



Lake Zurich winter swim attempt – January 2009

Ram Barkai and Andrew Chin

Well, here we are again, pushing the envelope another few inches. I (Ram) went to Geneva in December 5 years ago. The lake was a cold, 5C, and there was some ice around the fountain. I had an irresistible urge to jump in and swim (luckily I didn't). Since then I have accumulated significant experience in cold-water swimming and it is time to fulfil the urge to swim in a snowy European lake. There are plenty of frozen lakes in Europe, and through time, we may swim a few of them but Lake Zurich seems like a good start. The Europeans are known for their winter dips in frozen lakes and icy water, however, long distance swimming in these waters is not common or done at all. Therefore, it is going to be an interesting challenge.

Last February, Ram swam 1km in Antarctica at 1C water temperature. Aside from the swim, which was also an interesting challenge, the logistics were the real issue. We hope that this time it will be safer because we are planning a slightly longer swim.

We contacted Amanda Picard (ex "Missy" Grendon) a South African living in Zurich (Amanda is a top ex SA swimmer). Amanda suggested that we swim in Lake Zurich so she can enlist the Zurich swimming club to help us. That sounded great, so we set the date for end of Jan-09 (happens to be the coldest time of the year). Amanda and Marco (well known swimmer in Zurich) are organizing a boat, doctor and a few friends to assist us with the swim safety.

Winter temperatures in Europe can vary, however, so far it is the coldest winter in 12 years. Current temperatures in Zurich are recording lows of -11c and highs of -5c. Lake Zurich seldom freezes (once in 15 years) so we hope the winter are not going to cover the lake with ice. The business of breaking 3km of ice for a swim seems like a complicated task.



I asked Andrew Chin to join me. He is also a veteran cold-water swimmer and a strong one at that. It is time to test him in the ice. He should not have any problems with it. Andrew and I will be leaving on 27th Jan-09 to Zurich for the attempt.

We are not sure about the course and distance; it will be subject to water temperature and safety. Lake Zurich is a fresh water lake so it freezes at 0C unless water flow is too fast for it to freeze.

We assume a swimming speed of 20min/km. We usually swim quite a bit faster, however, the cold water slows you down significantly and if we want to cover some distance, we should make sure our

breathing is under control all the time. The cold water tightens your muscles dramatically and the only way to be able to move and cover distance without panic is to control your breathing (while inhaling air which is a few degrees colder than the water!)

The plan so far is as follows:

- Water temperature is between 1C to 2C – a mile swim 30 minutes
- Water temperature is between 2C-3C - 2km swim 40minutes
- Water is above 4C – 3km swim 1 hour

We are not sure which one is more challenging but at these temperatures, every degree makes a big difference and time spent in the water is critical. It is difficult to comprehend that in 2C, which is extremely cold, moving to 1C is TWICE as cold. We were swimming at 9C the other day (which was clenching to most parts of the body...) can you imagine swimming in 3 or 9 **times** (1C to 3C) colder water? It's like going to Zurich with the South African Rand, it is only about five times more expensive... - so no comparisons, we deal with each swim as they come.

Logistics:

- We will have a small boat with a doctor and an experienced swimmer on board. Although we intend to swim close to the bank, it is very cold and we mustn't assume that people on the lakeside would just dive into the icy water if we require help.
- We will have a vehicle nearby to transport us to a warmer place if required.
- Amanda and possibly others will accompany us on along the lakeside on foot or bicycle, weather dependent.



The conditions can vary significantly. It can be clear of snow and sunny, but still very fresh and cold water or it can be like the pictures above. So far, it is the coldest winter Europe has for many years so it seems like it may be chilly in Zurich end of January.



We started training a wee while ago swimming in the Atlantic Ocean. We try to swim around 3km a day, with a longer swim on the weekend. It is a tough task during the festive season, however, swimming with a high level of alcohol in your blood makes the cold-water significantly more uncomfortable, and so it is another form of endurance. We are swimming 30min to an hour in cold water and an hour in the pool for aerobic fitness. We have been swimming without a swimming cap for some time. The coldest we had so far is 45 minutes in 9C, without a cap. It takes around 5 to 7 minutes to get rid of the immense ice cream headache. It feels like someone put your head in a big, tight vice. The pain wraps your entire skull and is unbearable so we need to stop every 20 seconds to shake our heads in order to try and get rid of the vice. After around 5-7 minutes, the head goes numb and the pain goes away as well, but you still lose heat faster than normal. One is believed to lose 80% of one's body heat through the head hence our training without a cap. We intend

to “climax” our training in a Robben Island swim, ***without a swimming cap***, on Andrew’s 40th birthday, 21st Jan. If we survive that, we should be ready for a 3km swim in a semi frozen lake.

