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By Norwegian
September 2016
Issue 45

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The robots are coming!
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1. NANCY HESLIN

Côte d'Azur resident Nancy contributes to the likes of *Women's Running* and Fodor's Travel Guides. An "avid Swimrunner", she was the ideal fit to interview the guys behind extreme race Ötillö (p56). Last year she trained in Nice's hottest summer on record: "Running with a swim cap, goggles and hand paddles along the Promenade des Anglais produces hilarious reactions," she told us. [nancyheslin.wordpress.com](#)

2. JO CAIRD

British travel writer Jo has written about the arts for newspapers including *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, and on travel for *Lonely Planet*, among others. She travelled to Hamburg for us to visit the city's Miniatur Wunderland attraction (p78). She was worried it sounded quite "nerdy" but loved meeting the people behind it – "I love talking to people who are passionate about what they do," she says. [jocaird.com](#)

3. ANDRIA LO

Photographer Andria, who lives in San Francisco's Bay Area, shoots for *Lucky Peach* magazine and SFMOMA, as well as collaborating on a blog documenting the street-style of senior citizens living in the city's Chinatown, [chinatownpretty.com](#). For our story on Oakland's progressive eateries (p36), "I ate my way through some excellent local restaurants," she says. "It was a real treat to photograph." [andrialo.com](#)

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Wet

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Words Nancy Helsin → Photography Jakob Edholm

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wild



Mats Skott and Michael Lemmel are the madmen behind Ötillö – an extreme race over and between 26 Swedish islands. Ten years after the race started as a drunken bet, we met them to find out how it spawned a new endurance sport



tillö is a great race for people who don't like boats. A 75km race across Stockholm's archipelago, it sees teams of two plunge into tissue-numbing Baltic waters before running, in wetsuits and sodden trainers, across island after rocky island in an

unrelenting slog from dawn till dusk.


It is, as veteran Tobias Mews suggests, "An event you only become aware of after Googling something like: 'Hard as nails race, ultra-marathon, Swimrun, Sweden, team event, Baltic temperatures, ridiculous number of islands, tight cut-offs.'"

To the uninitiated, the pleasures seem dubious; the discomfort pronounced. Unlike triathlon, where transitions between different disciplines give participants time to change, here the whole race is swum/run in wetsuit and running shoes. 'Transition' simply entails stumbling up or down sharp and slippery rocks.

There are also some very real dangers. "If you don't die of exhaustion or hypothermia, there's always the chance of getting drowned by a hydrophilic moose," reported *Outside's* Fit List columnist Erin Beresini back in 2013. (The year after a moose had indeed tried to join the race.)

Yet, somehow, despite all this, each year the race is overwhelmed with entries. For the last outing there were 1,400 applicants for 240 spots. Remarkably, those race fans – "Ironman triathletes, multi-sport stars, elite military teams, endurance junkies, and nut cases" (as the event website describes them) – who make it through the lottery consider themselves lucky.

What's more, the event, which celebrates its 11th edition on 5 September, has birthed a whole sport – known as Swimrun – and competitions are held all over the world (including the US where its first race took place last month). Stockholm's original Ötillö is now regarded as the world championship title.



"If you don't die of exhaustion or hypothermia, there's always the chance of getting drowned by a hydrophilic moose"

Given the level of madness, it might come as no surprise that Ötillö is the result of a drunken bet between a bunch of Swedish buddies. However, contrary to urban legend, Michael Lemmel and Mats Skott, the two adventure racers who now run it, weren't actually part of that friendly wager. They found out about the bet quite by chance.

"In 2005, my car was at a garage outside Stockholm and the owner, who also co-owned the Utö Vårdshus resort with Anders Malm, told me that Malm and three guys had started doing this 'thing' the last two years," says Lemmel, 49, setting the record straight. When he heard the group of four had run and swam from Utö to Sandhamn – "Last team of two pays for hotel, dinner and drinks" – over some 28 hours, he called Skott from the car en route to the office to look at the map.

By this point, the pair were already established figures on the adventure-racing scene. After meeting through friends in 1990 in Chamonix, France, they had been Scandinavia's top team for over a decade, hovering in the world's top 10 standings. At the time of the garage conversation, they had been working on an adventure »

ÖTILLÖ THE SWIMRUN
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racing reality show in Australia, similar to *Survivor* in the US, producing all the physical challenges. But, although they'd previously introduced ski alpinism and adventure racing to Sweden, they'd been too involved with their own racing to devote themselves to organising a local event before.

Ötillö (pronounced "uh-till-uh") was different. From that first day, when they scoured a map of the Stockholm archipelago, their ambition was to create a world-renowned, awe-inspiring race based on "the best of" their adventure racing career. By early summer 2006, they were ready to test out their 65km running and 10km swimming course. "We called people we knew from the adventure-racing world and managed to raise nine teams," Lemmel explains. "Only two finished."

The very first of these, Team Nokia from Finland, had just won the Adventure Racing World Championship. They thought outside the box and used a Nokia telephone-shaped air mattress, which they ran with (there was no size restriction on flotation devices at the time). It took 13 hours (the current record is 8hrs 16mins and 12sec).

