

SWIM & RUN TO THE WORLD'S END

Helen Croydon attempts to get to the world's end...
it's a journey organised by Xterra and is in Norway...

Words Helen Croydon





I

didn't realise the magnitude of running 52 kilometres and swimming nine kilometres in a day when I signed up for one of Norway's iconic

swim-run events - the Xterra's Swim-Run to the World's End. Nor did I register that the nine kilometres of swimming would be done in trainers and 52 kilometres of running in a wetsuit.

I say 52 kilometres of running, but that's not entirely true. It was more like 52 kilometres of scrambling, climbing, slipping, stepping over boulders and at one point abseiling.

Xterra's Swim-Run to the World's End covers twenty unspoiled islands of breathtaking beauty in a remote archipelago in Norway. It sounded idyllic, so why let the small matter of an ultra-marathon and ultra-swim spoil the prospect of a long weekend away?

Swim-run events have exploded in popularity in the last three years. For adventurous types they offer a more hardy adventure than commercialised multi-sport races like triathlon, which have become synonymous with flashy gear and scientific training plans. Swim-run is about wild

swimming, uncultivated terrain and big distances. Most require you to compete in pairs and you have to carry all your kit. There are no controlled transition areas with pre-talced running shoes.

I took part with seven friends from London Fields Triathlon Club. We'd swapped race partners at least three times before the big day as our fitness levels changed. The organisers were very good about it.

My buddy was fellow club member Pete. We started our training early - January to be precise. A morning swim followed by a fifteen-mile run. We were both marathon training and felt smug that we were banking distance in our legs so early. Then we didn't do anything together until July.

We did train separately though. For lucky Pete, who spent the summer in Jersey, this meant scenic coastal runs and dips in the fresh sea. For me, in London, this meant running up the A13 in my wetsuit to the Royal Victoria Docks, swimming a few laps in my trainers before squelching around the docklands in swim hat and goggles in front of bemused commuters. Repeat x four and I'd run home with a green algae moustache.

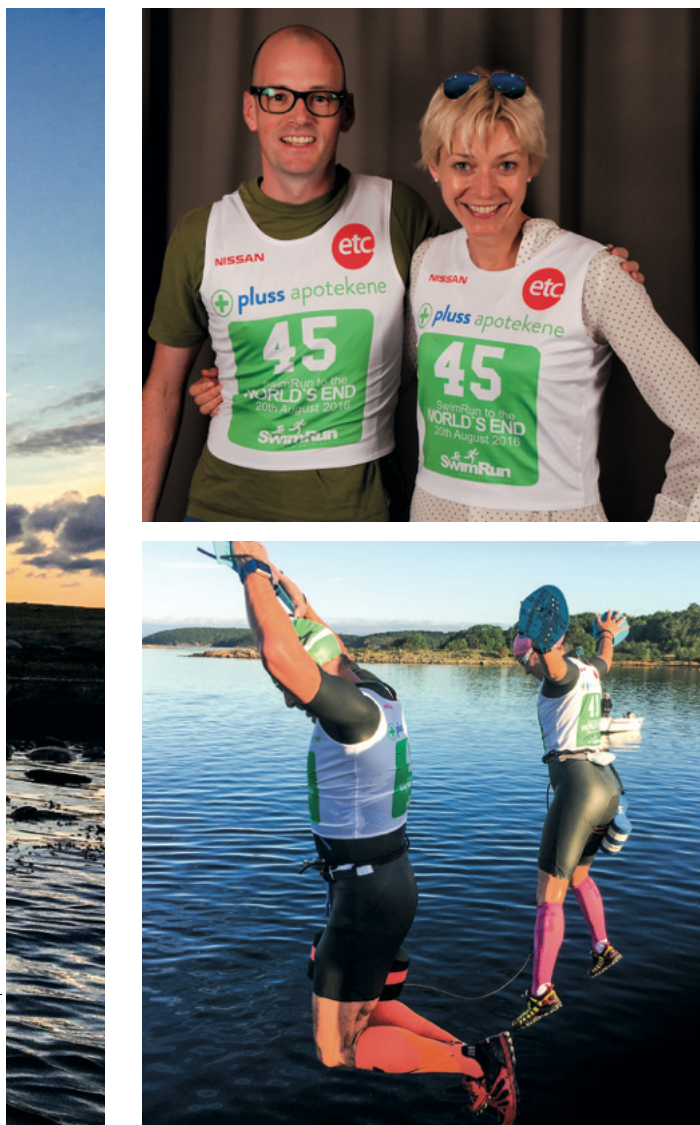
I performed this odd ritual once a week, on top of my other regular triathlon training, with lots of long runs, swims and cycles to

