimming back towards Kawau!”

Damn. I had no idea how long I had been going in the wrong (opposite) direction but I reasoned it was probably only a short time. There was no point wasting energy getting upset about it. Instead, Fogg resumed a course towards Tiri Tiri Matangi and I calmly followed suite.

For the next couple of hours the wind was light and variable, mostly between 0-10 km/h and swinging through all directions. Thankfully, the rain cleared and perfect visibility returned, meaning I could now see Tiri Tiri Matangi becoming larger, albeit at a painfully slow pace.

Kawau disappearing behind: Rob monitors my progress.



As I entered the 4th hour of swimming, I felt a small boost in mood. On the basis of completing the whole swim in between 5 ½ – 6 hours, this surely meant that when I hit the 5-hour mark, I would be in the final stages? At 5 hours, I should be stopping for my last nutritional drink and then counting down the minutes to the finish line sometime before the 6 hour mark arrived, right?

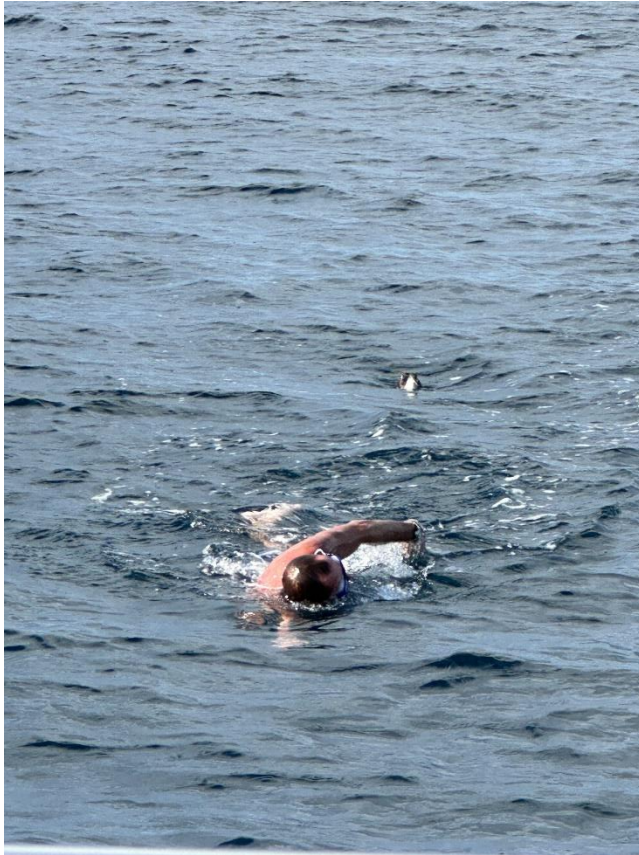
But as the 5-hour point arrived and I stopped for a drink, I asked Rob for a distance-check. It was still over 4km to go. Which I calculated should take about 1 hr 15mins at my normal average of 3 km/h. This meant pushing past 6 hours which was the first warning sign that things were not going to plan.

I reasoned that some of my previous swims had taken a few minutes longer than planned, and so if this was similar then that should be OK.

At the 5 ½ hour mark, the wind suddenly swung to the SW and strengthened. This meant I was now swimming into a strong headwind of around 20 km/h, with associated choppy sea. I knew this would slow me down but did not know by how much.

For the first time, I was no longer sure I could complete this swim. Yes, I could see a bit more detail on Tiri Tiri Matangi Island but it was changing so slowly it gave me little comfort.

A different kind of supporter: In the latter stages a seagull followed me.



I didn't notice at the time, but in the closing stages of approaching Tiri Tiri Matangi, I was joined by a seabird. I was a bit of a 'twitcher' in a previous life and so I can tell from the picture that it was a Fluttering Shearwater.

They are pretty little birds that often swoop past boats in the hope of an opportunistic meal scrap, but in this case the Shearwater seemed happy to just follow behind me and observe from a safe distance.

Rob, who snapped this picture, saw comforting symbolism from this scene; he surmised that the bird was local and possibly recognised Fogg as a frequent visitor to these waters and was stopping by to say "hi".

Rob also saw it as a positive sign of the health of this particular seabird population, which he knew was a cause close to both mine and Jono's hearts.

As we hit the 6 hour mark, I stopped for my regular nutritional drink. For the first time I noticed that I felt tired and also slightly cold. This was the next warning sign that things really were *not* going to plan. Maybe I needed some more energy?

"Can someone throw me half a banana?", I asked. This was my first experience eating any solids whilst treading water and the banana went down well. Usually, after glugging my hourly 750ml drink, I would feel it sitting in my stomach for the next 15 minutes or so. It was a slightly uncomfortable feeling but not debilitating. I wondered how the banana would sit. I resumed swimming and it felt OK. But I still felt a bit weak and hungry so I stopped again and asked for more food. I chomped down the rest of the banana but I needed more!

