







# TESTING THE SHARK-INFESTED!?!? WATERS

AFTER YEARS OF DOING LENGTHS IN THE POOL, SHE WAS  
READY FOR HER FIRST BIG SWIMMING ADVENTURE. OR WAS SHE?

**BY KATE BARKER**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE LaBADESSA



**ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ:** Racers jump off the ferry at the start of San Francisco's annual Alcatraz Invitational Swim. Opposite: A competitor heads for the mainland.

## MY NEW FRIEND RICHARD

and I nodded a grim hello, then stuck resolutely together, only a few inches apart. Surrounded by 600 other swimmers, most of them sensibly clad in warm head-to-toe neoprene wetsuits, some even equipped with insulating hoodies, Richard and I shared a special bond. We were virtually naked, and proud of it. He, slim in his Speedo, chest bare and body greased in all the male chafing areas, and me, in my brand new, plus-sized, purple one-piece swimsuit, similarly greased, but where women most fear to chafe. (Not where you might think—the neck, actually, from the friction of bathing suit straps and salt water.)

We were waiting for the start of San Francisco's annual Alcatraz Invitational Swim, which begins at Alcatraz Island—home to the former maximum security prison from which no one ever officially escaped—and ends at the city's waterfront, about two kilometres away. As zero hour approached, I found myself wondering how I came to be here—quietly terrified and about to voluntarily jump into the freezing, turbulent and great-white-shark-infested waters of San Francisco Bay.

**ONE FEBRUARY MORNING IN TORONTO**, while scraping ice off the windshield before driving to the pool, I thought there had to be a better way. I just wanted to swim, far, and free of the confining lanes of crowded swimming pools with their kid germs and nasty smells. (That stink, incidentally, is not caused by chlorine, but by something far,

far worse—chloramines, the by-product of chlorine mixing with urine.) I wanted a goal, something to swim for beyond the tedious lap-lap-lap weight-control fitness routine of my winter workout. If this were training, then it would be more endurable. But training for what? Most open-water swims seemed well out of my league. I wasn't up for 10 hours of front crawl aided by a guy in a pilot boat with a feeding stick. I just wanted a beginner's race of an hour or so, to swim with those of a similar ilk. But something more exciting than a race around buoys tethered to the muddy bottom of Lake Ontario.

I started looking online, and that's when

fort of my local pool, I wondered just what it would feel like to swim in water that was 58 to 60° F, the temperature of San Francisco Bay in mid-September.

I found out a few months later when I went for my first open-water swim in a small Ontario lake. It was a particularly dismal May 24 weekend, before the sun had adequately warmed the water enough for normal human recreation, but after the blackflies and mosquitoes were out in full force. The water was, simply put, fucking cold and miserable—even in a wetsuit. My hands immediately turned into numb and clumsy flippers, and it took 15 minutes before my face stopped stinging. I paused

**THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING LASTED FOR LESS THAN ONE MINUTE, THE TIME IT TOOK FOR EVERY OTHER SWIMMER TO MOVE AHEAD AND LEAVE ME DEAD LAST. I'M NOT ESPECIALLY COMPETITIVE, BUT THIS WAS DOWNRIGHT EMBARRASSING**

I discovered the Southend Rowing Club's Alcatraz Invitational Swim. It sounded perfect. Not too long, but still a serious challenge. It also appealed because I had never before been to California, and—as a Clint Eastwood fan—I loved the idea of swimming away from Alcatraz. So I signed up.

For the rest of the winter I swam my usual 100 laps of front crawl several times a week, but with renewed vigour. Soon I would be striking out for open-water training in a wetsuit. As I prepared in the steamy com-

in my inelegant flailing, struggling against the unfamiliar drag of the wetsuit, to discuss the situation with Kim, my spouse and pilot, who was patiently batting away blood suckers with her canoe paddle.

"How's the suit?" she wanted to know.

