

Phia Steyn Loch Awe 41km Swim 2017

Dear All

Loch Awe was a long, tough swim on probably the best day we've had in Scotland all summer. The sun heated me and the water resulting in water that was that tad warmer than expected – it started off at 12.4 °C, peaking somewhere in the 15 °C range for a short period before going back to the 14 °C range it was for most of the day.



It was a long swim: I started the swim at Ford at 06:30 on 18 July, and finished 00:38:30 on 19 July when I crossed the line of buoys in front of the Awe Barrage 38.1km later. The 18h 8m 30s of the swim was spent mostly lost in my own thoughts – I did some work in my head reorganising a course I'll be teaching in September; mulled over some interesting bits of information, mostly from fellow swimmer Caroline, that Robert conveyed to me during feeds; when conditions got a bit rough I was inspired by the example of a South African swimmer Kiki who battled the tide in the EC last year for hours – I kept on telling myself that I have only wind to swim against, not a tide, so if Kiki could keep swimming with the tide head on then surely I can swim with just the wind; and when the swim seemed never to end, I prayed. A lot.

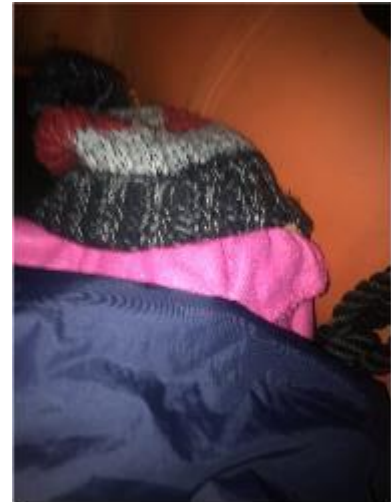


There were lots of highs and lows. Highs included sharing the experience with my fab crew, Robert and Stewart; eating some nice proper food from Racefood and Safari when I could (i.e. before nausea set in); enjoying the sun on my back; the unexpected warm water; those short periods where the water was just perfect for my stroke and personality, and just generally being there and swimming. Lows definitely includes the minute or so 13 hours into the swim when I finally acknowledged to myself that I was GATVOL (i.e.

fed up) with the wind causing dishwasher conditions which made me feel like a puppet on strings (I pushed that genie back into its box super quick); the sun setting which meant the swim was getting on somewhat; that false promise of the end that turned out to be the lights from the roadworks between the Cruachan power station and the Awe Barrage and NOT the lights at the Awe Barrage I initially believed it was, and the nausea that required a lot of anti-motion illness tablets (I really should ask Stugeron to sponsor my big swims!).

For safety reasons (mainly) and for the sake of historical accuracy (an incidental discovery), we did not swim the swim route that the British Long Distance Swimming Association (BLDSA) officially recognises. This runs from Torran Bay (Ford) in the south through the central axis of Awe past Kilchurn Castle in the north to finish under the railway bridge where the River Orchy starts. Numerous recces over a few weeks of this

BLDSA recognised end point left us certain that this is an unsafe and unswimmable end point for most of the year. And that it would be reckless to go that way. We fussed about looking for a safe end point around Kilchurn Castle until some proper historical research provided evidence that Loch Awe's length of 41km/25.5 miles (which makes it the longest loch in Scotland and thus also in the UK) is obtained from measuring the distance between the Torran Bay (Ford) in the south, along the central axis, then turning west on its western extension along the Pass of Brander until the point where the River Awe starts (as opposed to continuing straight till past Kilchurn Castle). During the swim when we were approaching the western turn at Ardanaiseig I was really thankful about this decision – here I realised that we had forgotten about the safety of the crew and rib in our objections to the BLDSA end point. We had some trying conditions in the water from around 6/7 hours into the swim, mainly owing to the wind (both in terms of strength and chaotic direction) creating dishwasher conditions which simply did not let up until right at the very, very end (last 30 odd minutes) of the swim. If we had continued to the BLDSA end point the crew and the rib would have been at risk as well – in the dark it would have been a great challenge to manoeuvre the shallow parts that dominate most of the northern end of the loch around Kilchurn Castle.



Like before I have lots of people to thank: the folks at Vigour Events (www.vigourevents.com) for organising my swim; Robert Hamilton and Stewart Griffiths who crewed for me, and Robin Law who passed on information to some of you as the swim progressed. We would like to thank Ardbrecknish House (<http://www.loch-awe.co.uk/>) for their generous support with accommodation the night before the swim, Cliff from Loch Awe Boats (<http://www.loch-awe.com/things-to-do/boat-hire/>) for all his support, and the temporary and more permanent inhabitants/anglers of Ardbrecknish who provided awesome support and showed an interest in a crazy swim in a manner that I have not yet encountered, and all you guys out there on who left messages of encouragement and congratulations. Your support and interest meant a lot and helped me keep going.

And lastly....

Should you be inspired by my Loch Awe swim, I would be grateful if you would consider donating to the Alexa Trust (UK Registered Charity Number 1168705) that raises money to support parents with babies in neonatal care. Simply forgoing a daily takeaway tea and coffee, that afternoon chocolate treat, or the evening drink, and donating the money to the Trust instead would already make a difference. More information on the Trust, the people involved and ways to donate can be found at: <http://thealexatrust.org/>

Next up is Loch Ness in September if all goes well.

Enjoy the summer/winter wherever you find yourself and thank you very much for your interest and support. Below are some images from the swim (the last couple taken by Robert).

Mooi bly
Phia