

Scott's Alcatraz Swimming Tips



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1. While swimming in the channel, be confident and relax. YOU ARE SAFE - Even if you can't see anyone around you, they are there behind the waves and chop. The safety boats and kayakers CAN see you.
2. Eliminate equipment issues before the swim: test everything in training and use what works - train in what you plan to use during the swim:
 - a. swim suit, ear plugs, caps, goggles
 - i. If you're looking for an insulated cap, the Barracuda Hothead or Blue Seventy swim caps work very well. But the water will be warm (62ish) in Sept.
 - b. Unless you have new goggle, you'll want to use defogging drops - they work. Without them you WILL need to clear your goggle at least once - HASSLE.
 - c. Use Anti-chaffing lube for the salt water (a little vaso or "body glide" in the arm pits works great - you can get it at fleet feet). You DON'T need to "grease" before a swim this short. This is for chaffing only.
3. Know your average open water mile time beforehand. This will help you pick the best landmarks based on your speed - your speed will determine how far you need to swim to adjust for currents, and the landmarks will differ depending on your speed.
 - a. Examples: 20 minute mile? Aim straight to the finish; 30 minute mile? Aim for the pump house; 40 minute mile? Aim for Fort Mason, and so on.
 - b. Actual landmarks and course will change right up to the day of the swim.
4. In some swims, they will put a big bright buoy on a boat and just tell you to swim toward that the whole time. Ultimately, just listen to the navigational briefing and do what they tell you. The advice will change daily due to currents and tides.
5. Get in several cold open water swims in the months/weeks leading up to the event. Train in cold water throughout the winter if possible.
6. Practice sighting (looking for your landmarks and swimming toward them) Sight about every 20 to 40 strokes (depending on how straight you swim) to stay on course.
7. Learn bi-lateral breathing (helps you swim in a straight line and good when there is chop)
8. The jump - hold on to your goggles, look before you jump, don't jump on the person in front of you, swim away from the boat immediately so you don't get jumped on. Then take a moment to make sure your goggles and cap are all good - find your first landmark and start swimming.
9. **DO NOT try to swim to the people far ahead of you.** Go to your landmarks. (The people in front of you have already been pushed by currents - swimming straight toward them will lead you off course).
10. **Relax and enjoy the swim . Take a moment out in the middle to look around at the golden gate bridge, the city, the island behind you. Take it all in.**
11. Before the swim, ignore the hype - it's not that far, it's not that cold, and there are NO really big fish in the Bay (at least not the kind that eat you.)
12. After the swim, hype it up - it was super far, the water was ice cold, and you were surrounded by man eaters 😊

Additional Notes:

There are many organized Alcatraz swims that run year round. Some are intimate with less than 6 people (my favorites). Some are held when the water is 48 degrees, extreme currents, and tough weather - these are VERY hard. Some are huge logistical events with over 700 people (SERC Invitational for example.) All are FUN. There are some advantages of the big events. They take place when the water is warm and the weather is more likely to be good. You will not get the solo open water experience in the big swims, but there is so much camaraderie and positive energy, it's a great experience (and they feed you afterwards - bonus). Most swim courses go from Alcatraz to Aquatic park (~1.25 miles straight line distance), while others (Alcatraz Challenge) go from Alcatraz to mainland and then down to Crissy Field (~2.0 miles). Very swims will allow you to swim in a straight line (you must swim a little extra to compensate for the currents.)

The waters in the Bay are so complex with currents and tidal shifts that NO two Alcatraz swims are alike. I have finished the same course in 26 minutes (with a tidal push), but other days it has taken me over an hour (fighting a river of current). I've done this swim in glassy pool-like conditions and stormy victory at sea conditions with thunder, lightning, and rain. So the conditions can have a huge impact on your time - so don't worry too much about how long it takes - just enjoy the experience. The big organized swims always run on the mellowest tides, usually beginning at the end of the flood or ebb, so you are swimming during slack, with a slight push one way or another near the end. The Race directory gives great instructions (twice) at the big swims, so don't even worry about the course or currents until this race-day talk.

Typical swim times can run between 20 minutes (elite swimmers to Aquatic park on a favorable tide) to nearly two hours (slow swimmers with lots of cross current) - all of these people complete it at their own pace and should be proud.

If you swim about a 30 minute mile, and get decent conditions in the Bay, the swim with mild currents runs from about 35 to 45 minutes (middle of the pack).

About training:

If you are a regular swimmer (Masters, swim team, local health club) and you can swim 3500 yards, then you're probably already prepared physically to make the short crossing from Alcatraz. But if you have little or no open water swimming (OWS) experience, you'll want to take some time to get familiar with ocean swimming. OWS is as much mental as physical.

