

Former NST journalist sets record with 17 km swim from Pulau Lang Tengah to Pulau Perhentian!

By Ridzwan Rahim - April 7, 2024 @ 9:46am



Aerial shot of Ridzwan Rahim during a swim at Summer Bay Resort, Pulau Lang Tengah. Photos by Muhammad Aqil Azhar Khalili.

MY team and I are on a quest to pioneer a cluster of marathon swims in Terengganu that we call the Terengganu Four Swims.

Recently, we completed our third run – a 17km swim from Pulau Lang Tengah to Pulau Perhentian in an event called "Perhentian–Lang Tengah Solo Swim 2024".

What a gruelling event that was! We now know what it's like to swim during the monsoon: it can be done, but it is tough on both swimmer and crew. Some on your team members will get seasick. Only the toughest will go on and complete the mission.



Ridzwan Rahim.

A little background: Peninsular Malaysia has two monsoons. The northeast monsoon hits the east coast from November to March, which usually brings heavy rain, severe floods and rough seas.

Generally, people stay away from the sea due to high waves and strong currents during this period.

So how did we end up swimming in the open sea in a monsoon season? I took a gamble when I planned the swim last year. I assumed if the monsoon came on time last year (which it did), it would end by March.

But as we discovered – much to our chagrin – during swim weekend, the monsoon was still very much in full swing.

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH...



The team arriving at the idyllic Summer Bay Resort, Pulau Lang Tengah.

On the day of the event, our boat crew took longer than anticipated to reach Summer Bay Resort Pulau Lang Tengah, our base and starting point for the event. When they finally did, my kayaker Hafizuddin Amlin (or Pie, as we call him) went to the jetty to greet them.

Pie returned from the jetty looking depressed. I asked what the boat crew had told him about the sea condition.

"*Gila* (the sea is mad)," Pie replied. My heart sank and we were speechless. Evidently, our boat crew had a difficult time getting to the island. Soon after setting off from the mainland, the rough seas had left some of them trembling in fear.

Our boat crew advised us to call off the swim. It was pitch dark out there, they warned. It'd be difficult for them to see oncoming swells and our boats might capsize. Our team convened an emergency meeting. We opted to still go to our starting point at Bubbles Dive Resort in Pulau Perhentian to see for ourselves the condition.

True enough, it was rough. Some of us succumbed to seasickness on that ride. One of them was Aqil, the last-minute replacement photographer for our usual guy Ariff Budiman. It looked like he shouldn't be on the boat for the swim proper.

About 5km out from Pulau Lang Tengah, our boat skippers got the jitters and insisted on turning back. I thought that was it. Perhentian–Lang Tengah Solo Swim 2024 would be a non-event.

During our return to the resort, I felt dejected because this was going to be my first event with corporate sponsors. U Mobile, Summer Bay Resort, Speedo and X3SI, along with well-wishers Low Khee Wah and Dr Hanapi Mohd Tahir who had enough belief in the mission to agree to get on board.



Team members saying a prayer before the start of the swim.

Even our online tracker, which I'd set up much earlier, didn't work that night. Thankfully, my team refused to give up. We decided to try again. The following morning, we sent a scout team to recce the sea condition. Their verdict: the sea wasn't much different from the previous night, but we now had daylight for better visibility.

Also, if we wanted to swim, we should probably change our route and swim from Lang Tengah to Perhentian instead, for a more favourable wind condition.



Applying a mixture of vaseline and zinc oxide to prevent chaffing.

It was a tough call. Within the scout team, the votes for "go" and "no go" were split 50-50.

As a compromise, my team leader Abdul Razak Abdul Aziz recommended a 3km test swim from Lang Tengah just so I could have a feel for swimming in the large swells. After 3km, we'd end the swim and return to the resort. Perhaps we would sing karaoke later that night.

I voted "yes" to both the 3km test swim and the karaoke!

TESTING THE WATERS



Conditions were extremely choppy during the 17km swim from Pulau Lang Tengah to Pulau Perhentian.

It was sunny but not too hot when we started our swim from Summer Bay Resort on a Sunday at 9.30am. The water felt cold. For the first hour of the swim, I could see the bottom of the sea. The water around Lang Tengah was that clear.

True enough, after a few kilometres, large swells started hitting from my right. But by then, I had already adjusted to the harsh conditions. I was still thinking about karaoke, though. I was hoping for signals from our boat skippers to end the swim. I would have happily obliged.



Team leader Abdul Razak Aziz (left) and feeder Mohd Fikri Zhafran Mohd Rawi feeding Ridzwan.

But the call never came. Finally, during a feeding break, Razak said the team could see I was doing well and had decided we would continue the swim. I said "okay".

Although I had found my rhythm when swimming, the feeding breaks were still a challenge. I had to kick harder in the water and time my bites and sips with the oncoming waves to avoid swallowing seawater when they swept over my body.

