



The 2016 Otter Aquatics European Swimming Tours

Exotic Fun and Adventure

A Cycling and Swimming Adventure around Lake Constance

On Thursday 20th August 2016, we gathered in the ancient and historic German city of Constance (Konstanz in German) for the start of a week-long cycling and swimming tour around Lake Constance (Bodensee in German), one of Europe's largest lakes, through parts of southern Germany, western Austria and northern Switzerland.

Some of us had come from an earlier holiday in Norway, some of us from a short jet-lag-busting stopover in Finland and others had come, wearily, directly from Australia. We spent the first day of our adventure exploring this ancient city which secured its place in the history books by a gathering of bishops, princes and prostitutes in the 15th Century (now there's something to explore in Wikipedia!). We also found a great swimming spot where we brushed away the travelling cobwebs. The following day, we took a boat for a three and a half hour voyage along the *Untersee*, or lower lake, to the Swiss town of Schaffhausen and onto the absolutely spectacular Rhine Falls.

The cycling trip proper began on Sunday 23rd August when we collected our rental bikes from our partner organisation, *Radweg-Reisen*, and proceeded to explore nearby Reichenau Island, listed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List. While not quite being an island since the construction of a causeway many years ago, Reichenau is a market garden picture book complete with a remarkable church built in the 16th Century but with origins dating from the 9th Century. But the weather was starting to deteriorate and we didn't dawdle pushing on for another couple of hours to the town of Wallhausen where some of us had a swim in the lake (inc me) and others (not me) gorged themselves with coffee and ice cream. We then put our bikes on a ferry to the northern side of the *Überlingersee* (the upper lake) to the town of Überlingen. Our scheduled stop for that night was the city of Friedrichshafen which was still some distance away, so we took the easier and quicker option of putting our bikes on the train for the last few kilometres. In

Friedrichshafen we experienced the first of a couple of episodes of directional confusion by this once-was-a-mariner tour leader. But we eventually found our hotel so we saw a bit more of Friedrichshafen than perhaps we had planned.

The next morning, John #1 and Helen decided to further explore Friedrichshafen while John #2 (or is it the other way around?), Gail, Noel and I decided to visit the Dornier Aircraft Museum. While it was very interesting for all of us, it was one-time pilot Noel who was in his element. It was all the rest of us could do to restrain him from taking the controls of a museum piece, donning Biggles hat and scarf, and making zoom-zoom noises.



Kaffeepause near the Swiss border

We then continued on our new, solid but quite heavy pushies along the northern shore of the lake past villages and national parks and across the state border separating Baden-Württemberg from Bavaria to explore the town of Lindau. Oh, and a swim; always a swim. We would swim about a kilometre each day in the clear waters of Bodensee, free from sharks, stingers, rips and other nasties. Just after leaving Lindau, we crossed the national border into Austria (although borders in this part of the world seem to be observed only in the abstract) where we had a marvellous swim just before reaching Austria's western-most town of Bregenz. The water was delightfully refreshing after a day in the saddle and

the grassy slopes to the lake were beautiful. The only drawback being the rocky beach was a touch painful on our feet on our way into the water. Gail, as always, with John #2 not far behind, showed us how to swim, setting the pace making the rest of us feel quite inadequate. But, hey, this was a holiday and at least some of us were swimming for pleasure, yes? Helen, on the other hand, chose not to show up the rest of us with her prowess in the water and was the self-appointed but invaluable caretaker of bikes, clothes, etc.

Bregenz was fabulous. The highlight of our visit there was the famous floating stage called *Seebühne* with its 7,000 seat open air amphitheatre, the location for large scale opera and musical performances. During our visit, workers were dismantling the set from a recent opera production, a mammoth process of organisation and logistics. If we come back next year, it would be good to take in the planned production of Bizet's *Carmen*.

And so on we pushed. The next day we crossed the Alps Rhine and through the border into Switzerland, had yet another swim (the only one we had in a fee-charging *Strandbad*) and stopped the night in the Swiss Heritage-listed town of Arbon where we checked out, among other things, the archaeological site of a late Roman fortress dating from 250 CE. And then the trip was almost over: another day of cycling and swimming, past more apple orchards, green-as-green farms and culminating in crossing the border into Germany at Kreuzlingen and back to Konstanz.



We saw many such pretty-as-a-picture houses along the way

Our last day was scheduled to be a day of rest from our exertions but Gail and John #2 needed to get in some training for the following week's swimming tour of Montenegro while John #1, Helen, Noel and I caught a train to the historic Swiss town of St Gallen with its world famous abbey library. St Gallen was named after the Irish monk St Gall who set up a monastery there in 612 CE – and not a certain rugby league player as John thought.

Then John #2, Gail, Noel and I headed off to Dubrovnik for a two day stopover before inflicting Montenegro with our presence and John #1 and Helen took a train to southern Switzerland for the next part of their European holiday, where they erroneously thought they would be able to understand the French language better than the northern Swiss German.

All-in-all, we covered some 150 kilometres or so around Lake Constance of relatively easy cycling across three countries with two currencies and one language, through countless towns and villages all with ancient buildings full of history, through beautiful scenery and with frequent plunging into the delightful waters of Bodensee.

An interlude in Dubrovnik

Between Konstanz and Montenegro, we had a brief interlude in the ancient Croatian city of Dubrovnik after dropping John #1 and Helen from the expeditionary force and gaining Peter. We stayed in somewhat quaint but very convenient accommodation called Edi's Sea View Rooms right outside the Pile Gate of the old city and right on the water. The man himself was larger-than-life in more ways than one and not a hostellier to suffer fools gladly, as Noel was to discover in trying to work out how to use the safe in his room.

