



UP FOR ADVENE

THE WORLD AWAITS ... WITH DOZENS OF EXOTIC

OPEN water swimming is experiencing a revolution unlike anything since Gertrude Ederle brought worldwide acclaim to the sport with her English Channel crossing in 1926.

Marathon swimming's debut at the 2008 Beijing Olympics was a catalyst for growth. The dramatic 10K Olympic marathon swim courses planned in Hyde Park for the 2012 London Olympics and at Copacabana Beach for the 2016 Rio Olympics also are likely to drive global interest in the sport.

While many open water swim courses are point-to-point ocean swims, or loop courses in lakes – where heats are separated by gender, speed, age and wetsuit use – the number

of exotic alternatives is increasing. A U.S. Masters swimmer who wants to sample some more creative races outside the United States might consider these exciting events.

GREAT BRITAIN

The birthplace of channel swimming is generating higher aspirations for thousands with its British Gas Great Swim series. This string of four outdoor events – beginning June 19 with British Gas Great East Swim 2010 near Suffolk – offers pageantry, competition, ambience, television coverage and celebrity participation.

Founded in 2008, the swim series attracted more than 10,000 participants in 2009. The four events, roughly 1-mile each, are the Great North Swim, Great East Swim, Great London Swim and Great Scottish Swim.

The high-octane summer festivals attract many of the world's fastest swimmers – including world champions and Olympic medalists – who flock to the lakes, lochs and docks where the events are held.

The field is encouraged to wear wetsuits so the colder waters do not present a convenient excuse. Fully supported by sponsor British Gas, the series plays up the fact that mostly ordinary people who fancy an aquatic challenge can get fit and socialize with many others who are diving headlong into the sport for the first time.

The demographics of the Great Swims are highly unusual, partly due to strong British media coverage of women who have achieved personal goals in open water swimming. In its first two years, the series actually has attracted more women than men – compared to

the 65:35 male/female ratio typical at open water swims.

SWEDEN

The Swedes take the male/female ratio to a whole different level with huge swim series that separate races exclusively for women and youths. In their hometown, The Vansjö Swim has been held annually every July since 1950, and attracts nearly 10,000 swimmers each year to a series of river races from 1.5K to 5K. So popular is the event that the host town swells to over six times its normal population for the duration

UTURE?

SWIMS BY STEVEN MUNATONES

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(PRECEDING PAGES) The start in the British Gas Great Swims series. **(LEFT)** Aerial view of the New Zealand Crossing. **(BOTTOM)** Start of New Zealand Crossing.

ages is orchestrated to set off in staggered heats of 100 to 200 swimmers each. Shepherded to the water's edge in what appears to be controlled chaos, the first heat starts at 7 a.m. with the last heat entering the water after 11 a.m. So many swimmers are in the water at the same time that officials require each one to swim with a red safety buoy and stay among hundreds of safety personnel on boats and fixed pontoons. With their rented buoys, the swimmers create a line of red along the straight shot from one shore to the other.

The swimmers range in speed from accomplished marathon swimmers to hundreds of physically disabled swimmers who have the honor of swimming in the first heat. Thousands of others simply float, kick, bob and breaststroke their way across the lake in leisurely fashion.

THE NETHERLANDS

With a long history of canal and river swimming, the Dutch offer many competitive open water races – both in traditional freestyle, and in even more traditional breaststroke.

For those more comfortable using breaststroke, the preferred stroke of Matthew Webb, the first person to cross the English Channel in 1875, the Dutch offer a number of affordable races that range from 500 meters to 5K in flat-water lakes and canals.

Swimmers often camp out before and after events such as the well-known Alkmaar Swim, which attracts breaststrokers and freestylers from all over the world.

The Dutch are also hosting the IPC (International Paralympics Committee) Swimming World Championships in August this year, where a 5K race will be held for the blind, partially blind and physically

disabled. Kayaks, bells and whistles guide the blind.

GREECE

The Greeks this year are scheduled to hold the world's first open water swimming championships for Special Olympians in the historic coastal city of Marathon. The host country's decision to stage the 1.5K swim in the Aegean Sea, where the swimming events of the 1896 Olympics were held, demonstrates the open water sport's commitment to hold safe and enjoyable events that reach out to people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds.

