



HOW
WAS IT
FOR YOU?

PRISON BREAK

A penal colony. A Sand Ladder. The Golden Gate Bridge. There are few races as iconic as Escape from Alcatraz. But what's it like to race this San Franciscan classic?

WORDS JOSH BOXER IMAGES ROCKY ARROYO



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he fleet of kayaks and support boats struggle to maintain position as the wind slowly picks up. The chilly water of the San Francisco Bay ebbs toward the Golden Gate Bridge – resplendent in International Orange – off in the distance. Two thousand nervous athletes from 54 countries gaze out at the water and the small but growing crop of white caps standing between us and dry land, a mile and a half away.

The captain of the San Francisco Belle throws the engines into reverse one final time to hold this spot, 50m off Alcatraz Island and the infamous prison colony it once housed. The ship's horn suddenly blows and the pro racers rocket off our port side and into the roiling water below. The 38th running of the iconic Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon is underway and I'm about to make my leap.

KARL STAYS HOME

For me, the Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon is like a pilgrimage, a welcome home, a hug from an old friend. I lived in the Bay Area all my life before relocating to LA nearly two years ago – a move widely considered heretical among Bay Area natives. That move was tempered by the promise my wife and I made to each other, a promise to return home for Escape from Alcatraz every year. Last year, however, high winds and small craft warnings forced the race organisers to scrub the swim at the last moment, much to our dismay (and unspoken relief).

After a staggering 37 years of being held in San Francisco Bay, this race is a well-oiled machine. Now, with build-your-own swag bags, on-site finisher's medal engraving, and massive corporate sponsorships, the race has grown from a hometown event into an Ironman-caliber race, one commanding an Ironman-caliber price. While the jump in price to \$750 in recent years turned off many would-be-Escapees, the race is as popular (and as hard to get into) as ever.

On race morning, the conditions look nearly perfect and I'm pleased to see that Karl the Fog has stayed home. Yes, the San Francisco fog even has a name, and yes, this being



San Francisco, Karl also has his own Twitter handle.

Once on board the Belle, I run into my buddy, Scott Cathcart, who is making his 22nd consecutive Escape. "There's a reason the Escape from Alcatraz triathlon is so popular and difficult to get into now," said Cathcart. "It's unlike any other race in the world – there's something magical about the topography, the scenic beauty, the great spectator support, and of course, the epic swim."

That epic 2.4km swim requires mastery of a fourth discipline – coastal navigation. As I zip up my wetsuit and ready my goggles, I try to remember the six landmarks I'm supposed to use as navigational markers. Though I've made this crossing 10 times in the past, I admittedly watch the 'swim tips' video five times in my hotel the night before.

Undertrained yet brimming with the confidence of a grizzled veteran, I know that while I may not be fast, I'm not going to die out there – a sentiment not shared by all my fellow athletes. Through the prism of a dozen different languages and accents, all athletes seem to be saying the same thing: "Am I really about to do this?"

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

Suddenly, like paratroopers dropping behind enemy lines, we're quickly ushered out the door in rapid succession. "Go, go, go, go, go!" I give my wife one last kiss,

check to make sure the water in front of me is clear, and make the short but shocking leap into the Bay waters.

The cold water instantly freezes my hands and delivers a piercing, ice cream headache-like sensation right above my right eye. I take a few quick strokes away from the landing zone before peeking up at my first navigational marker, the Fontana Towers and Aquatic Park.

Last year's Alcatraz winner, Lauren Goss, advised me to "figure out which way it's blowing and try to breathe to the opposite side to ►



JOSH BOXER

Josh Boxer, 41, is an Ironman finisher, husband, and father of two girls, Sydney and Alex. When he's not training to make his annual Escape, Josh is an employment attorney, practising law in Manhattan Beach, California. Josh's 'Triathletes of Marin' column, profiling local triathletes, ran for years in the *Marin Independent Journal*.





avoid getting water in your mouth.” But the piercing sun is rising to my left and the wind is blowing in from my right. I’m constantly choosing between the sun in my eyes and salt water in my mouth. I look up every 10 strokes or so and find myself aiming too far to my right. I know that if I overshoot the swim, I’ll have to swim upstream at the end, draining precious energy, or worse, getting blown out toward the Golden Gate Bridge.

The waves pick up as I reach the halfway point. I flip over onto my back to take in the jaw-dropping view and think about just how lucky I am to be in this very spot, smack dab in the middle of the Bay. It’s this view, this race’s history, and this (seemingly) impossible swim, that draws athletes from all over the world to this iconic event. While crossing the finish line is special, there’s nowhere on Planet Tri quite like this sacred spot in the middle of the Bay.

As the waves continually break up my rhythm, I think about the advice I received from Eric Lagerstrom, who took first place here in 2015: “Relax and don’t fight the ocean. You have to roll with the waves, take some short strokes and some long ones, but just keep moving and stay relaxed.”