keep up my endurance. The key element of swim-run training is not to replicate the distances of the race, but to get comfortable with the discomfort of running with squelchy trainers and a tight rubber swim cap. And to know exactly the points your wetsuit will chaff and your trainers will blister so you can apply plasters and Glide strategically.

We flew to Oslo Torp the day before the race in August and stayed at the official race sponsored hotel. Special breakfast was laid out at 2.30am, (worse, 1.30am UK time!) After force-feeding ourselves muesli and eggs, a coach transported me and 99 other bleary-eyed competitors to the start point at Ringhaug beach, near the town of Tonsburg.

It was still dark when we disembarked. We had a whole thirty minutes before the 5am start for nerves to gestate. For me this manifested as kit-regret-syndrome. During training, we'd experimented with different kit options and methods for carrying gear. First, there was the pullbuoy conundrum. In swim-run events it's common to use a pullbuoy to counter the loss of buoyancy from swimming in trainers. Slick competitors thread elastic through a pullbuoy, attach it to their hip for running, and then effortlessly move it between their legs for swimming.

I, however, had destroyed three pullbuoys



while attempting to punch holes through them with a blunt screwdriver. I gave up on the pullbuoy and got myself some neoprene calf guards instead.

Then there was the water dilemma. To carry or not to carry. I'd experimented looping a handheld water bottle in the belt of my bum bag in training but concluded that it created too much drag when swimming. So Pete and I went waterless, banking on there being enough aid stations. My kit consisted of a small bum bag with enough space for energy bars, spare contact lenses, and, much to the ridicule of my teammates, a tub of Vaseline. Now, with thirty minutes to go, I doubted all my decisions: "Everyone has a pullbuoy; I'm going to die of dehydration; and I've cut too much off the arms of my wetsuit; and I'll probably get hypothermia too." These demons were still playing out in my head when the start whistle blew. We had a fifteen-minute run before arriving at a harbour for our first pre-dawn swim. The water felt as cold as it looked and my trainers felt heavier than ever. Swimming in trainers, I should mention, adds around a third to my usual swim speed.

Trainer-drag affected me more than Pete. Perhaps because my natural swim style has a strong kick so when my pins are weighed

down, I feel it more. Usually we are of a similar swim speed but I struggled to keep Pete even in sight. Pairs of swimmers glided past me and I started to panic. We have nine kilometres of this.

It was a rocky exit and I felt dizzy – something I often suffer in open-water. This so-called swimmer spin is common in cold water because blood pools around your vital organs to keep you warm. When you go from being horizontal in the water to upright on land, blood repools causing giddiness. Not a problem in a triathlon where a friendly marshal helps you out of a grassy river bank but a bit of a problem when you're trying to balance over jagged mossy rocks.

We had a meagre 500-metre scramble over the island before we plunged back into the sea to swim to the next island. The first three hours of the route took us in and out of water, traversing tiny islands less than one-kilometre in diameter, so there was not a chance to warm up between swims.

But on the precipice of our third swim, the sun peeped up from the horizon. My mood lifted and I felt my energy return. "Try staying on my feet this time, and draft off me," suggested Pete.

I focused intensely on staying on his feet, keeping my hands within an inch of his trail

shoes while trying not to get kicked. It worked! My swim rhythm returned and we even caught up with another pair from our group. The four of us swam together as the sun rose to the side – one of my most memorable highlights.

