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.
Every time I travel, I stand at my front door, bags in hand, wracked with a hungover I’ve forgotten something. As I boarded 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 that would have been completely ruined had I used the Force to remember my flash drive.

**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 Cowrie Mountain

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 flash drive.

**The island pace**

The physical entrance fee for this paradise-based swim clinic is being charged to swimming 

1.5km - a distance I’d never actually swim in my life. An avid runner, 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 Strait or English Channels.

My swimming companion 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 10km. However, it’s not the quantity that counts, it’s the quality that makes every metre worthwhile. Over the course of the week, we reach a new skill that I’ve mastered over the past two decades of work. Oddly, this isn’t gained in the way I initially imagined.

Meeting as a group on the first night, I find many swimmers have brought their paddles 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 for a 15-minute rainbow fish to Bingil Bay, 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 away 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 that The Karate Kid enque 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 week 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 nudge to signal I’m off 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
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.