BRAZIL

For outrageously enjoyable swims, Brazil is hard to beat in December at the Desafio Rei Do Mar (King of the Sea Challenge). With music blaring, fans cheering and TV cameras rolling from the shoreline and in the water, the Brazilians organize both low-key and competitive races amid a festive beach party atmosphere.

At Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, athletes first race 400 meters in a short sprint in order to be seeded. Then the swimmers are slightly handicapped at the start. The race is over the 2016 Rio Olympic 10K marathon swim course, but with a Brazilian twist.

Instead of the usual in-the-water feeding pontoon, the hydration stations are positioned up on the soft sand along the beach. The athletes must exit the water every 2 kilometers, and then run 100 meters on the beach past throngs of cheering fans to grab their drinks and gel packs.

The five-loop course is an unusual combination of serene protected waters on the inner legs, high surf at the water's edge and challenging cross-currents with surface chop on the outermost legs.

of the three-day event. More than 2,500 swimmers participate in the Vansbro Tjejsim, a 1K swim for women only.

TAIWAN

When it comes to communal swimming, the Taiwanese have perfected the art. The Sun Moon Lake International Swimming Carnival, founded by Taiwanese Premier Wu Den-yih in 1983, is a mass participation event where more than 25,000 (not a typo – three

zeros) people swim an untimed 3.3K crossing of Sun Moon Lake in central Taiwan.

Swimming is normally off-limits in the beautifully tranquil lake, once the favorite vacation spot of former President Chiang Kai-shek. But on one day in August each year, thousands descend upon the quiet oasis, taking up all the available hotels and campsites, to churn up the normally calm, mist-laden, emerald green waters.

An international field of all

Lissa Reyden

SOUTH AFRICA

Not to be outdone, the King of the Nelson Mandela Bay event in South Africa takes an even more strategic “mano-a-mano” approach to competitive racing.

In an innovative race arrangement, 20 swimmers are put together in a single heat over a 750-meter ocean course. The slowest four swimmers in each heat are eliminated as the field is whittled down.

Every April, this knock-down, get-up-and-go event provides only limited rest, as the heats alternate between male and female rounds. After four elimination rounds, the fastest four swimmers end up racing in the final for prize money. The event is a tough test of sprinting speed, overall endurance and racing strategy.

SPAIN

Strategy and open water awareness truly come into play at the Descenso a Nado de la Ría de Navia (River Navia Downstream Swim), which has been growing steadily since its inception in 1958.

Each August, thousands of swimmers – separated by age and gender – wait until the ocean tides turn, and then race down the River Navia in northern Spain. Pushed by the currents, the race is the culmination of many pre-race activities including parades and community celebrations that combine Spanish culture and local folklore.

Excitement builds in the days leading up to the swim, when music welcomes the swimmers at the start, fans line the river shores, and television cameras capture the excitement. Once the race starts, helicopters zoom overhead and media boats jockey for views to capture images of the professionals leading the pack, and Masters swimmers striving to beat the younger age groups. The series has races between 1K and 5K.

NEW ZEALAND

The New Zealand Ocean Swim Series presents a popular na-



Gilvan de Souza

tionwide competition where Masters swimmers can test whether their navigational IQ and wisdom of years is enough to offset the youth of their age-group competitors.

During the Southern Hemisphere summer from November through April, six of the most scenic locations on New Zealand’s North Island – from Wellington Harbour to a quaint bay near Christchurch – entice Oceania’s best elite and Masters swimmers to compete for prize money and a slew of random prizes, including free international trips to events throughout the South Pacific.

Run professionally with entrepreneurial zeal, the series offers a series point system by age group, and has established a number of sister swims throughout the South Pacific. Wetsuits are de rigueur given the cooler water temperatures, but the smiles and hospitality of the hosts warm the hearts of the competitors.

CAYMAN ISLANDS

For big-time money and big-time swimmers, the 2010 Flow-ers Sea Swim, scheduled for June 19 in the Cayman Islands, is a must-do. In 2009, the event hosted numerous Olympians, including Ryan Lochte, Ian Crocker and Rada Owen, and NCAA champions, including

hometown hero Shaune Fraser. These champions were enticed by purses of \$5,000 to break the course record and another \$25,000 to break the world’s fastest 1-mile ocean record in still water (promoted as 16:00 for the men and 17:21 for the women).

Finish of the King of the Sea Challenge. The event includes an exit from the water and re-entry every 2 kilometers.

