

No Bullshit Guides

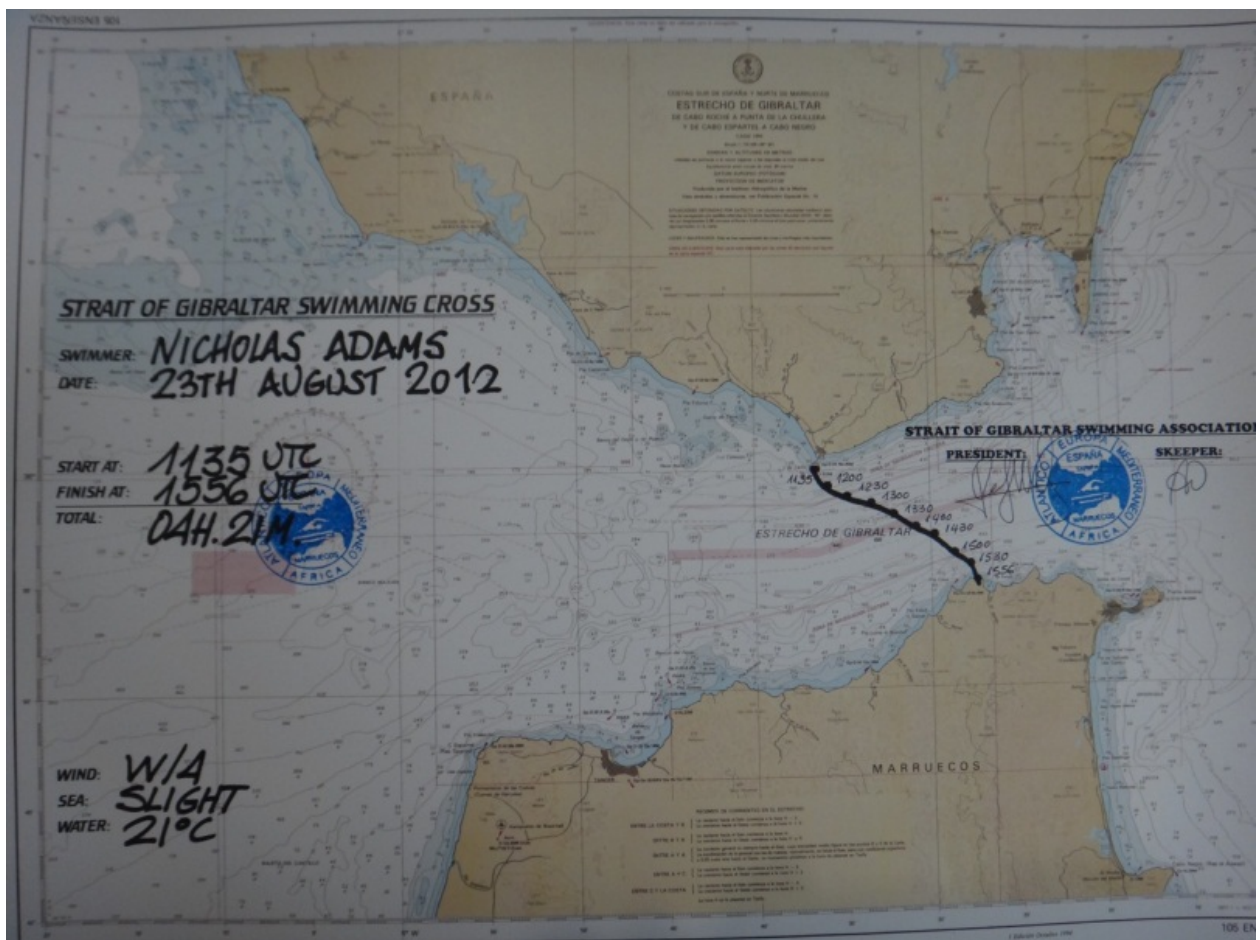
Gibraltar Straits Swim

When planning a swim, it's all too easy to trawl through blogs and website to research the swim, but what you really need is the hard-and-fast, no bullshit info. Reports 'bigging up' the swim don't really help. If we believed some of the reports of EC crossings where there were enormous shoals of jellyfish so dense you could walk on top of, ships coming within 5m of the swimmer, tides directly against you the whole way, pilots that went the wrong way, acres of floating rubbish and sewage, seas that made hardened sailors soil themselves, water so cold there were icebergs in it, and giant squid fighting with sperm whales, one would never give it a bash!

After doing the Gibraltar Straits swim this Summer, here is the no-bull guide. No ethereal waffle about how spiritual it was. No stories of heroics. Just info I'd like to have known before I started looking at it!

Where is it?

