

Sink or swim



A mid-life crisis spurs Auckland businessman Peter Bourke to head with his Speedos to the lakes of Slovenia.

WE ARRIVED at Lake Bohinj, northern Slovenia, late in the day before the start of the swimming adventure.

Swimming the length of this lake has been my goal for nearly a year and my first thoughts were "Bloody hell, I can't swim that, I can hardly see the other end." I could sense Bubbles, my wife and travelling companion, was sharing

my doubts
As part of my midlife crisis I had decided to take up swimming. That was after a sailing trip at Croatia when we swam in the tepid Adriatic. Back in New Zealand, inspired and in Speedos, I launched myself into the bay down the road from home. At first it was a case of just getting from mooring buoy to mooring buoy and resting at each. By Christmas I could swim non-stop around the buoys but unless I had a reason for visiting the buoys, it wasn't going to last.

Among Google searches and YouTubes on how to swim, I discovered the term "adventure swimming". That's me, I declared. I'm going to become an Adventure Swimmer – whatever that is. Further research revealed adventure swimming is fulfilling the challenge of swimming naturally defined pieces of open water – for example, the length of

a lake, a river, a harbour crossing. I found out the ultimate adventure swimmer is Martin Strel, a Slovenian known as the "Big River Man". Strel has swum the length of the Amazon, the Mississippi, the Danube and the Colorado rivers, to name a few. And his day job, along with his son Borut, is to provide swimming adventures to punters like me.

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Strel Swimming Adventures is based in Slovenia but provides adventures in Croatia and the United States, as well as the lakes of Slovenia. An adventure will typically consist of three days swimming for a total of about 15

Making a splash: Peter Bourke swims the 4.5km length of Lake Bohinj.

kilometres with the longest swim being up to 5km. In my case in Slovenia, this involved swimming three lakes, Bled, Bohinj and Predil and part of the glacier-fed Soca River. Our longest swim, and ultimate goal, was the 4.5km length of Lake Bohinj, the largest lake in Slovenia.

Slovenia is a beautiful country nestled between Italy, Austria, Hungary, Serbia and Croatia. With a population of just two million, its people seem to have a blend of all that's good about the cultures of its neighbouring countries. They're known for being hard-working, honest and friendly and that's just how we found them. Slovenia was previously part of Yugoslavia but was moving towards independence before the civil war and was the first of the Yugoslavian states to join the

European Union.
The Alps start in Slovenia, so its landscape, apart from along its just 7km of coastline, is alpine with beautiful clear lakes and rivers, towering mountains, wooded steep slopes and scenery out of *The Sound of Music*.

Ljubljana, the capital and largest city with just 200,000 people, has all the character and history of the famous old cities of Europe built around palaces – only it's smaller. And with a third of its citizens being students, Ljubljana has a university town feel about it.

Lakes Bled and Bohinj are stunningly beautiful. The water temperature at the end of August was 22 to 25 degrees, and crystal clear. My group, being the last of the summer season, was the smallest with only four swimmers: Toby, from Belgium, and Rob and Hannah, a young English couple, and myself. Usually there are about 10 swimmers, mainly European although some come from the United States and a few have travelled from Australia. I was the first Kiwi.

The adventure is run by Borut Strel with his small team of guides. They escorted us on the swims in inflatable boats either paddled or propelled by electric motors. There are no fizz boats allowed on the lakes.

Over the course of three days, Borut and his team gave instruction on swimming technique with a view to having us all completing the longest swim. My technique improved hugely and, yes, I did complete the 4.5km swim of Lake Bohinj. Not bad for an old heavy displacement diesel like me.



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