The Caribbean crowd that gathers on Grand Cayman for the event is never disappointed with 140 randomly drawn prizes valued at over \$120,000.

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The opportunity to compete together with the world's best swimmers in warm, crystal-clear waters and be eligible for fabulous prizes in a tropical paradise is what draws an increasing number of visitors year after year.

FIJI

On the other side of the tropical world, the swim series, Fiji Swims, similarly attracts Masters swimmers whose heroes and heroines competed in Olympics past.

A few of the stars who participate in the Fiji Swims are three-time Olympic medalist (1972) Shane Gould, six-time Olympic medalist (1956, 1960) Murray Rose, 11-time Olympic medalist (2004, 2008) Natalie Coughlin, and three-time Olympic gold medalist (1968) Debbie Meyer.

The mid-August, three-day

potpourri of open water swims kicks off with an 18K relay, where teams of any size – and solo swimmers – navigate among uninhabited islands, innumerable sandbars and stunning coral reefs. The freestyle-type relay allows swimmers to swim any time, any order or any distance on their leg – which leads to some interesting strategies for the most competitive teams.

The Australians, who have ruled the roost for the past several years, use a quick-tempo relay where each swimmer swims all-out for as little as 1 to 2 minutes on his or her leg, before rotating out to a teammate. Other teams, more serene in their approach, simply enjoy the underwater scenery and camaraderie with their teammates.

Billing itself as “the most stunning ocean swim in the world,” the relay ends on Beachcomber Island, where the swimmers stay overnight. The next day, the swimmers

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Links to Events

- * Great Swims – greatswim.org
- * Vansbrosimingen – www.vansbrosimingen.se
- * Sun Moon Lake International Swimming Carnival – www.puliswim.org.tw
- * Alkmaar Swim – openwateralkmaar.nl/node/5
- * Special Olympics: Marathon, Greece – specialolympics.org
- * King of the Sea Challenge – reidomar2009.com.br
- * Descenso a Nado de la Ría de Navia – rianavia.com
- * King of Nelson Mandela Bay Swim – www.kingofthebay.co.za
- * New Zealand Ocean Swim Series – oceanswim.co.nz
- * Flowers Sea Swim – flowersseaswim.com
- * Fiji Swims – fijiswims.com
- * Clean Half Extreme Relay – www.thecleanhalf.com
- * Hernandarias to Paraná – fina.org

do a 1K warm-down swim to neighboring Treasure Island, where a stroke clinic is given.

For the finale, the swimmers wait for low tide and the appearance of a sandbar in mid-channel between Treasure and Beachcomber Islands. Escorted out to the low-lying sandbar, the swimmers head 2.7K back to the

shores of Beachcomber Island, where they finish in a coconut-lined chute to the sounds of Fijian music.

HONG KONG

For multi-sport athletes interested in nonstop physical exertion, the Clean Half Extreme Relay is a unique endurance challenge. The 14.5K re-

lay is held along the tropical shores of Hong Kong – on the much cleaner side of Hong Kong Harbour.

Teams can enter the Carbon-Neutral Option of the relay, using outrigger canoes instead of the traditional motorized escort boats. The Carbon-Neutral Option allows no time for relaxation, as team members are constantly swimming, navigating and paddling, sometimes over massive swells.

This eco-swim – held in October – draws swimmers from both the East and West with surprises galore, such as musicians playing on floating pontoons.

ARGENTINA

For those who crave physical exertion, the 88-kilometer Hernandarias-to-Paraná marathon swim – held each February – is the longest race in the world. Although swimmers have the benefit of a downstream current along a meandering river,

pro swimmers typically take more than 10 hours to complete the race – where they constantly jockey for position along the fluctuating currents.

“The race is incredible and challenging. There are points when the river is narrow and you move quickly, but there are other points where you can’t see either bank of the river and you have no idea where you are, or if you are headed in the right direction,” says former world champion Erica Rose about her two swims in the Hernandarias-to-Paraná.

“The people in Hernandarias and Paraná are amazing. They get so excited about the marathon that they celebrate the week leading into it, and line the banks of the river during the swim. They’re incredibly supportive of the swimmers and treat us like celebrities.” <<< >>> Steven Munatones, a World Open Water Swimming Association board member, writes for The Daily News of Open Water Swimming.

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