

CREATING AMAZING CONNECTIONS IN LISBON

Positive connections create the confidence to explore and push beyond our limits. Ben Lane travelled to Portugal to swim the seas and get connected

A recent trip to Portugal to swim the waters around Lisbon succeeded because our connections were good; they unexpectedly guided our journey, propelling the simplicity and beauty

of an open water swim to a level of fulfilment we were not expecting.

After months of preparation and connecting with locals to finalise the trip, we were nearing our goal. After landing without incident in Lisbon, we were soon

making the car journey from our hotel in Carcavelos to our first swim destination in Cascais, traversing the beautiful Estoril coast north of the capital. Our swim guide and driver, André Santos, raised our spirits and kept the conversation upbeat. We were enjoying our new face-to-face connection. Until then we had been exchanging vague ideas on social media channels; now we were in the real world, and our ideas were taking shape.

He explained the beach we were swimming from that day was the finish line on a stage of the UltraMarathon Swim Series organised by the World Open Water Swimming Association (WOWSA). The Travessia Lisboa Cascais 20km swim took place last September. Starting at Doca de Belém, the course passed Lisbon and Oeiras, with the finish line at Praia dos Pescadores in Cascais. And this is where we stood, limbering up for our first taste of Portuguese waters.

André told us that he had competed in the event and finished a respectable 12th place in a time of 4hrs 31 mins. The winner completed the event in 3hrs 52 mins. We were planning to swim a small portion of the course, but at a much-reduced pace! The sun was shining from behind grey clouds, the predicted rain was holding off, Portugal was looking beautiful. It was early December, and all was right with the world. The stars were aligning. Things were beginning to connect. We were ready to dive into a new experience.

As we were climbing into our wetsuits, we gave André an overview of our swimming exploits, which included a recent swim in the tenebrous seas around the Faroe Islands (see September 2023 issue of *Outdoor Swimmer*). The Faroe Islands, you would think, share little in common with the sunny climes of

Portugal; two lands on opposing sides of the geographical equation. Given the distance and remoteness of these tiny islands, what was the likelihood of a connection between them and our new Portuguese friend? Slim?

Amazingly, André was familiar with the Faroe Islands and not only that, but he also hosted and swam with a group of Faroese swimmers prior to our visit and from the very beach we were standing on. The connection was extraordinary. What a delightfully small world!

We were ready for our first swim in Portugal!

The waters around Lisbon at this time of the year are a favourable 14-16 degrees, but the air can be cold, and a gentle wind that day created a damp chill. We set off and set a course in the general direction of Carcavelos, 100m out from shore, always in sight of the buildings on land which provided some comfort. The going was good, but a little choppy. Soon we found a rhythm and settled down. We swam through shoals of fish, which was a surprise; there are actually fish in the sea!

André swam beside us and kept us on track, he moved through the water effortlessly while we seemed to battle through every stroke. If you allow yourself space and time, the connections you can make during a swim are many, connecting with yourself, the people swimming with you, and with your surroundings; all of which add to the simple joy of a swim. Spend the time adjusting your technique, searching for the smoothest movement, perfecting your balance and position, connecting your body to the water, connecting your mind to the journey. If you persist, you will find your sweet spot: a zone where you are swimming without effort and your mind empties of all thought, floating away, literally – and then a realisation dawns, and all of it makes perfect sense. You are connected.

We covered just over 2km and ended the swim back at the beach we had departed from a few hours earlier and enjoyed a strong coffee, local cake, and a conversation with our new friend. André told us he has been a swimmer for most of his 28 years. His parents realised from an early age that he was a natural water



baby. He has since carved out a successful career and a lifetime passion for swimming. His company Swim Together arranges tours across Portugal.

Our first swim complete and we were soon eyeing up options for the next one. This is the trouble with swimming! It constantly moves you on to the next one. With one eye on the weather conditions, which were wet and windy for the next few days, we decided to swim at Lagoa de Albufeira on the Costa da Caparica coastline. The lagoon, a sheltered spot, connects to the sea via a sand bank on one side and a beautiful inland body of water on the other. Located in a national park and about an hour drive south of Lisbon, the lagoon measures around 3.7km long, and is the deepest inland body of water in Portugal, with a depth of 15m.

The conditions were windy but settled, sunny but chilly. We covered 2.5km in glorious clear waters and delighted in having the whole lagoon to ourselves.

Fishing huts on wooden poles poking out of the waters dotted across the lagoon made for a delightful back drop and a fun slalom course, weaving in and out and avoiding the fishing nets. This swim gave us time to work on our technique, enjoy the solitude of a winter swim (this area gets busy in the summer) and connect and immerse ourselves into nature.

The last day of our trip was a wash out; a huge storm across the area meant the waters were too dangerous to swim (although we dared a late evening “bob” in the rough seas of Carcavelos Beach). We therefore decided to experience the sea from the “other side” and hired bicycles from Cascais Rent Bike to explore the famous national cycle route from Cascais running north along the rugged beauty of the Portuguese coastline.

If you can't get in the water, the next best thing is to travel alongside it! It is all about maintaining connections, no matter the mode of transport.