Lemmel and Skott were convinced they were onto a winner but the race wasn't an instant hit, as few teams understood the »

"It's become the ultimate bragging rights for endurance athletes, leaving Ironman a distant second"



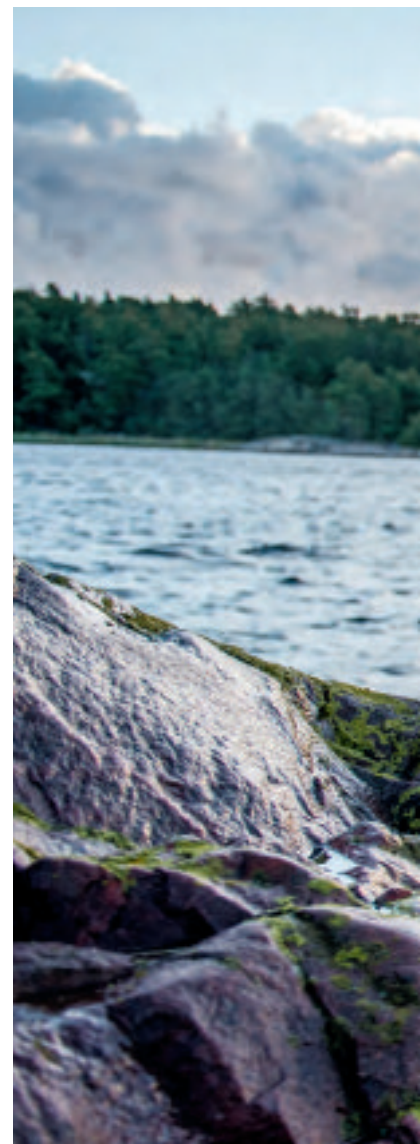
concept. “I watched a team do a 200m swim,” Skott adds. “They sat down, took off their shoes and socks, put everything in a dry bag. That took 10 minutes. After the swim, they came up, opened their dry bag, put back on their shoes, another 10 minutes. They’ll never reach halfway through the course, I thought. And they didn’t.”

Ötillö lost money the first three years, but the fourth year saw the entry fee tripled just to cover costs, which includes ferry, accommodation and food. By year five, endurance athletes were realising that the discomfort and difficulty of the race were actually selling points. Since then the race has become the ultimate bragging rights for endurance athletes, leaving Ironman in a distant second place; last year, one team swam from Sweden to Finland as part of their training. Ötillö tattoos are de rigueur.

It’s quickly turned into a phenomenon, attracting both A-listers, like the future Queen of England’s sister, Pippa Middleton, and former Ironman world champions, such as Chris McCormack and Faris al-Sultan. “We balance the superstars with those that qualify on merit,” says Lemmel. “We got a lot of flack for accepting Pippa Middleton in 2015, but as she smiled right up until the finish line, it showed that she had a place there. We need to reach different communities.”

Part of the appeal of the main event lies in its exclusivity: entry is capped at 120 teams. Now the pair are inundated with requests to host spin-offs around the world. The plan is to introduce two unique Ötillö World Series events to the programme each year. In 2016, on top of qualifiers in Utö (Sweden) and Engadin (Switzerland), there are the Isles of Scilly (UK) and the 1,000 Lakes (Germany). They’ve also added a sprint race to each series, an entry level open to more people, aimed at attracting a new generation to a quickly burgeoning craze.

“When others look at you and think you’re nuts, it’s because they are looking at it from their perspective”





“It was only when a volunteer at Ötillö told me he was a Swimrunner, I realised we’d created a sport,” Skott recalls.

They put their success down to the fact that they’ve designed an event with themselves in mind. As adventure racers, their careers took them around the world to more than 70 of the world’s toughest events, so they well understand the appeal of races where contenders pit their wits and bodies against the elements.

“What I miss most is putting ourselves in situations like [the seven-day, eight-discipline] Raid Gauloises,” Skott says. “Moving for 22 hours, sleeping two hours a night in a pitch-black unknown jungle, hearing noises, and trying to navigate to find your way to the next checkpoint. Suffering from sleep deprivation and hunger, but having to keep your head together to work as a team.”

“It was like living all the emotions of a lifetime in just one week,” says Lemmel. “Mats often speaks about how life as we know it disappears during the race because you change from being part of the modern world into being part of the world that is on your map, nothing else matters.”

“When others look at you and think you’re nuts, it’s because they are looking at it from their perspective. It’s crazy for me that people drive around a race track at 200mph, but that’s what they know.”

otilloswimrun.com



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Give Swimrun a try



The Swimmer, London

This monthly half-marathon is a journey from north to south, starting at the natural ponds at Hampstead and finishing at Brockwell Lido, stopping to dip in Parliament Hill Lido and the Serpentine.

theswimmer.org



Loch Gu Loch, Scotland

This Otillo Merit Race makes use of Scotland’s picturesque lochs and tough terrain. This year’s event starts at Loch Ness on 1 October. There are 13 swim sections and 47km of running, finishing up at Fort Augustus Abbey. Keep an eye out for Nessie.

lochguloch.com



Neda el Món, Barcelona

The first Swimrun event in southern Europe, Neda el Món has two starting points – one in Cabrera de Mar and the other in Premià de Mar, with both finishing in Badalona.

There are three race options – 32.8km, 21.4km and 11.9km – so it’s suitable for beginners.

nedaelmon.com