Next to land in the water next to me was some kind of chewy, nutty, chocolatey energy bar.

I relished the sweet taste in contrast to the salty ocean, but for the next few minutes I would be spitting out fragments of nuts as I resumed swimming.

I didn't realise it at the time, but I was 'hitting the wall'. I had made the mistake of under-doing my nutrition by assuming I could do it all with my usual hourly electrolyte drinks. Yes, I was avoiding de-

hydration and cramp. But I was falling deep into energy deficit and the food I was eating now was too little too late.

I resorted to pausing and asking for a distance check more frequently. After 6 ½ hours, I still had 2 ½ km to go. My confidence in estimating the remaining time was diminishing. I was also aware that the favourable tidal window was closing and within 30 mins the tide would start flowing against me.

“I’m not sure I can do this”, I told my support crew. Both Rob and Reema shouted back, “You *can* do this!”

I countered, “But I’ve been in the water for 6 ½ hours and I’m feeling cold and tired. And the wind and tide are turning against me. I’m not sure how much longer I can keep going.” I could tell I was trying to justify a decision to abort the swim.

But for now, I was still floating and not yet ‘dead in the water’ so at least try to keep going, right?

“How much progress am I making?”, I asked Rob. He told me the honest truth, “You are still progressing but not as fast as you were.”

I didn’t quite know what to think about this, so I resorted to my default mode of resuming swimming and thinking of the pros & cons of continuing vs stopping. Also, every time I stopped for a distance check, I was drifting backwards towards Kawau. Afterwards, Rob told me he became increasingly concerned about how much ground I was losing during each stop. This ‘two-steps forward-one-step-back’ situation was one of the contributing factors to the extra distance I would ultimately swim.

But I needed confirmation that I was still actually making progress towards Tiri Tiri Matangi. The wind was now blowing around 25 km/h against me and the sea had become a sloppy mess. It felt like swimming in a washing machine and I had no idea if I was going forwards or not.

I reasoned that even boats can get beaten by having wind and tide against them. So surely, continuing to swim into this was pure madness?

“How far to go?”, I called. Rob peered at Fogg’s chart and the reply came back, “0.43 nautical miles”.

A few minutes later, I repeated, “How far now?”. Rob obliged, “Down to 0.38 nautical miles”.

He was giving me precise distances to 2-decimal places. This was the data-geek in Rob coming out. But it was immensely helpful to me because it told me I *was* still progressing. Whereas if he had rounded up to “0.4 nautical miles” for both his answers, it would have suggested I was stationary. And probably would have triggered me to abandon the swim, with apparent justification.

But this told me I was still progressing, all be it almost literally at snail’s pace. I focused on looking ahead at Tiri Tiri Matangi, which for the first time looked tantalisingly close. I could even make out a small, red fishing boat anchored near the rocks where I was hoping to climb out. I *had* to keep going.

The period between 6 ½ - 7hrs was a blur with a variety of confused and conflicting thoughts flooding my mind.

I recall feeling annoyed with myself that I had taken such a casual approach to nutrition. Apart from some brief conversations with Jono and reading of other swimmers’ experiences on the Marathon Swimmers Forum, I had basically made it up. It had worked OK for my previous swims but not today.

And what about feeling cold – would that get better now I had eaten something or continue to get worse? How long should I push it out of mind and carry on and when should I start to worry about potential hypothermia?

And how could I be *so wrong* about the timing today when I had been so accurate in the past? Previously I was only a few minutes out with my predictions but today I'm wrong by *hours*.

This period between 6 ½ -7 hours were my darkest moments. Despite the presence of my wonderful support crew nearby on Fogg, I felt very lonely. They had no idea what how I was feeling right now.

I was only now realising that today's swim was nothing like my previous efforts. I had casually treated it as a simple extension to my previous swims but all my doubts now combined to make me realise the brutal truth that my whole plan had fallen apart and I had more questions than answers.

This was a serious open-water swim and other people doing this kind of this had coaches, dieticians, medics etc. But I just had some bright ideas, a bold plan and some willing helpers doing as I asked.

My biggest fear was when would this shift from being a 'bold attempt' to a 'dangerous folly'? And was I being irresponsible to both myself and my support crew? If I pushed on and willingly got myself into trouble, that would be hugely unfair to them and others who might be involved in rescuing me.

Had I already crossed the line into fool-hardiness and should I stop now? Or was I physically fine and just feeling weak psychologically?

Approaching Tiri: Charlie escorts me through choppy seas.



