

Weekender

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What lies beneath epic swims

Former toaster salesman Adam Walker has chronicled how he conquered the world's toughest oceans in a new book. The Notts swimmer talks to **Lynette Pinchess** about dolphins, sharks and pushing himself to the limit

SELLING toasters and kettles was never going to cut it for Adam Walker. The Russell Hobbs' salesman craved something more.

He just didn't know what until he tuned into an in-flight movie. The film, *On a Clear Day*, telling the plight of a redundant shipyard engineer who set out to swim the English Channel, struck a chord.

Notts-born Adam, who now lives in Kelham near Newark, recalls the frisson of excitement at the realisation that he would make this his goal.

The 37-year-old, who launched his new book *Man vs Ocean*, this week, says: "I was engrossed."

But the 6ft 5in powerhouse adds: "I became so excited about the idea of it and didn't allow my brain to compute the negatives." After intensive training he completed the 21-mile Dover to Calais channel swim in 2008 in 11 hours, 35 minutes.

Bitten by the bug, it led to the ultimate endurance challenge, Ocean's Seven. Swimming the deadliest oceans in the world. It pushed him to the max, both physically and mentally.

The only Briton and fifth man in the world to conquer all seven, Adam grew up in Radcliffe-on-Trent, where the only swimming he did was in a leisure centre pool.

His technique lacked finesse

but he was competitive and driven: characteristics which stood him in good stead for tackling waters with strong currents, jellyfish, and even sharks.

The most dramatic experiences occurred while swimming the Cook Strait, off the coast of New Zealand, when a pod of dolphins surrounded him.

"It was amazing. There were at least 12 dusky dolphins," says Adam. One was so close to my fingers. I was a bit wary as I didn't want to disrupt them."

Feeling completely at ease, the mood was shattered as Adam looked down to see a 6ft shark just five metres below him.

"You could tell it was a shark, it was much thinner, the way it was moving differently and it was just drifting forward," he says.

He had two choices: panic or keep calm, focussing on the dolphins which barricaded him in. "It's impossible to say but it felt like they were protecting me and guiding me home."

A clip of the dolphins, who remained with Adam for more than an hour, has had more than five million views on YouTube.

"A marine specialist said it is very rare for wild dolphins to spend so long interested in a human being and so close."

"It's something that will never leave me. The whole seven swims was worth it just for that," says Adam.

Swimming the Strait of Gibralt-



“You could tell it was a shark, it was much thinner, the way it was moving differently and it was just drifting forward”

Adam Walker

tar, between Spain and Morocco, was less dramatic but not so, the Hawaiian Molokai Strait, where he was badly stung by a Portuguese man o' war and still bears the scars four years later.

"It's the most pain I've ever had in my life. I can't describe how painful it was."

"They have 75 per cent of the poison of a cobra which can shut down your organs and put you into an anaphylactic shock."

Despite the lacerations on his stomach and 12in scar inside his leg, he completed the swim and couldn't wait to call his parents, Margaret and Peter, in Radcliffe-on-Trent, and brother Mark.

Adam says: "My mum is a very, very protective person. When I started to do this stuff I never told her an awful lot about it. I'd speak to my dad and he'd go 'great, brilliant, fantastic' and my mum would be 'please let this be the last one'."

He has attracted media attention around the world, hosting the annual Bosphorus Cross-Continental Swimming Race in Turkey.

In the UK, he's virtually unknown until now with TV appearances beckoning, including Channel 4's *Sunday Brunch*.

"I think there is a lack of understanding about what I've done," says the man, nicknamed 'Mad Adam'.

Mission complete, it is now his objective to make Britons aware of the benefits of open water swimming, in the sea, rivers and lakes. He also teaches a unique stroke, Ocean Walker, that he invented to combat a recurring shoulder problem and has coached top athletes including tennis star Novak Djokovic and leading UK triathletes.

He has carved a niche as a motivational speaker.

"I love telling the story. I want to instill in people that I'm just a normal guy and it can be done."

"I don't believe I was a born open water swimmer - I just believe I took a step forward and did everything possible."

■ *Man vs Ocean*, £17.99, John Blake Publishing Ltd, available at Waterstones and online. Find out more at adamwalker-oceans7.co.uk.



Adam Walker still has the scars from a jellyfish attack during his Ocean's Seven challenge.



Rules of open swimming

FOR challenges like Ocean's Seven to be official, swimmers have to adhere to certain rules.

Wetsuits are not allowed, only trunks or shorts (above the knee) or a classic-shaped costume for women, a swimming hat and goggles.

An observer on the support boat officiates the swim but swimmers are not allowed to touch

the boat during the crossing.

Swimmers can eat but food has to be passed to them and drinks must be thrown in a bottle tied to a piece of string.

Hypothermia is a major risk. Adam suffered severe symptoms during his first cold water outdoor experience.

Comparing the pain to the worst ice-cream headache in the world,

he lost the feeling in his arms.

Disorientated, he sounded drunk. Back on dry land he began shaking uncontrollably and stumbling. "I looked like a walking corpse," he recalls. He'd come close to killing himself due to his lack of knowledge and experience.

With proper coaching, open water swimming is an excellent form of exercise.

It burns more calories than cycling and running put together, aids depression, is good for injuries and it's cheap.

Adam, who is an ambassador for the Royal Life Saving Society, urges beginners to sign up for coaching at places such as Colwick Park and Holme Pierrepont Country Park rather than taking to the water untrained.