

The Magnificent Seven



Adrian Sarchet in 2015, ahead of his North Channel swim, the fourth in his Oceans Seven swims. (Picture by Thomas Tardif, 27953318)



The Strait of Gibraltar, looking toward Morocco. (Shutterstock picture)

From unfit 'ordinary bloke with a dream' to 'Sea Donkey', Adrian Sarchet's epic adventures in the water have made him a local legend. Having had a few weeks to rest and recover after completing the final swim in his gruelling Oceans Seven challenge, Adrian spent time talking to **Jamie Ingrouille** and reflecting on his 10-year-long journey

ONE question has the power to change your life – just ask high-achieving marathon swimmer Adrian Sarchet. More than a decade after his chance introduction to swimming, the 'Sea Donkey' has made good use of his Guernsey stubbornness to become only the 21st person to complete the Oceans Seven, a swimming feat often likened to the Seven Summits challenge in mountaineering. The Seven Summits challenges people to reach the highest peak on each of the seven continents, and about 500 people worldwide have accomplished it. To conquer the Oceans Seven is a much rarer feat. It entails seven immense efforts of between nine and 26 miles, each harbouring its own thrills and demands. Having started in 2012, Adrian was initially speechless after wrapping up his journey with the Cook Strait swim between New Zealand's North and South Islands a few weeks ago. But after four weeks of holiday to recover and a period of self-isolation back in Guernsey, he's had time to reflect on his accomplishment. So how does he feel? 'Profoundly relieved. I am a rather goal-oriented sufferer of OCD, which meant once I had committed to the Oceans Seven, it was going to be completed,' he said. 'Also profoundly sad that my wonderful dad, who was my greatest swim supporter, did not live to see me complete the challenge.' Adrian's late father had supported him in every way, but his son also had many others to thank. That brings us to how it all began – with an innocuous question at the Christmas dinner table in 2009. Adrian recalled the moment his older brother, Ian, asked him if he would like to complete a charity swim to Herm. 'At the time the question was asked, my obsessive-compulsive disorder was focused solely on work, exercise was non-existent and my blood pressure readings resembled a particularly close cricket test match score. 'I chose to swim.'

local swimmer Roger Allsopp, including completing an English Channel qualifying swim, he decided to start his colossal journey. His initial motivation? 'A profound yearning for adventure and a deeply-seated need to seize that elusive "something more" out of life.' Fittingly, it began with the English Channel swim in 2012. His support crew included his dad, brother Ian, friends Giles Newark and Tellervo Maukonen and ITV documentary maker Michael Ogden, who was filming for the TV series 'Island Hospital'. Adrian covered the 21 miles with little incident, lapping up the support along the way, and that was his first marathon swim completed. The next year's goal was the 20-mile Catalina Channel Swim in America. After he opted to travel with a 'crew' consisting only of his wife Andrea, the Catalina Channel Swimming Federation kindly protected him from his inexperience by providing some additional members. His fondest memory of that swim – Captain Dave walking him to the edge of the boat at the start and saying, 'Don't worry, we don't have any man-eaters around here... only boy-eaters!' before shoving him over the side. For the 'short but iconic' nine-mile Gibraltar swim in 2014, he went crew-less. Instead, he enjoyed training with a team organised and supported by Barcelona's Neda el Mon group, the head coach of whom nicknamed him 'La Machina' or 'The Washing Machine' for his form. 'Despite my terrible stroke, it was a pleasure to complete that swim alongside Ingrid Basso, Loic Tordo and Henry Sanz [the former French rugby union team captain]. 'Playing tig with massive cargo ships and being frightened to death by a pod of dolphins that suddenly appeared underneath me were the highlights.' Tasked in 2015 with preparing for the North Channel swim, some 21-plus miles from Ireland to Scotland, Adrian decided to upgrade his swimming technique. For this he engaged the services of Conor Osborough – still his coach to this day. His support crew for Ireland consisted of Ian, friends Mandy Mackelworth and Shane Torrens and Guernsey film-maker James Harrison, who was making the documentary about Adrian, Sea Donkey*. Even with this support, for Adrian it was 'the toughest day of my life'. 'Without offering any spoilers for the documentary, we collectively went as close to the line between success and disaster as I ever want to go again. 'It was sufficiently traumatic for my brother Ian that he retired from crewing on marathon swims permanently that day.'

This proved a life-changing choice – something Adrian would realise in time. In January 2010, under the guidance of fellow swimmer Carl Dawson, he completed his first of many sea swims. Yet before he could take what he had learned to his charity swim that August, disaster struck in the form of an Achilles heel injury. Yet following his dad's advice, he tied his legs together and completed the swim anyway. He soon found himself hooked. After some time in the sea supporting



* Find out more about James Harrison's documentary at <https://seadonkeyfilm.com>

From the icy waters of the Irish Sea to the tropics. Kaiwi Channel – also known as the Molokai Channel – was the location for his 2016 swim. The longest



Oahu, Hawaii. (Shutterstock picture/Paula Cobleigh)



Adrian Sarchet after becoming the first Guernsey person to swim around the island in 2011. (Picture by Thomas Tardif, 27953052)

Adrian en route to completing the Molokai Channel swim. (Picture by Jeff Kozlovich)



Flanked by his support crew Mandy Mackelworth and Pete Rowland after completing the Tsugaru Strait swim.