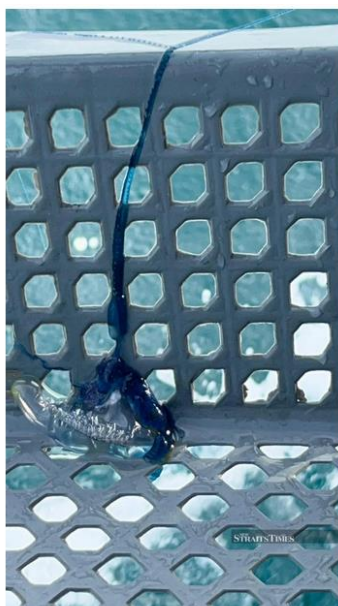
Soon, the team told me we had already covered 8km. The distance between Pulau Lang Tengah and Pulau Perhentian is 17km. In my mind, we had about 10km more to go. I was wrong, but it gave me comfort.



The distance of 10km was considered one of my "shorter" training distances in the pool under coach Shauqie Aziz. I could swim 10km quite comfortably.

Even so, I was still non-committal about finishing. In my mind, this was still a test swim. Once, the team recorded a video interview with me. In between the splashing waves, I said finishing the swim was just a possibility.

The sea was so rough that even my kayaker Pie was overcome by seasickness and had to be replaced by my observer, Tsuyoshi Amzar Sawada (Yoshi) for a brief spell. I'd never seen Pie getting seasick. I also had contact with marine life. I was stung by what I thought were jellyfish at least four times during this swim – the greatest number of stings I'd ever received since I started marathon swimming.



A Portuguese man o' war fished out of the water by the team during the swim.

We didn't see what animal I ran into, but the team did see a number of Portuguese man o' war (or bluebottles) during the swim. So, it was possible that what stung me wasn't a jellyfish but bluebottles.

Every time I got stung, I stopped swimming to unwrap the long tentacles from my body and report the incident to the medic. The pain was mild and didn't require medical attention.

When it got dark, the team asked me to switch to clear goggles for nighttime swimming. I could see Pulau Perhentian, but I was also getting exhausted. I'd been swimming in adverse conditions for more than 10 hours with no respite.

SWIMMING FROM THE HEART



Ridzwan prostrating in gratitude upon landing at Arwana Perhentian Resort, Pulau Perhentian Besar.

My swim techniques began to deteriorate, and I was reduced to flailing my arms. What kept me going was a desire to bring back the good news to my family, friends and sponsors.

I was swimming purely from the heart. I didn't ask my team how much further to the island because I didn't want to be demotivated. Soon, the sea turned calm, and I knew we weren't very far away.

My team informed me that we had to switch to another landing spot as we had missed Bubbles Dive Resort, our designated landing spot. We'd be heading into Teluk Dalam instead, located a further 700 metres into the bay. They said our escort boats wouldn't be following me to Teluk Dalam due to low tide.

Yoshi then sprang into action. He got on his paddleboard and guided me to the beach while Pie transported our videographer Fahmi on his kayak to document the landing.

I felt the water turning considerably warmer as we entered Teluk Dalam. As I was approaching the beach, I saw crowds of people and a fire show. I thought my team might have gone slightly overboard with our celebration. But no, the fire show wasn't for me!

I landed in front of Arwana Perhentian Resort, much to the bemusement of local villagers.

This was a real WTF swim. I allowed myself time to cry while prostrating on the beach. Time: 12 hours 25 minutes and 15 seconds. Total swim distance: 26.2km.



The team back at Summer Bay Resort after the 17km swim.

So, in the end, although the Perhentian–Lang Tengah Solo Swim 2024 didn't exactly go according to plan, but we still had a swell time (excuse the pun!).

With this achievement, my team and I are poised to complete our Terengganu Four Swims challenge with a final swim of 11km between Pulau Lang Tengah and Pulau Redang.

On the day we left Pulau Lang Tengah to return to Kuala Lumpur, as if fate was playing a prank on us, the sea was very calm...



Aerial shot of Pulau LangTengah.

PERHENTIAN-LANG TENGAH SOLO SWIM 2024

Team members: Ridzwan Rahim (swimmer), Abdul Razak Abdul Aziz (team leader), Mohd Hafizuddin Amlin (kayaker), Shamsul Hamimi Ab Rahman (lead observer), Tsuyoshi Amzar Sawada (observer), Lim Yi Ting (medic), Mohd Fikri Zhafran Mohd Rawi (feeder), Muhammad Aqil Azfar Khalili (photographer), Mohd Fahmi Zainal Aripin (videographer), support swimmers Shauqie Aziz, Hakimi Radzi and Mak Hoi Mon (Casey).

Boat crew: Mohd Nazuan Azharrudin and Shamzur Azren Che Samaon (skippers), and boat hands Hairiy Uteh, Azam, Takim, Hassan, and Roki.

Sponsors: U Mobile, Summer Bay Resort, Damai Beach Camp Resort, Speedo, X3SI, Low Khee Wah and Dr Hanapi Mond Tahir

Partners: Project Life Aquatic and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu Institute of Oceanography and Environment (INOS UMT)