"Heavy." That was an understatement. It felt like I was pulling a waterlogged corpse along for the ride. I was so hampered by my protective outer skin that it sucked the joy right out of the swim. "I'm going to try without it," I told her. Kim seemed nervous



as I wriggled out of my wetsuit. When I went back in, I decided to stay near shore, close to my anti-hypothermia aid—an already damp towel. The cold was a shock, but not unbearable. Soon I was swimming, a little blue around the edges, but blissfully free of the wetsuit. At least now I knew what I was up against, temperature-wise.

**WAVES WERE ANOTHER STORY.** When I resumed my open-water training, I swam in Lake Ontario at Woodbine Beach, with or without the wetsuit, depending on conditions. But so far, I had yet to battle any real surf. Kim was not satisfied with my training repertoire, as she watched from the beach.

“You need to be challenged,” she insisted. “You need waves—big ones!” I shrugged and continued doing endless laps between

undulated past. I swam to shore.

On the next training day, I convinced two friends to come along in a rented canoe for company, and to provide possible backup against marauding lake life. They gamely launched in rough seas and I followed. The moment the first wave bitch-slapped me down, I started to giggle. Who knew I’d get such a kick out of sliding into troughs and flying along wave crests? I almost didn’t notice the weight of the wetsuit, feeling not unlike a seal, or perhaps more accurately, a walrus or some other solid pinniped frolicking in the cold. After half an hour, the wind picked up, whipping the waves even higher, necessitating our return to shore. By this time, I was having decidedly less fun. I felt sick, as though I would actually hurl. It turns out that swimming in rolling

motorboat traffic since the 1970s. I opted for the five-kilometre race—significantly longer than my Alcatraz swim, but the same distance I routinely swam between the buoys at Woodbine Beach, according to my rough nautical calculations.

On race day, we drove beside the course, from the finish to the start. The trip seemed inordinately long, even before we passed the start of the three-kilometre event. Eventually we reached the five-kilometre start—a scrubby stretch of rough grass at the water’s edge—and I realized that my rough nautical calculations at Woodbine Beach had been completely wrong. This race was easily twice as long as I had ever swum before. When Kim appeared at my side to cheer me on, I glared at her.

“It will be fine,” she said. Her falsetto voice, followed by a nervous laugh, revealed an obvious lie. I walked toward the water, startling a large black rat snake that had been sunning itself in the short grass. It slithered off under a bush and, remembering the eel, I contemplated the portent of all things slithery. After a 15-minute delay due to distant thunder, we were ushered into the canal.

It was a warm, soupily organic bath, and I hoped I wouldn’t swallow any. The whistle blew and I sluggishly set off with 17 others. “Okay,” I reasoned, “I can do this.” The power of positive thinking lasted for less than one minute, the time it took every other swimmer to move ahead and leave me unquestionably dead last. Now, I’m not especially competitive, but this was downright embarrassing. Particularly because I was being flanked by a pair of over-anxious young spotters in a canoe who—doubtless fearing I might expire from heart failure before their very eyes—kept questioning me every time I paused to clear my goggles.

“Are you okay?” the well-muscled 20-year-old chirped.

“Fucking brilliant,” I answered, and continued on.

This was supposedly the Four Bridges Swim, but after 30 minutes of relentless pulling, I wondered where the hell bridge number one was hiding. My humourless spotters paddled close, whispering to themselves, thinking I couldn’t hear. I felt tired and impossibly out of my depth. But I kept swimming, hard and alone.

I don’t believe in God. Maybe I should. As I finally passed beneath bridge number one—fearing a congregation of do-gooders forming to cheer me on, as though I were some unfortunate disabled child bringing up the rear in a foot race—I heard it. A



the buoys at Woodbine, ingesting questionable *E. coli* levels instead of chemically treated pee, dreaming of the sea, completely unaware of Kim’s tough-love training plan.