Gradually the islands got wider so the runs became longer and I warmed up. By the fifth swim I was no longer dizzy coming out of the water. This was fortuitous because the rocky, slippery swim exits became more lethal on each swim. The entry points weren't any better either. Often the only way in was to leap off a five-metre high pier. At the beginning of the day, I noticed how everyone lowered themselves cautiously by their arms. By the end, we were so used to it, we were jumping off backwards and dive-bombing.

None of us escaped without cuts and grazes from slipping, scrambling and crawling over rocks. At one point the route required us to climb up an almost sheer rock face with just a rope for support tied loosely to a bush at the top. There's none of this health and safety nonsense in Norway. They're too tough for that.

Up and over islands we swam, ran and scrambled. The event is a test of sure-footedness as much as it is endurance. Should I ever bang my head and decide to sign up for



such an event again, I'd make all my runs on trail to strengthen the stabilising muscles of my lower legs. These were the bits that suffered the most.

There were more than forty swim-run transitions. The longest run was only seven kilometres and the longest swim 1.1 kilometres. No chance for boredom then but no chance for our wrinkled skin to dry out either. The long swim was, however, against a strong current. I stayed tucked behind Pete's trainers focusing hard not to lose his slipstream. It took us almost an hour and I began to shiver and go dizzy again. I had to constantly tell myself to stay focussed.

But the worst was not over. We finally landed on "Eagle Island", the most stunning island yet. So stunning that a convocation of eagles had chosen it to nest. This meant the organisers had not been allowed to lay markers on the land and we had to navigate our own way to the other side. They'd warned us about this in the race briefing. But did we remember? Of course not.

We ran blindly up the cliff, expecting to find the familiar red and white polythene markers flapping. Nothing. We went back down to the water and followed the coastline. Still no markers. Rocks and cliff faces forced us inland. Soon we were in dense, silent

forest. We ran on, getting nowhere, coming to dead ends. I started to wonder at what point search parties would be sent. A day? Two days?

An hour later we finally stumbled along the coast and saw a flag on the island opposite, signalling the next swim exit. I've never been more relieved to get into the cold sea. By now, we reasoned, everyone must have overtaken us.

But rather than spurring us on, this made us relax. No point killing yourself when you're already last. From then on, we stopped regularly to peel down wetsuits, for toilet breaks, and to eat a couple of apples from someone's garden. Clearly cooking apples but who cares, they're calories. Pete even had a 10-minute chat to some locals keen to practice English as we were about to enter a lake. He would have gone on had I not reminded him we were in a race.

After 10 hours, there were just two more five-kilometre runs, and two more one-kilometre swims to go. Our conversation had dried up, my hamstrings had packed up and my Garmin had died.

Just as we were approaching our final swim we caught up with Jo and Andy, from our group. They're fast runners so we weren't doing so badly after all! In no hurry to get

back into the water, we took some time to exchange war stories. I got out my pot of Vaseline for my chapped lips and the three closed in like magnets, vying for the last dregs to slap onto blisters and chaffing and grazes. Not so ridiculous to carry it after all then.

We swam together through the last fjord. Then there was just five kilometres to run. We agreed to stick together but my hamstring packed in. My brain simply wouldn't let me run – a strange sensation for a usually stubborn athlete like me. Pete didn't mind walking in the slightest. We had to pick our way over a path littered with bricks and boulders. I had to pick up my legs with my arms to step over them.

At last, we saw a sign for "Verdens Ende" aka World's End. The finish. From somewhere in the depths of our souls we got the will to run through the finish flags where the most delicious beer and the most

stunning view awaited. We were 42nd out of 100 pairs in a time of 11 hours and fifty minutes.

For three days I couldn't walk and for two weeks I suffered from prickly heat on my lower legs from the neoprene calf guards. But the knowledge that I had pushed myself to places I never imagined I would go was, as it always is, worth all the pain and cold.