A view of the Tsugaru Strait from the island of Honshu. (Shutterstock picture)



Hokkaido



North Island, South Island



Cook Strait

'From somewhere I summoned the willpower and determination to finish... I just hung on... relying on the innate stubbornness of the Guernsey donkey to see me through'

of the seven swims at 26 miles, it is the stretch of sea that separates the islands of Oahu and Molokai in Hawaii. It was here that his current crew took shape. Despite fine support from Mackelworth and Pete Rowland, plus local assistance, Adrian had to dig deep not to retire after one shocking incident. Early on in the swim he was electrocuted in the teeth by the shark deterrent shield that was meant to be protecting him. Somehow he managed to soldier on – with a lot of encouragement. 'Pete and Mandy played the ultimate game of good cop/bad cop that day and managed to cajole me the 17.5 hours to the finish line.'

Training had been going swimmingly for the 2017 Tsugaru Strait – at least initially. Then a mystery gut infection soon took him off his feet for a month and led to 10kg weight loss, stomach surgery via keyhole and a hallucinatory week in hospital on Fentanyl. Nine weeks later and good to go? Well... 'We'd thought we'd identified all swim hazards and then, the day before the swim, North Korea fired a test ICBM over the remote Japanese fishing village we were staying in and the missile landed not too far from the swim area.'

Thankfully, despite the looming spectre of imminent war, Adrian was able to join the crew of Mackelworth and Rowland plus friend Simon Davies for the 12-mile challenge. The swim was tough. Adrian found himself floundering and admits he was fortunate to finish. 'I'd always heard that marathon swims require participants to go outside of their comfort zones. It had never occurred to me before that one of those participants could be the skipper himself. While it isn't the longest of the swims, the strong current can make the swim between the Japanese islands of Honshu and Hokkaido particularly challenging for both the swimmer and their support crew. 'My crew defied my right to swim long enough that we finally got around the tidal zone and I was able to swim to shore.'

After a long wait, he checked off the last box on the list. Only this February did he finally take on the 14-mile Cook Strait. Having to prepare through the winter months proved demanding. Lengthy interval sessions in the frigid sea or a slightly cosier pool formed the major part of his preparations. The big day came and he made a stellar start, taking just four hours to cover the

first half in a slack tide. But then the tide shifted and things became tougher. He experienced gastric distress, causing heavy disruption and interrupting his feeding plan. Yet he finished, some 10hrs 45min. after starting, thanks to a protracted mental push. 'I was watching my Oceans Seven slide away from me, stroke by stroke,' recalled Adrian. 'I was thinking about my dearly-departed Dad and what humorous words of encouragement he would have offered and I was thinking of the local Poolpod Appeal, which might falter if I failed the swim.' (The Poolpod Appeal being Adrian's fundraising appeal to install a poolside lift for Beau Sejour to improve accessibility.) 'Then, with roars of encouragement from Pete Rowland and Corey Fairbairn, who both spent the entire day soaking wet in the RIB right next to me, the usual swim discipline reasserted itself. 'I focused on the countless hours I'd spent ploughing up and down the Ladies' Pool with Reggie Luxon and Mike Ward. 'I concentrated on the miles and miles I had swum indoors with Becky Simmonds, Iain Lowe and Izzie Grierson. 'And I remembered the key words for improving my swim technique from Conor Osborough. 'From somewhere I summoned the willpower and determination to finish. I upped my swim speed, not to where it had been at the start, but close enough... and then I just hung on... relying on the innate stubbornness of the Guernsey donkey to see me through. 'The end of the swim was a blur of pain and effort, but I remember pulling up sharply when I realised that Mandy Mackelworth was swimming by my side and that I had made it.'

It's been quite the demanding journey – even for the iron-willed Adrian. 'The biggest challenge was maintaining a life/work/swim balance,' he admitted. 'Adding up to 15 hours a week in the water to an already busy life and demanding job was intolerable at times. 'Just behind that was the challenge of coping with adversity and carrying on regardless, like being hospitalised before the Japan swim.'

His marathon swims have caught the eyes of many, but what about the foundation of training behind them? As well as racking up the hours, he also used lengthy, arduous interval training sessions to boost his fitness and endurance: such sessions might be 200x100m with 1min, 45sec. recovery – that's six hours in the pool. Even this pales, though, to the sheer duration of the marathon sea swims he has completed. And yet Adrian's main sentiments are not with the countless hours spent swimming, but rather the many faces that supported him along the way. 'This is to the point that he didn't have a favourite swim. 'There was only ever... the next swim.' Included in his lengthy vote of thanks are Naomi Wakeford, head coach of the ever-so-supportive Guernsey Swimming Club, plus Jason Alderton and the encouraging care-taking staff at St Sampson's High. 'Without these amazing people, I would be an ordinary bloke with a dream. 'Thanks to them, I am an ordinary bloke who has now achieved the holy grail of open water swimming.'



Emerging from Havellet Bay in 2018. (Picture by Steve Sarre, 27953239)



Cook Strait, New Zealand. (Shutterstock picture)