A LIFE AQUATIC

CAN A HOLIDAY LEAVE YOU FITTER, FATTER AND MORE RELAXED? DALE TAYLOR WAS THROWN INTO THE DEEP END OF A LORD HOWE ISLAND OPEN WATER OCEAN SWIM CLINIC AND DISCOVERED IT IS POSSIBLE TO HAVE IT ALL – AND MORE.

Photography by Luke Hanson

Every time I travel, I stand at my front door, bags in hand, wracked with a hunch I've forgotten something. As I board the disturbingly small plane bound for a swim-coaching clinic on Lord Howe Island, it hits me: my USB. My Yoda-shaped USB contains all the sci-fi shows my wife rolls her eyes at, and I'd relished the thought of gorging myself on these fantasy worlds while away. The island's Pinetrees Lodge, my home for a week, has not so much as a byte of internet, zero phone reception and nil flat screens draped from their walls. A week without so much as a single video frame, status update or email would be a first for me. I fastened my seat belt and decided Corona may have to step up and fill the void.

However, with no disrespect to the amber ale, this tech-free experience, combined with swim training, would turn out to have a profound effect on my fitness, productivity and happiness - an experience that would have been completely ruined had I used the Force to remember my fanboy tech.

A promising start

Ducking my head to exit the plane, it looks as if I've stepped into the opening credits for *Jurassic Park*. Living beneath the shadow of the great Gower Mountain that rolls into a retina-burningly turquoise ocean lies an island more Australian than any westie mainlanders. The people are gentle, friendly and beautifully aware of just how good they've got it.

Pinetrees Lodge is predictably nestled between forests of towering pine trees that overlook a monstrous coral lagoon. This body of water is to shape my fitness and swim skill set in a way that the monotony of pool laps never could.

I've never been a passionate swimmer. For me, it's something akin to teeth brushing: a necessity but not particularly enjoyable. If I don't like it, why bother? Well, I've always dreamed of effortlessly cutting through the water in the case of an emergency and I wanted to pass on those life-saving skills to my kids. To help me achieve this is Trevor Hendy, a six-time Australian Ironman lifesaving champion, who's like a distinguished statesman of the ocean - a true master of all things aquatic.

The island pace

The physical entrance fee for this paradise-based swim clinic is being capable of swimming 1.5km - a distance I'd never actually swum in my life. An avid surfer, I hope my paddle fitness will pull me through, and luckily it does.

This is not the boot camp for swimmers who are looking to cross Bass Straits or English Channels. My swimming compatriots all swim two or three times a week and do it for the love of the splash but want to get better. Total distance we will swim over five days: roughly 11km. However, it's not the quantity that counts, it's the quality that makes every metre worthwhile. Over the course of the week, I watch confidences grow and distances per stroke increase, leaving me with a new skill that I've waited over two decades to master. Oddly, this isn't gained in the way I'd initially imagined.

Meeting as a group on the first night, I find many swimmers have brought their partner for company, because only a fraction of each day is taken up by swimming and all are welcome on the extra-curricular activities. Hendy invites us to join him at 6:30am the following day on a 15-minute rainforest hike to Blinky Beach, where we are to learn a crucial component of swim (and life) performance that doesn't even require a towel.

Praise the morning

After the morning hike, Hendy explains to us the meaning and benefits of Qigong, an ancient Chinese movement system similar to Tai Chi but one that tunes your body to think and move better. We face the ocean and run through a series of eight movements that inspire me to reflect on the quiet mind and wash other business from my thoughts. It's this peaceful mental flow, Hendy says, that is key to unlocking an improved swim stroke.

While a little suspicious at the time, I soon learn this *The Karate Kid*-esque wax-on-wax-off ritual will bear fruit later. A relaxed mind forges a relaxed body that'll cover more distance with less effort - they go together like cheese and ham.

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After this morning ritual, we head back to Pinetrees to eat the tastiest and healthiest cuisine - food that is so overwhelmingly impressive, I buy their kitchen's famous cookbook. After letting the bliss settle from the food, we head to the coral-crusted lagoon in a glass boat, flanked by a water-safety crew who supervise each swim.

Despite wanting to gorge myself on Hendy's charismatic style of teaching, he chooses not to overpower us with too much information.

Instead, we focus on one element each day, which work synergistically to craft a swimmer built for anything the ocean (or pool) can throw at you. If I'm doing well, he'll unexpectedly appear beneath me offering a thumbs up, and when I flounder like a wet chook I get a gentle ankle tug to signal it's time for stroke correction. This is the kind of discreet coaching that doesn't leave you on the spot in front of other people, while offering enough freedom to enjoy yourself.

This ocean swim is different from any pool because there's current, surface chop and a view to admire. Being able stay in your swim lane for an hour doesn't help you cope with the need to chart a direction and react appropriately when things get challenging. You simply can't put your

A new day, a new lesson

These are things I found myself with after just five days, and this is how the master broke down the basics of the freestyle stroke.

Day 1: focus on pacing yourself correctly and being aware of your bearings.

Day 2: relax your hands, forearms and wrists.

Day 3: imagine you're pulling yourself over a Swiss Ball, then gliding for two seconds.

Day 4: get a longer glide by turning your head and hips into each stroke so you travel further for less effort.

Day 5: learn how to slip stream behind someone else to make your stroke technique easier.

feet down and stand up, however there's a plethora of rewards to be earned when that safety is yanked away: confidence, immaculate technique and real-world fitness. And when it's all done for the day, the group and I hop on our bicycles for a five-minute cycle beneath the forest canopy for a delicious post-workout lunch that hits every macronutrient target you could ever ask for. It's clear the chef lives up to the resort's motto: "fatter, but fitter".

The ups of down time

Lord Howe Island is three kilometres across and is a mountainous beast peppered with exquisite trails that allow you to explore every secluded inch of it. With my workout over and swim up-skill upgraded by 1pm each day, there is still seven hours of daylight left to fill with the type of unique tourist adventures that draw people from around the globe. Whether it's golf, hiking or hand-feeding gigantic drummer fish that patrol Ned's Beach, every experience is a one-off.

Just about everywhere is accessible by bicycle and the only thing that's mandatory is a raised index finger when you pass someone else on the bike tracks. I ride them all and come to the conclusion that if anyone wants to be fitter, healthier and happier with a truly matchless experience, leave Queensland to the unlucky fools who haven't read this article. Lord Howe is unquestionably Australia's best-kept secret, with corals and fish life that make the Barrier Reef seem like the cheap seats at Sea World.

In the week I'm there, I get to see almost every coral head and technicoloured fish, except for when the inquisitive turtles are rude enough to obscure my view. First world problems, huh? All I need to do is submit to this unique experience, unplug the tech and plug into the murmurs of the swaying pine trees. It turns out to be the best week of my life, viewed through a screen that only shows one channel; paradise so unique it almost feels like science fiction. ■

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