We plan to sort out safety and logistics on the 28th on arrival and a test swim of at least 20 minutes on the 29th. The actual attempt will take place on 30 Jan. We are as flexible as our safety team, so we don’t have much time to fool around. The real challenge in this attempt is the time spent and distance covered in these temperatures. The first 30 minutes should be bearable, assuming a water temperature of around 4C. After that, swimming may become quite challenging with a loss of control of hands and fingers and also arms and shoulder muscle may struggle to connect properly. This may slow us down quite a lot. If we manage that, the risk of hypothermia increases rapidly after around 40-50 minutes. Most research done deals with cases of people falling into icy waters and the length of time they have managed to survive. According to the literature available, surviving an hour in this water should be rather impossible.

We still believe that there is very little known about swimming in ice water and recovery after swimming in icy water. Although we are not in the medical profession, we have accumulated a significant amount of experience in the past 8 years, swimming all year round in cold water.

- We avoid immediate hot showers, it causes the blood to rush to your extremities and it causes serious nausea and possibly fainting. Not a good idea to lose control in a serious condition.
- We dry as quickly as possible and get into dry stuff as soon as possible. No time for dignity, the moist acts like a fridge.
- We walk, and move to continue generate heat, lying down and crumbling like a porcupine and shivering works for a short time but you lose control of the recovery process.
- A hot drink helps a lot to warm your frozen internal organs. Not too sweet, not too hot, not too much. Your stomach muscles are still very tight.
- We try not to shiver if possible. But push the cold away mentally. This is probably the hardest part but if you manage that, you recover faster. The shivering can get into an uncontrolled shaking of the body. It generates heat but also uses a lot of energy and can cause muscle spasm and inability to take in hot fluids.
- If the sun is shining, exposing the skin to the sun does a much better job then layers of clothing. Direct hot sun defrosts your skin (which gets very close to the water temperature) and warms the blood close to the skin surface.
- Lying on hot surfaces like tar, rocks or cars in the sun, warms you up very quickly; crumbling into a ball restricts the blood flow. Hot air is also very good, getting into a car and put the heater on at full blast.
- We believe that like any other extreme situation, losing control of your body actions is risky. Many times (like in Antarctica) you are not close enough to hospitals and proper medical care so being able to manage the recovery process with the elements around and yourself can save your life. It is critical to maintain a cool (not cold) mind, don’t panic (panic causes your body to do the wrong things) and focus. By doing so, the recovery will be much faster.
- As we mentioned, we may contradict some of the medical research undertaken, however, we

have found through experience what works for us.

- A large part of the swim is psychological. It may sound strange but if you want to feel the cold you will and if you push it away it works (unfortunately your body does present some limitations, sometimes).

This is a Google image of the swim course, approximately 3km. We may change the course around the water conditions and the snow. We could not find a winter Google view.

We are swimming everyday in Clifton so any support or WARM word is welcome. Zurich will be a great adventure. Looking at Wikipedia, it looks like we know few people there: Albert Einstein, Mann, James, Heidi Klum, and Kimi Räikkönen.



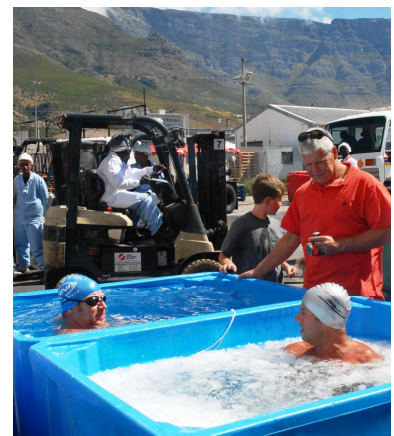
Currently temperatures in Zurich are around -10C at night and -5C during the day, a tad nippy!

Water temperatures in Camps Bay/Clifton have been around 20C in the past 2 weeks. We are getting very concerned about our cold-water adaptation. Andrew organized an ice tub at I&J fish factory in Woodstock. So we started some ice tub training while praying for the South Easter to come and pound Cape Town enough to create an up well (the SE wind pushes the surface water out to sea which brings the deeper water to surface. This water comes from the cold current that makes our Atlantic sea front so cold).

We had two tubs one at 0.4C for Ram and one at 3C for Andrew. Ram spent 3 minutes in 0.4C. It is fresh water so getting to 0.4C means just above freezing temp. The way they do it, they fill the tubs with 2-3 degrees Celsius water and start filling it with ice to lower the temp. After 3 minutes Ram joined Andrew at the 3C tub. We spent



total of 10 minutes. We are fine. Hands and



fingers are extremely painful, but nothing fell off.

12 days to go. All is set in Zurich; Lake temp is around 4C in the day and 2C at night. Outside temp is around -5C during the day and -10C during the night. So it looks like it is going to be a day event.

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Craig Doonan will be our contact person while we are in Zurich. If you want any updates please let Craig know: craig@leapcommunications.co.za Keep on swimming. Any WARM encouragement is welcome – we will need it!

Cheers

Ram Barkai & Andrew Chin