I take aim at the dome of the Palace of Fine Arts before heading toward the swim exit at the foot of the St. Francis Yacht Club. Fortunately, the rushing tidal river seems to slow down just as I reach the shore. Before I know it, I’m on the beach, running toward the swim exit and the cheering crowd gathered along the shore. My 44min

swim, while not nearly as fast as in years past, still feels exhilarating.

WEED AND WINDMILLS

Just one of its many unique aspects, Escape features a ‘warm-up run’ – a half-mile jaunt between the swim exit and transition. I decide to run in my swim socks, a new and very welcome addition to my racing kit. Making my way into transition, I spot my wife, Robin, who seems genuinely pleased to see that I’ve made it out alive.

I mount my bike and enjoy the fast and flat start along Crissy Field, taking in some energy gel and trying to wash the salt water out of my mouth. The flats don’t last long as the technical 29km bike course presents a dizzying mix of climbs and descents.

As I reach the posh Sea Cliff neighborhood, I spot the first casualty of the horrific road conditions that plague the race. The potholes and ruddy roadways puncture tyre after tyre after tyre along the course. At the top of the first serious incline, up to the Legion of Honor museum, I catch a glimpse of Rodin’s Thinker gracing its outer courtyard. Is he contemplating the meaning of life or is he just bored, waiting for my slow ass to make it up the hill?

We speed down the hill, flying past the precariously-perched Cliff House on our right, before reaching Ocean Beach. We make a left into Golden Gate Park, where the smell of salt air gives way to Eucalyptus. I pick up the faint smell of (now legal) cannabis from a group of early-morning picnickers before riding on past Dutch windmills and the ►

CONQUER ALCATRAZ

1 Come out a day or two early to take part in one of the organised practise swims to help familiarise yourself with the water conditions and pick up some pro tips.

2 Leave the tri bike at home. The course is super technical, with few long straightaways, and the road conditions are horrible. Stick to a more maneuverable road bike. Disc brakes are a plus, and don’t forget extra tubes.

3 Use some earplugs to keep out the cold water, which can really throw off your equilibrium during (and after) the swim.

4 Swim socks not only help to keep your toes warm during the swim, they provide enough support and protection to complete the warm-up run without having to stop to put on a pair of shoes at the mini-transition.







Our man Josh strides away from the Golden Gate Bridge on the run



Buffalo Paddock leading back to Great Highway. Once again, we're on the climb, making the ascent past the Cliff House and then one final short but steep push toward home. Just as I reach transition, pro Sarah Haskins is flying down the shoot, making her final dash for the finish line.

HUMBLED AND HOMESICK

The 12.8km run course starts off flat and fast and I try not to over-run it. My legs are already tightening up as I push myself up the stairs, and navigate the series of steep, narrow paths, which wind under the Golden Gate, and meander along the decaying military batteries, once home to anti-aircraft artillery and U-Boat spotters.

The course suddenly takes a welcome turn downhill toward Baker Beach, one of the only nude beaches in San Francisco. The prospect of seeing 2,000 Spandex-clad triathletes was apparently enough to keep its usual inhabitants at home. My shoes fill with sand as I begin the out-and-back stretch along Baker Beach, which delivers unbelievable views of the Golden Gate, the Marin Headlands, and, on a clear day, the notoriously shark-infested Farallon Islands.

As I reach the end of Baker Beach, the dreaded Sand Ladder comes into view. When the conditions are at their best, the Sand Ladder is a steep climb up 400 sand-covered logs, laced together by heavy cable, providing a platform just stable enough to allow you to gain some upward momentum. At its worst, however, the irregularly-spaced logs are buried in the sand, making it impossible to find a toe hold. While six-time race winner and Alcatraz legend Andy Potts tells me to "build on the Sand Ladder and crest it hard," I'm barely able to put



one foot in front of the other when I reach the top.

After a bit more climbing, the rugged path once again winds us back to the bridge, through a low tunnel, and downward to Crissy field. If you've held back on the swim, played it conservatively on the bike, and didn't let the Sand Ladder get the best of you, this last two-mile stretch is the time to burn any fuel you have left in the tank. My tank is just about empty, however, and I gobble down as much sugar and caffeine as I can stomach, hoping to maintain my pace. Humbled, homesick, and hamstrings burning, I make my way

ESCAPE KEY INFO

First race 1981

2018 starters

1,608

2018 finishers

1,574

Next date

TBC June 2019

Entry fee \$750

Nearest airport

San Francisco

International

Website

escapealcatraztri.com

through the throngs of spectators lining Marina Boulevard and kick toward home.

With a huge smile on my face after 3:39hrs of racing, I barrel-roll across the finish line, an homage to the late Jon "Blazeman" Blais, the Ironman hero who bravely battled ALS, the same disease that claimed my grandfather, Harvey. I'm sore and sunburnt but grinning from ear-to-ear.

It's no wonder triathletes come from all over the world to cross this race off their bucket list, and why so many return. And I know I'll be back for another attempt at Escape from Alcatraz in 2019. **220**