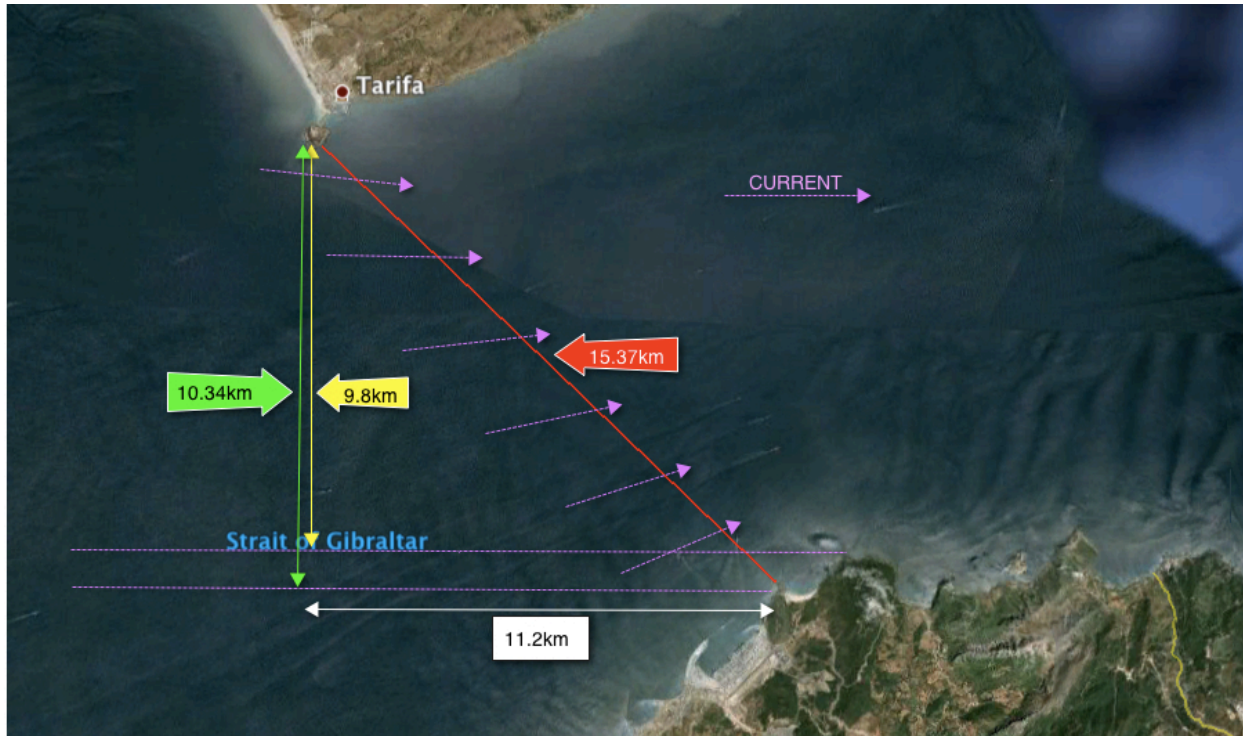
At the bottom of Spain. Stretch of water connecting Spain to Morocco:



How far is it?

The distance from the tip of Spain (Tarifa) to the nearest bit of Africa is quoted as 14.4km, but basically you aim south and the tide and current takes you east into the Med, so you don't swim 14.4km. It's more like 11/12km. I have seen blogs quoting 20+km, but this is crap! They are just slower swimmers, so take longer to do the swimming south bit, whilst the water is always moving east, hence more distance (over the ground) is covered.

Below is a visual picture of why the distance is more like 11/12km than the minimum distance quoted of 14.4km.



This is not a swim for you, if you can't do more than 2km/hr in open water, as you will not get far enough south before you get taken east past all the possible landing spots.

You are free to measure the distance you've swum and blog about it, but you certainly didn't swim it!

Who runs the show?

Rafael Gutierrez Mesa is the man. There isn't anyone else you will/can liaise with. His 'day job' is as an official at an organisation similar to the coastguards, and he gets you the required permissions to swim from Spain to Morocco.

Rafael runs the ACNEG ("Gibraltar Strait Swimming Association" <http://www.acneg.com/>)

It is a complete monopoly, and I know that mysteriously, others that have tried to gain the required permissions to swim outside of the ACNEG haven't managed it. It is not worth the hassle of trying to go it alone, so sadly you will have to cough up for a very expensive short swim!

Rafael is a charming, warm and generous man once you get to understand him. Communication before arriving, and after arriving, in Spain can be frustrating. Bear with it; it'll happen!

What are the currents and weather like?