You can pay a day fee at the Dolphin or South End Rowing Clubs (\$6) and use their lockers and sauna. It's worth it. There are people swimming in the park every day, all year round - unless it's rainy (dirty water.)

About Wetsuits:

Although most official open water swims and solo marathon swims do NOT allow wetsuits, most Alcatraz events are aimed at the masses and have a category for wetsuits. Swimming in the "skins" category gives you the full open water experience, but you are much more vulnerable to the cold and

conditions than wetsuit assisted swimming. Swimming in a good wetsuit is (by most) considered an “assisted” swim and is noticeably faster and offers huge competitive and safety advantages. Wetsuits remove the cold water issue and the risk of hypothermia. They create float and better body alignment in the water, which makes you swim faster. The extra float means you can relax your legs (less kicking) and expend less effort to maintain the same speed. They function as a flotation device so if you get tired or cramps - you can rollover and float - you don’t sink. Wetsuits are a flotation device, but they can also give people a false sense of security. You are still in the open water with the elements, sea life, and boats. In my opinion, you should be able to do the swim without a wetsuit, or don’t do it. A wetsuit should be used for performance or comfort, not as a crutch.

Some disadvantages of the wetsuit are that you don’t get to “experience” the challenge of the cold water. There is some additional resistance on your arms (swimming without a wetsuit is a very free feeling). Wetsuits can rub and rash you more around the neck and armpits (so lube up). There are certain bragging rights that come with swimming “naked,” but if you do choose to wear a wetsuit, a swimming or triathlon suit is preferred over using a “surfing” style wetsuit.

If you’d like to get the “purist” view on wetsuit, you can read the articles by Scott Zornig titled, “What’s wrong with marathon swimming.”

http://www.icontact-archive.com/9BwG8tBcsCV_QYleE0UgKzHympOPZ9dU?w=3

http://www.icontact-archive.com/9BwG8tBcsCV_QYleE0UgK960z1Zfecw?w=3

Extra notes for family and friend observers:

For those standing on the beach, you’ll see an endless flood of people arriving at the beach. You will also view the water from within Aquatic park (which is like a swimming pool). What you don’t see from the beach are the white caps, waves, currents, and shipping traffic your friends or family had to navigate to get to the water park. Don’t let the smooth waters on the inside fool you. It can be pretty rough out in the Bay.

On the beach, it can be mind blowing (and confusing) to see “old” people, overweight people, people with missing arms or legs, etc. arrive at the beach before your “athletic” friends and family. Don’t let this worry you and think your loved one is lost at sea. There are many reasons they have not arrived on the beach yet: First, there are a LOT of really FAST old, fat, and disabled swimmers. Some of the best English Channel swimmers are old and chubby. Also, getting everyone off two large ferries takes time. People who jump early may have a 5 or 10 minutes head start. And finally, the Bay is very dynamic - small navigation changes can add or take away distance and time. If you swim slightly slower than someone, you have to swim farther to compensate for currents, meaning you swim slower AND farther, adding up to a big gap very quickly.

NONE of this matters as long as you swim your own swim and just have fun.

If you are even thinking about swimming from Alcatraz, then DO IT. It’s an awesome (and addictive) experience that will surely lead to many more ocean swims in your future.

Water Temps:

San Francisco Bay: http://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/station_page.php?station=ftpc1

Alcatraz Day of Swim Logistical Notes:

Because Alcatraz is a one way trip, there are some things you can do to make for a more comfortable day.

For most swims, such as the SERC Invitational, you are NOT allowed to bring anything onto the boat, this includes extra clothing. They will stop you at the boat ramp and tell you to strip down.

This means you will need to walk "swim ready" (about a 10 minute walk) to the boat. If you are a SKIN swimmer, you will either walk to the boat in your swim suit OR you can bring (and wear) some extra flip flops and sweats to the boat and bring an extra small bag to put them in when you get to the boat ramp. There will be someone there to take your extra clothing bag and bring it back to the Bag Check area for you. They will place it together with your main bag in Bag Check.

IMPORTANT: They will give you a bag tag with your race number on it so you can store your stuff in the Bag Check Area.

So.... ASK FOR TWO BAG TAGS. Put one tag on the bag you leave with bag check. This bag should include a towel and clothes for after the swim (just in case your extra clothing doesn't make it back in time.)

Put the extra bag tag on the small bag you bring to the boat ramp. With both bags tagged with your race number, they should both end up in the Bag Check area. Usually these are there together when you get out of the water.

If you are wearing a wetsuit, none of this matters, because you can just wear your wetsuit to the boat. No extra clothing or bags are needed. OR if you are TOUGH, you can just do the walk bare foot and in a speedo 😊 Many choose to do this.