

Italy- Capri and Messina Swims. 26 Miles Total.

A Real Virtual swim by Joe Oakes and friends. Accomplished: From the ISLE OF CAPRI to the island of ISCHIA, not far from Naples. 21 Miles.

Two crossings of the THE STRAIT OF MESSINA, 5 miles. (Cancelled)

Joe Oakes lives in Portland, Oregon and swims with the Tualatin Hills Barracudas. Just like some folks have a hiking group, he has a swimming group. This is the story of his group and their swim in Italy, September 4, 2005.

Every year several friends and I get together for some fun swimming. We are not the least bit interested in competitions; our focus is on swimming in the most interesting places we can find. In the past we have swum as a relay across the English Channel; across the Strait of Gibraltar from Spain to Morocco, Lake Tahoe, the Maui Channel and Loch Ness. We have also done individual swims in such varied places as Lake Titicaca; the Bering Strait; Antarctica's Deception Island; Australia; and The Dardanelles. If there is open water, it is fair game.

This year we planned to do a double in Italy. The first was a relay from the romantic Isle of Capri, where Europe's glitterati gather under the Mediterranean sun, to the Island of Ischia. The distance is comparable to the English Channel, 21 Miles, but with six of us sharing the work in half-hour shifts, it should not be difficult. The distance is not so much a problem as the potential for fickle currents playing tricks on us. But the unpredictability is what makes open water sea swimming so much fun. The first swim will be a relay of several hours.



The second swim is interesting, not so much because of the distance, a mere two miles, but because it has a reputation of being some of the fiercest water in the world: THE STRAIT OF MESSINA, the body of water that separates SICILY (near the city of Messina) from the mainland of ITALY, near the city of Reggio di Calabria. In ancient times it was thought that very evil things dwelt

there, like big sea monsters, and ships passed at their peril.

It was believed that the sea god, Poseidon and Gaia, had a daughter, Charybdis, who was nothing but trouble. She angered her father so much that he turned her into a sea monster. Dissatisfied with her fate, she stole Hercules cattle. (She had an unhappy childhood. Some people never learn.) Not appreciating her cattle-rustling very much, he cast her into the sea between Sicily and the tip of the Italian boot. She is still there, angrily submerged in the Strait of Messina.

Three times a day she sucks in immense amounts of water then spits it all out, causing a massive whirlpool.



Directly opposite Charybdis's whirlpool is the cave of another monster, Scylla. Ancient Greek sailors had a difficult time navigating the Strait of Messina between the two monsters, Scylla and Charybdis. Even today, the expression "between Scylla and Charybdis" means finding yourself between two imminent dangers, and to move away from one puts you in proximity to the other. The photo above shows just how nasty these waters are.

The Swim:

We arrived in Sorrento Sept 1, after three trains, two planes and two vans, a bit haggard. The rest of the swimmers arrived at the Il Nido Hotel the next day, a bushy bunch Nido is high up on a cliff overlooking the Bay of Naples, with a view of Vesuvius to the right and a view of Capri to the left. Rarely have I had better service from hoteliers than here, at a family business, where generosity seems the key to their operation.

On Sept 4, 2005, we swam. Early in the morning our marinaio took us to the starting place, the Blue Grotto, Grotto Azzurro, on Capri. We (illegally) swam into the cave and were greeted by the most magnificent play of natural light I have ever seen. Shining in through the entrance was a sparkling, almost spiritual blue luminescence, filling the black cave with a color that was uplifting and almost unreal. (Elisa got an injury on her foot when she got too close to the sharp rocks.) Gary swam first, making tracks from Isola di Capri towards Isola di Ischia, invisible in the distance. We were told, variously, that it was 16 miles away, 20 miles away and 30 kilometers away. Who really cares? We were there for a good day of swimming with friends in a magnificent place. To our knowledge, this relay swim had been done only once before, by a group from San Diego. (I think that our swim was a bit longer, because we had to search for another grotto around the island.) We ate, we drank, we swam, for about ten hours, and we had a marvelous time.

Our marinaio, Salvatore, was competent, simpatico and quiet. Our second escort boat, a zodiac, was driven by the handsome Luigi, who showed particular interest in Jumpin' Julie's posterior as she swam alongside him. (In truth, Julie demonstrated her roving eye as well.)

What was it like? The water was a caressing warm, almost penetrating our very blood vessels, saying "you are a part of me!" The water was as clear as air, with fine, long

visibility. Little fishes cavorted below, along with the occasional three inch brown jelly, who seemed quite uninterested. The day was warm, the sun thankfully blocked by clouds for most of the swim, and a gentle breeze kept us company most of the day. A good dinner, a fond farewell, and we parted ways, some going home, some to Greece and some to swim the Strait of Messina.

The Strait of Messina. Nice try, but no cigar. Before the swim, our marinaio cancelled, saying that the wind conditions were not good. A scirocco had blown in from Africa and there was no possibility. Elisa and I looked at the water and found it quite swimmable, but to no avail. A re-schedule was impossible because of the permits required. A long trip without the satisfaction of even giving it a try. As they say in Brooklyn, wait 'til next year.

These are Joe's own words. Joe is the swim director (for over 25 years) of both the ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ TRIATHLON and THE ALCATRAZ CHALLENGE, which is a swim-only or a swim-run (over the Golden Gate Bridge.) The website is www.alcatrazchallenge.us

Swim compiled by Pam Himstreet, Fitness Com.