It was revealed during a trip to Kingston—where Kim’s parents live. Here, I would take on the decidedly wavier conditions of Lake Ontario—in my wetsuit. I was dubious, as the first morning was dead calm and looked no different than the water at Woodbine Beach. Still, I donned the wetsuit and flipped on my new, \$30, Italian, fog-resistant Aqua-Woman goggles. I employed my father-in-law to keep a lookout, and then set out to swim for an hour up and down the little piece of coast in front of his house. I was just getting used to the wetsuit and enjoying the rhythm of my stroke, when something big moved directly beneath me. Thanks to my expensive and mercilessly un-fogged European-crafted lenses, I could see the unmistakable outline of a hideous, three-foot-long eel as it

swells is no different than sailing on them to the sensitive inner ear. I was seasick. Great. I pondered the logistics of chucking while maintaining a stiff egg beater off the San Francisco skyline, in effect becoming a human chum line for all things scary beneath the waves.

**WATER CONDITIONS ASIDE,** there was also the race experience to take into consideration. How would I handle all those flailing arms and legs at the start of a competitive swim? I had no idea. Kim suggested I find out by signing up for a race near home. The Four Bridges Swim along the old Welland Canal near St. Catharines seemed like a good choice. It offered five-kilometre and three-kilometre events, almost exactly one month before my Alcatraz race.

The setting of the Four Bridges Swim was picturesque, even bucolic in a landscape-by-Constable sort of way. The old Welland is thankfully not the new Welland, but a lovely clean stretch of water, unsullied by



swim master Pedro Ordenes, a man who has swum from Alcatraz 500 times. He had agreed to let me take a dip with his regular Thursday night swimmers. I had brought the wetsuit, but wanted to go without—I figured I would need all of my strength and stamina to make the crossing. I was also keen to avoid the uncanny resemblance I bear to a sea lion when sausaged inside its grey skin. So I hit the water sans wetsuit. My knees were numb, but not stinging. I had been in much worse. My face didn't even hurt. "It's doable," I told Kim.

It was here that I met Richard Culbertson, who was also hoping to do the race

distinct, long, low rumble of thunder. We were in the eye of the killer storm of the summer. All swimmers were ordered out of the water, immediately. My overprotective teenaged escorts sent me ashore.

"Oh, what a shame!" I lied, delighted. No one finished. I was saved.

**"NO MORE TRAINING,"** I informed Kim, except for the usual visits to Woodbine and also Cherry Beach, where the E. coli levels were much healthier. She agreed. I was as ready as I would ever be.

That is, until about a week before the swim. I always knew vaguely that the coast

**FINAL STROKES:**  
A swimmer nears the end of the race at San Francisco's Aquatic Park; the author cracks a smile after surviving both the swim and the sharks.



**AS IT TURNS OUT, SAN FRANCISCO LIES SMACK IN THE MIDDLE OF A NOTORIOUS SECTION OF COASTLINE KNOWN AS THE RED TRIANGLE—AN AREA RESPONSIBLE FOR MORE GREAT-WHITE-SHARK ATTACKS ON HUMANS THAN ANYWHERE ELSE**

of Northern California was shark territory, but I didn't think much about it until the swim organizers sent out a pre-race e-mail offering to sell competitors a \$5 great-white-shark-repellent pill. It was a sick joke that I didn't find too funny.

As it turns out, San Francisco lies smack in the middle of a notorious 160-kilometre section of coastline known as the Red Triangle—an area responsible for more great-white-shark attacks on humans than anywhere else in the world. That's right, *the world*—as in, swimmers in Australia have less of a chance of being eaten, mate.

When I arrived in San Francisco, I discovered that the local 49ers are very proud and informed about their native apex predators. I learned that great whites can be 21 feet in length and weigh up to three tons. Even the smaller ones can decapitate a

400-pound sea lion in a single bite. Exsanguination is their preferred kill method. They hit hard from below, once, and then run, ensuring their frantic prey never get an opportunity to stick a flipper or a flailing foot into their delicate, dead eyes. They then leisurely wait for their prey to bleed out before returning to feed.

It seems yellow is particularly enticing to sharks, which is why my distance-swimming hero, American Lynne Cox, refuses to wear a swimsuit of that colour in the ocean. "Yummy yellow," she calls it.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the official Alcatraz Invitational swim cap was, yes, a screaming yellow.