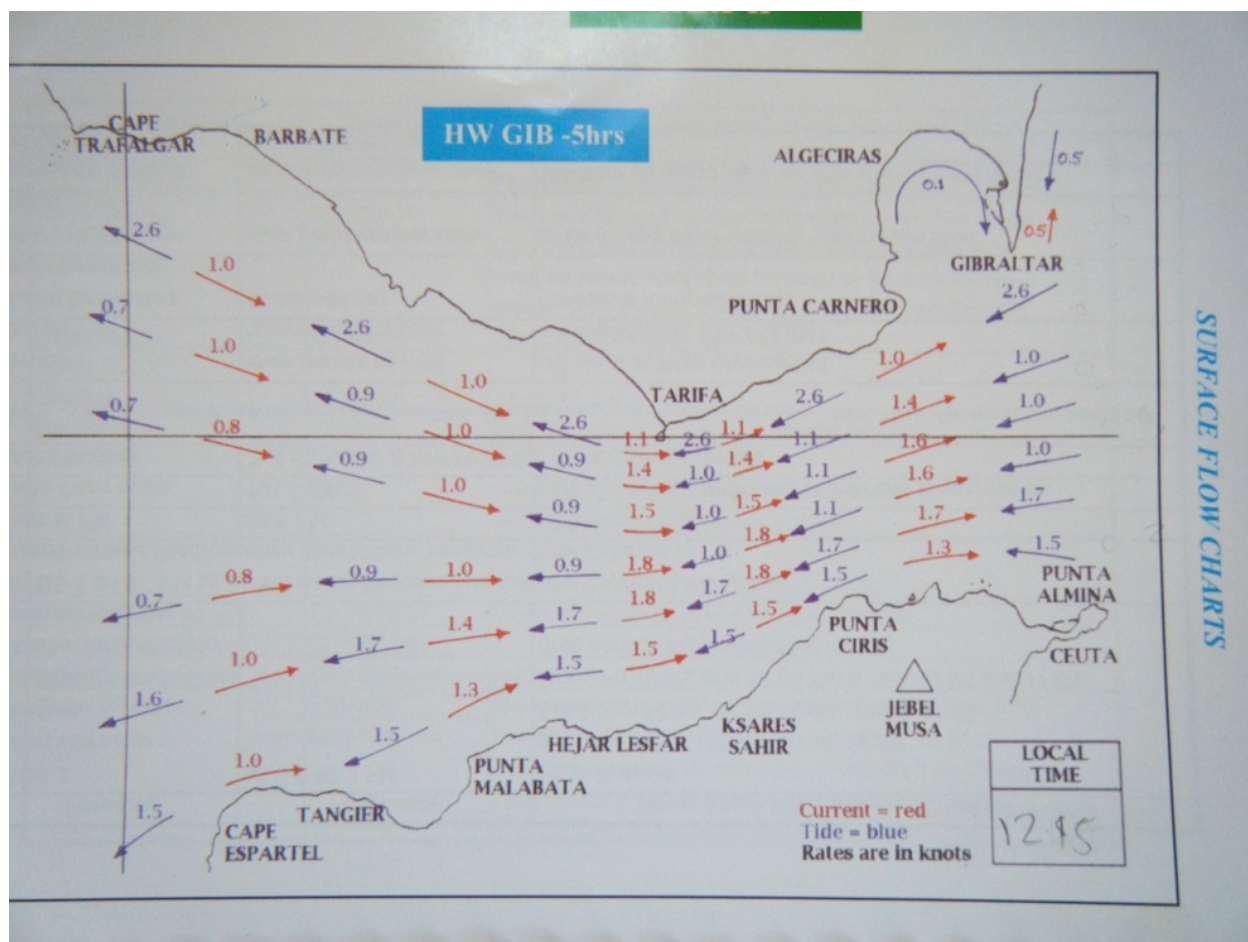
The bad news: Tarifa is known as the windsurfing capital of the world! It's windy most of the time. There is the odd day or two when the winds die down, usually when they are in the process of changing direction.

They are more nervous and cautious about conditions than we are, in the EC. They get very 'wobbly' if it's a F3/4, so make sure you reiterate you've swum in a lot worse, many times.

The water movement in the Straits is made up of two components, current and tide. The current is always moving West → East due to the higher rate of evaporation in the Mediterranean. The tide washes back and forth, basically in an E/W direction.

Below is a tidal chart for five hours before high water in Gibraltar. You can see at that point the tide is heading west and current east. I have all these charts if you are interested in them.

Generally they start the swims 2-3 hours before high water.



When can one swim it?

They take bookings for May to September. The winter sea temperature is ~15C. May it is ~16-18C. Maximum Summer temperature is 22/23C.

You need to be at least 16 years old to swim.

