



ROTTNEST CHANNEL SWIM

The 19.7km Rottnest Channel Swim is one of Australia's most iconic open water events. **Ryan Duell** braved strong currents and swells to swim his first race over 10km – and found himself on the podium

Taking off before sunrise and heading out into waters that are known for containing some large marine life isn't everyone's cup of tea; however, the Rottnest Channel Swim remains a highly regarded swim in the Australian ocean swimming calendar and one of Perth's premier events, attracting participants from all over the world. The 2017 event welcomed 2,457 swimmers. I first experienced the swim in 2014 as part of a duo (two-person relay swim) and returned this year to complete the 19.7km swim as a solo participant.

In its 27th year and held in late February, the swim is open for solo swimmers and teams of two or four. Every competitor and team is required to organise their own support boat and it is highly recommended to have a paddler to assist with navigation and

feeding. In recent years the organisers have added waves for Champions of the Channel (a race within the main race open to elite solo swimmers), teams and tandem solo (two solo swimmers of similar ability with one boat). Organisers require solo swimmers complete a 10km qualifying swim in the three months prior to the swim.

We gathered on Cottesloe Beach in the dark. It was quite a strange feeling, not the least because big fish such as great white sharks seem to be more prevalent at dawn and dusk. However, a large crowd was there to see us off and made it easy to get excited about what was to come. I was one of 272 solo swimmers who left the beach in three very civilised waves, with my wave leaving the beach at 5:55am. For the first 250m, we swam directly west off the beach in a swimmers' only zone before meeting up with our paddlers. Boats enter around 1km from the beach and all swimmers must meet up with their support boat before the 1.5km mark. Conveniently, the Leeuwin, an iconic sail-training tall ship, marks this point and adds to the overall spectacle of the swim. My awesome paddlers wore bunny ears to help me spot them easily.

Conditions this year were tougher than many people anticipated. Water temperature was around 22 degrees Celsius, which is chilly for Australian conditions and such a long swim, while the air temperature reached a scorching 39 degrees. Swim times varied from 4 hours 12 minutes for Australian Olympian Jarrod Poort

to over 10 hours for several solo swimmers. Ninety-four per cent of swimmers completed this year's swim with most swimmers who couldn't finish succumbing to hypothermia.

We had a strong offshore breeze to start the race which made for a quick first hour; however, as the wind dropped the swimming became tougher as we faced a small swell that seemed to be coming from all directions. As we got close to Rottnest Island the water flattened out and the swimming became easier; however, close to the island a strong current swept across the course and had to be accounted for – not what you need 18km into a swim. The longest race before Rottnest that I had competed in was 10km, so the last half of this race did feel like uncharted waters. As my neck and shoulders really started to ache I just had to keep reminding myself to keep my head down, the pace up and my technique intact.

Approaching the finish the water became beautiful, clear and turquoise and with the support of the gathering crowds that lined the jetty that runs along the finishing zone the last few hundred metres were actually quite relaxing. It felt amazing to get my feet down on the sand on Rottnest Island in a good time (4



hours 56 minutes) and to then find out that I had won the solo race. It was a great feeling knowing that all the hard work and planning had paid off.

To make the victory even sweeter, I could welcome home my partner Barbara Hirche, who completed the channel as part of a team, quite a feat given she was four months pregnant with our first child at the time.

The festivities on the island afterwards also help to take your mind off any pain left from the swim. The Rottnest Hotel is an excellent place to rehydrate and we were able to spot a few quokkas, (the very cute local marsupial) as we walked about and waited for our ferry to return us to the mainland.

It really was an amazing swim but it made for an even better day out thanks to the fantastic organisation of the day. To top it off and much to my own and everyone else's relief, there were no reported sightings of any 'large marine animals' and for that we were all extremely thankful.

BIG FISH SUCH AS GREAT WHITE SHARKS SEEM TO BE MORE PREVALENT AT DAWN AND DUSK



Ryan and his bunny-eared support crew

ROTTNEST LOW-DOWN

Swim: [Rottnest Channel Swim](#)
 Location: [Rottnest Island, Western Australia](#)
 Distance: [19.7km](#)
 Course: [Rottnest Channel \(Freemantle to Rottnest Island\)](#)
 Time of year: [February](#)
 Number of competitors: [2,457](#)
 Website: [rotnestchannelswim.com.au](#)

More info on Australian open water swimming events: [ioceanswim.com.au](#)