**TWO DAYS BEFORE THE RACE,** I stood at the edge of San Francisco Bay with a group of swimmers, most of them in wetsuits, listening to

without a wetsuit. Cold water immersion was something new to Richard, who is from New Orleans and who had only swum in the warmth of the Gulf of Mexico until now. He later confessed to his wife Susan, who was fretting on shore in a full-length wool coat, hat and mitts, that for the first five minutes, he didn't think he would be able to do it. Unaware of Richard's angst, I swam happily with the group inside the safe confines of the sea wall for the next 50 minutes, and found myself actually looking forward to taking on Alcatraz. I didn't notice the pain in my neck until I came shivering to shore. In my excitement, I had forgotten the Vaseline. A giant, red-raw, double-bathing-suit-strap hickey had erupted on the left side of my neck. Kim joked that it looked like I'd been making out with a vampire. But I liked to think of it as a battle scar.

**THE NIGHT BEFORE THE SWIM,** I slept for precisely one and a half hours. At four a.m., I heard what sounded like thunder echo through the hotel. There was a flash beyond the heavily curtained window. Lightning. By

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LOWER: TOBIAS MOUTCHA

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the time we arrived at the marshalling area at six a.m., the streets of San Francisco were experiencing an unnatural deluge. Organizers stood grim-lipped, eyeing the sky. One of the marshals told me there hadn't been a full-on thunderstorm in the area for the past five years. It slowly dawned on my sleep-deprived brain that we could be rained out.

Hell no. I didn't swim all of those endless pee-flavoured laps, inhale Lake Ontario's E. coli, and nearly puke my guts out in three-foot-high waves to be told to go home now. Fortunately, as I glowered at the scudding clouds, the storm miraculously abated. (Perhaps it was my non-existent God again?) Operation I Am Not a Sea Lion was back on.

We boarded a ferry that took us across to Alcatraz Island. On the way, the boat cut through considerable chop, and the driving rain made Alcatraz loom even more bleakly than it normally would. As the ferry sashayed ass-end into position, we were told to swim for the SS *Jeremiah O'Brien*—a World War Two Liberty bat-

tieship permanently moored on the waterfront at Pier 45. The ship sits just next to a narrow break in the seawall leading to Aquatic Park, our finish area.

Apparently, the ship was out there, somewhere, on the other side of the slate-grey water. A hulking Australian in full neoprene, including insulated hoodie, peered through the greasy ferry window from his unique vantage point of six feet four inches and stated flatly, "I don't see the bloody thing."

"Me neither," I agreed.

He looked down at me, in only my swimsuit, goggles, timing chip bracelet and yellow shark-attracting Alcatraz swim cap. "Blimey," he said. "I guess you've done this before."

"No," I answered.

Richard and I saw each other and stood together. Suddenly the starboard and port forward doors swung open and a cheer went up. My mouth went dry.

"Go, go, go!" A voice urged each consecutive group to jump, in threes. Richard and I shuffled forward, closer and closer to the door. "Go, go, go!" I watched four lines ahead of me as one wetsuited lemming after another dutifully took off. Suddenly a woman in a full-hooded wetsuit leaned

into my panic-charged personal space and whispered, "You're so brave!"

The bitch. In that second, standing two rows from no-turning-back-now, with nothing but a thin layer of stretchy polyester between me and great-white territory, I was anything but brave. "Go, go, go!" I didn't have time to hate her for long. Suddenly there was only air in front of us as Richard and I stepped together out onto the ledge.

"Go!" I jumped.

**"MAKE SURE YOU DO A SCISSOR KICK** and stick your arms out." That was the only technical advice Kim gave me before the swim. I knew the manoeuvre, a classic entry position adopted by lifeguards, ensuring that your head stays above the water so you never lose sight of your drowning victim. In this case, it would ensure that my head stayed above water and hence visible, so that no one behind me would jump on it, turning me into the drowning victim. It was sensible advice that I promptly forgot as I plummeted, feet first, straight down. The knifing cold and shock of being suddenly six feet under, coupled with the knowledge

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that the fridge-sized Australian was right on my heels, shot me torpedo-like to the surface, where I windmilled mindlessly away, having no idea where Richard was. It was every man, woman and lemming for themselves.