A close-by restaurant right on the water had great food and equally great views. The old town of Dubrovnik itself, of course, was wonderful but so choc-a-block full of tourists (a number of cruise ships were in) that there was hardly any room to move. Leaving souvenir shops and restaurants aside, the view from the walk along the old city walls was something to behold.



Our swimming cove in Dubrovnik

The swimming in a nearby cove was excellent. One of us suffered a bruised coccyx by jumping bum-first into water too shallow. It was the same person who attempts to make a living from training Bronze Medallists and pool lifeguards by telling them not to do such a silly thing – and to be a role model for his guests on his European swimming tours. In his defence, he claimed that he was told that it was clear to jump in – his increasing deafness caused him to not hear the word ‘not’. Either that or Peter was mumbling. Sitting down for him is not much fun for the time being – so he will have to just stay swimming.



A view from the walls of Dubrovnik's Old City – standing, not sitting!

Then it was over the border into Montenegro

Swimming the Coves and Fjords of Montenegro

From 28th August to 4th September 2016, our group of five from Otter Aquatics joined two Brits, one German and two other Australians on a fabulous open water swimming holiday to the former Yugoslav republic of Montenegro. Montenegro is a tiny country of less than 14,000 square kilometres and with a population of less than 700,000. It is bordered to the northwest by Croatia, to the north by Bosnia and Herzegovina, to the north by Serbia and to the southeast by Albania. And, for our interests, Montenegro has a coastline on the stunningly clear, blue and warm(ish) Adriatic Sea as well as the bays and fjords of Kotor and Tivat.

Our six day adventure was expertly led and supported by Borut and Laura from Strel Swimming Adventures. Each day, they took us by boat from our hotel in the village of Prčanj, near the town of Kotor, to different locations where we would swim for about two kilometres in the morning, rest over lunch on the boat and then swim another 2k or so in the afternoon. On our lunch breaks, we would also walk around local villages with their ancient buildings, orthodox churches and sometimes a welcoming coffee shop. On one particular church visit, the priest asked us to wear a type of skirt to cover our bare legs.

Some of us who normally repress such urges revelled in the dress-up opportunity (a photo of John wearing his very fetching skirt is available for a small fee – or a bribe from John not to show it).



We also climbed a mountain to see where we had swum in the Bay of Kotor

The swimming was fantastic with clear, deep blue, warm water. It was not competitive and most of us chose to enjoy the views along the way rather than test ourselves. But the fast swimmers among us can't help themselves and they set out to spend as little time in the water as possible (I reckon they don't like being in water). Starting from the rear, Gail always managed to streak past the rest of us and claim victory. But she was not alone. Husband John was always hot on her heels, despite some recent major leg surgery, and our German friend Sascha was never far behind. A special mention needs to be made of Peter's efforts. Despite also being challenged in the kicking department, he not only completed all swims, he was far from the slowest swimmer. He also received a commendation from Borut for his good technique – and he is almost 70!

There were very many highlights of the trip, one being a swim around and then a walk on Mamula Island which holds the ruins of a fort built in 1853 by the Austro-Hungarians, the

then rulers of Montenegro, to deter invasion by Russian, French and British antagonists during the Crimean War. From an Australian interest, the fort was built in precisely the same year and for the same purpose as Fort Denison in Sydney Harbour, no matter how far away the conflict was.



Swimming around Mamula Island

Another highlight was swimming in and through the Plava Spilja (Blue Grotto cave), a spectacular natural feature on the Adriatic coast. Yet another was meeting Dušan Mandić-Manda, a member of the gold medal-winning water polo team from the Rio Olympics. Dušan's proud Dad was our boat skipper. Holding his medal was a huge buzz and the closest I have ever been – or even likely to be – to an Olympic gold medal. But perhaps the most exciting highlight was swimming in a tunnel built during the Second World War by the Germans to hide, service and supply their Mediterranean submarine fleet. Not only was this a spooky thrill for us swimmers, it was also of great historical interest and gave us a chance to marvel at the engineering feat of drilling and blasting tunnels in the granite rock as well as the very effective method of camouflaging the tunnel entrances to avoid detection by Allied reconnaissance flights.

The organisation of the trip by Strel Swimming Adventures was first class ranging from our accommodation in a good three-star hotel to supervising our swims. Borut and Laura took safety issues very professionally with a detailed safety briefing the evening before our first swim. They organised us swimmers into three separate groups to cater for different swimming abilities, they accompanied us in two zodiac support boats in addition to our base boat and they provided delicious lunches which also catered for the vegetarians among us (half of our number). And, to top things off, Borut provided us with underwater video analyses of our swimming techniques.

Sadly, our swimming holiday/s finally came to an end. Gail and John left Montenegro a day early to catch a cruise ship and Noel and I left on Sunday 4th September for different parts of Europe leaving Peter to continue his holiday diving a little further down the coast. The normally two hour transfer back to Dubrovnik airport for Noel and me became three and a half with an interesting (?) one and a half hour delay at the border crossing. Bureaucratic inefficiency seems to be a hallmark of Montenegrin government. But it had its upside when we observed a Russian woman attempting to bribe the border guard (the Russians think they own Montenegro – which is not far off the mark). Not only did he refuse her offer, we were told that she would experience a particularly rough time when she eventually reached the head of the queue.

And now it's back to reality back home. Sigh!

Mark Otter