Wetsuit or not?

Obviously without wetsuit is preferable! Wetsuits are allowed, but recorded as a special category.

How are the swims conducted?

You will be escorted by two boats. One is a larger boat that steers the course, and stays 50-100m ahead of you. The second is a rib, and this boat will stay next to you and you will feed from it. The rib aims for the larger boat, and they ask that the swimmer/s also sight off the big boat.

You will meet at the port/marina 30-45 mins before kick off, and grease up etc on land. You then get onto one of the boats and motor round to the bit of rock they want to start you from. You hop in, touch the rock if it's safe to do so, then swim swim swim.

At the other end, clear the water if safe to do so, otherwise touching rocks is permitted. Then swim back to the larger escort boat.

Remember to take all our passports on the boat with you.

Multiple swimmers side by side

You are allowed up to four swimmers swimming the Straits at the same time, with the same boat cover as a solo would have. You must swim close together. If one is jeopardising the success of the others, they will be pulled by the support team. Make sure you can all swim together, at one speed, before you book this!

Special local rules

Often the conditions are too rough and unsafe for a dry land to dry land swim. It is usual (and allowed) to just touch land at the start and end. You do what you are told by the support team.

If there is imminent danger of collision with other shipping, the swimmer is allowed to be plucked out of the water and chucked back in at the same place as soon as possible. Rafael says this is very very very rare.

How much does it cost?

These are the 2012 prices, so they may change for when you want to swim:

1 Swimmer solo	€1,700	= €1,700 pp	
2 Swimmers solo	€2,300	= €1,150 pp	(basically €600 extra for each extra swimmer)
3 Swimmers solo	€2,900	= €967 pp	
4 Swimmers solo	€3,500	= €875 pp	

You will need to pay a 20% deposit by international bank transfer to secure your slot. Rest can be given to Rafael in cash on the day of the swim.

What do I get for my money?

The all-important permissions, two boats and their crews, and medical backup. He also provides each swimmer with a cool chart of their swim, along with a certificate. We all got a silicone swimming hat thrown in. You can buy t-shirts and polo shirts from Rafael.

How do I book it?

Rafael starts taking bookings on 1st December of the year before, i.e. 01/12/2012 for 2013 swims. Ask him by email (gibraltarswimming@gmail.com) as to what slots he has free. Once you've booked and paid, the slot is yours.

It's not clear as to whether you can only book on neap tides or not, so just book from what you're offered.

Admin required

Get the following to Rafael. We found scanning and emailing the least painful:

- Booking/Application form. Print it off from their website.
- Medical for each swimmer, no ACNEG medical form exists!! A CS&PF one works fine.
- Photocopy of each passport
- A swimming CV. Doesn't need too much effort in this department

The 'queuing' system

I still don't get this, and many other swimmers don't get it either! This WILL frustrate you.

If there is more than one swim to get off, Rafael seems to send off the people that have to leave Spain first, rather than those who arrive first. We booked on 1st December, and were there for the entire duration of our 'tide', but he still sent someone off before us; odd!

Sadly you will have to go with the flow. SMS him daily, and arrange to visit him in his office in Tarifa the moment you arrive.

Tears have been known to work on Rafael (Sara Newman you are shameful), so be prepared to cry if things are looking bad!

The wildlife

We saw nothing on our swim. In the past people have seen dolphins, whales, sunfish and jellyfish. No swim has been stopped due to wildlife interactions. Don't big up the swim saying you'll have to brave shark infested waters etc. as you'll be lying.

In 2012, there was a very large number of jellyfish in the Mediterranean, and local reports from Gibraltar are that they have now come out as far as them. The jellies don't seem to be a problem in Tarifa, most likely due to the large currents moving water from the Atlantic into the Med all of the time.

Where does one fly to?

The cheapest way to do it is to fly to Malaga in Spain, hire a car, and then drive to Tarifa. Flying into Gibraltar itself is often more expensive, due to their being fewer flight options. The drive from Malaga to Tarifa should take around 2 hours, and it's quite a stressful drive with dreadful Spanish driving, dangerous road layouts and poor signage. Pay the extra and use the toll roads (~€10).

Where does one stay?

Central Tarifa is very small, so anywhere IN Tarifa will be fine. If you wait in Tarifa for more than a few days, you will go stir crazy!

The Atlantic facing sandy beach is lovely to train in.

One particularly nice apartment setup should be considered, as the lady running the place is lovely, it's cheap but STUNNING, she speaks English and she is 'swimmer friendly':

<http://www.darcilla.com/> and this one is GORGEOUS: <http://www.darcilla.com/Amadeus.html>

Contacts

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<http://www.acneg.com/>

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