I had a rough start. Apart from the cold, the two-foot chop and whitecaps had me immediately disoriented. Not even my Aqua-Woman goggles could help me find that goddamned battleship in a landscape of varying shades of grey. I took an unexpected hit from a particularly large wave in the first minute, ingesting more than enough sea water in one gulp to make me queasy.

As I swam, I could hear my fellow racers, but I couldn't see them—except for one dickhead who gave me a fright by swimming directly across my legs. I chugged on, arm over arm, breathing to the left at every stroke. (I am so pathologically left-handed that it even extends to my swimming. I once tried bilateral breathing—the correct method—in the calm and aromatic waters of my local pool. I almost drowned in four feet of water, inducing the worst asthma attack of my life. So much for proper form.) Fortunately, the wind and waves at Alcatraz were coming from my right, so left-handed breathing was an asset. It was the only one I had for the first 10 terrible minutes. “If I don't find my rhythm soon,” I thought, “this could actually kill me.” For a moment, I remembered the sharks.

It is remarkable how quickly 600 people can disperse in the ocean. The first time I was aware that no one else was around me, I paused and took a moment to fully appreciate where I was, what I was doing. To my right, the perfect symmetry of the Golden Gate, standing sentinel over the bay. To my left, the outline of the Bay Bridge at the east end of the historic harbour. Straight ahead, the iconic descending lines of San Francisco's steepest streets running downhill almost all the way to the water. And behind—I turned my head. Damn. Alcatraz lurked, as near as the moment I first leapt from the ferry. I put my head down and powered against the waves.

I don't know, precisely, when I started to have fun. I can only assume it was roughly 20 minutes in, after my nerves had given up sending frantic messages to my brain about the cold and the sheer impossibility of the

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situation. The rain never let up completely, but the waves lessened and eventually I took another 360 of my coordinates in time and space, noting with more than a little pride that I was almost exactly halfway between Alcatraz and San Francisco. A little later, being a natural pack animal, I hooked up with a small pod and we all swam happily together for quite a while. I no longer felt the cold, and was slicing through the water at a satisfying rate. There was no question in my mind that I would make this crossing, possibly even in respectable time.

About half a kilometre out, as we closed in on the *Jeremiah O'Brien*, I was momentarily stopped short by sheer terror. No, it wasn't a shark. It was one of the loudest, most prolonged reverberations of rolling thunder I'd ever heard. My pod, to a man, popped up their yummy yellow heads, as though we were so many tasty sea lions, sensing an apex predator circling below. I scanned the ominously dark sky, put my face down and sprinted. I flew past the *Jeremiah O'Brien*, through the challenging currents swirling near the break in the seawall, and straight into the calm expanse of Aquatic Park. I didn't relish death by electrocution, or worse, being forced out of the water by some over-anxious race officials. I looked up briefly to find the line of well-wishers marking the finish and then churned through the final thousand feet.

I could hear them, whistling and cheering and making much of the swimmers as they staggered singly to shore. Many of the racers did stumble in the sand, so I waited a moment to make sure my legs weren't Jell-O before hauling my purple-suited carcass out of the water. Kim was right there, laughing and snapping unflattering pictures of me smiling snottily. I passed under the finish line solidly mid-pod, with an official time of 1:03:02. Richard did well too, coming in a few minutes ahead of me.

Later, someone told me that after swimming Alcatraz, he felt like a part of San Francisco belonged to him. The next day, walking past the sea lions lounging at Pier 39, I felt the opposite was true; that San Francisco would ever more own a little piece of me. **e**

*Kate Barker is a contributing editor to explore. She wrote about Canada's first family on Everest in our May 2009 issue.*