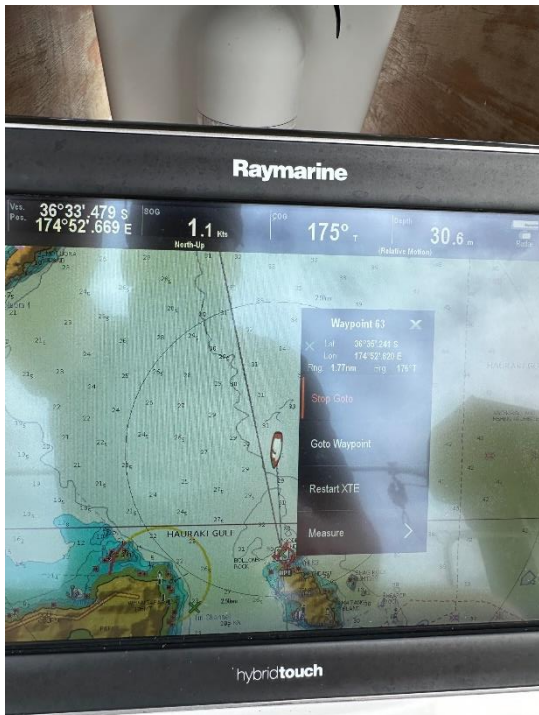
I briefly entertained the idea of stopping here and declaring victory. After all, I was only a few hundred metres from Tiri Tiri Matangi. I could dress this up as a success, couldn't I? On a map it would look real. And everyone would be saying, "Well done!"

But it would feel a hollow victory that would nag me forever. And I reasoned with myself that this was exactly what I had been curious to discover. Namely, "How much further could I go?"

And today I was finding out. I knew for certain, that when or *if* I managed to finish this swim, it would feel different to all my previous swims. I would not be sending Jono a confident text saying, "I still had more in the tank." In contrast, I now felt I was running on empty.

As I continued taking strokes, my mind wandered back to the day this all started. The day I had come out on Fogg to watch Jono with fascination and awe. He had been swimming in this exact same piece of water north of Tiri Tiri Matangi. But by then he had been swimming not for 7 hours but about 27 hours. And he continued on to Auckland! If he could do that, surely I can do this?

Approaching Tiri: I was swimming through the same waters that Jono had a few months earlier.



At the 7 hrs mark, I stopped for my final drink. Tiri Tiri Matangi looked so close. But it was still going to be a battle swimming into wind and tide, even for the last few hundred metres. Yes, I had swum in rougher conditions during my training but that had been for a relatively short duration and when I was feeling far fresher. I was now facing the toughest conditions at the end of the longest swim.

Rob asked me, "Where do you want to land on Tiri?". I replied, "Wherever is closest!" My original plan had been to swim to Northeast Bay but Rob noticed that Wooded Island would be about 250m closer and under the circumstances that was a win we needed to take. He took the decision to divert slightly and pointed me towards the new target. I was only too happy to oblige.

Change of plan: Wooded Island was slightly closer to land o than Northeast Bay.



I now felt that I had done all the thinking that I could do, and no amount of extra reasoning was going to help me. The brutal reality hit me; I just had to keep putting one arm in front of the other for as long as I could, until someone told me that I had to stop. Until then, that was the only job to do. Just get on with it and stop asking questions of yourself.

As my stopwatch reached 7 ½ hours, and I was enjoying my new mindset of ‘no doubts’, I focused on finding a safe landing spot in the 1m swells breaking over Wooded Island at the north end of Tiri.

My heart leapt at the sight of Charlie climbing into the dinghy to accompany me for the last stage and then to bring me back to Fogg. This was because the shallow, rocky waters forced Fogg to stop and wait whilst I swam on alone. Then my heart dropped as I saw Charlie climb out of the dinghy and back aboard Fogg. What was going on?

But that wasn't going to distract me now. I was close enough to hear the waves breaking on the rocks and then emerged the most beautiful sight – the seabed came into view as the kelp-covered rocks rose from the depths to meet me.

I carefully picked my way around the turbulent, rocky shallows and found a spot to climb out of the water, turn towards Fogg and raise my arms in victory. I was too far away to hear anything but I'm sure they cheered loudly!

Finish: I climb out of the water after swimming 18.5km in 7:35hrs.



With that, I waved for Charlie to come closer – he was understandably nervous about driving the dinghy closer to the rocks – and I dived into the water towards him. After a few strokes, I used the remaining energy in my arms and the adrenalin rush of victory to pull myself out of the water and into the dinghy.

Back home: Returning to Fogg at 7.00pm after 7:35hrs swimming.



It was 7pm and the sun was getting low.

Instead of swimming 16.5km I had covered 18.5km, which I didn't realise until afterwards. And instead of swimming for 5 ½ - 6 hours I had been going for 7 hours 35 minutes. I was painfully aware of this.

I had found my limit – for today.

And my curiosity was cured – for today.

“Thanks for picking me up, Charlie. Let's get back to Fogg for that beer and BBQ!”

I was exhausted but happy.

Rob Webb

Auckland, New Zealand

January 2024.