



# Master the ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ Swim

**Sharks:** You may spot seals or sea lions on race morning, but they're just surveying the situation. Rest assured that any bigger sharks are far away. There are smaller species, but they stay 20–30 feet below the surface. "The water is silty and brackish and partly freshwater," Gilseman says. "The gills of the largest sharks don't allow them to come into the area—there's not enough oxygen or salt."

The iconic 1.5-mile swim from Alcatraz Island to shore is a challenge that 2,000 triathletes take on every year during the Escape From Alcatraz Triathlon (June 5, 2011). The frigid waters—typically around 55 degrees—are a result of the 500 miles of Sierra Mountain snowmelt coming into the San Francisco Bay. Not to mention the 5 million gallons of water per second that enter and exit through the Bay's mile-wide inlet under the Golden Gate Bridge, making for strong currents. As the staff head coach for Alcatraz, Eric Gilseman, says, "Alcatraz is like a box of chocolates." And, well, you know the rest.

"The water can look calm and crystal-clear, but you'll get in and all of a sudden

realize, 'Whoa, I'm moving,' and you can't stop," Gilseman says. "If you stop, the water is still pushing you, and probably the direction you don't want to go. You'll have an ice cream headache one second and a warm face the next."

Gilseman, who's done the race every year since 1989, runs a camp called the Escape Academy, where athletes complete the entire course (1.5-mile swim, 18-mile bike, 8-mile run) over a weekend and gain automatic entry into the race. He reminds triathletes that the Bay is a river, "so swim across the river." Keep in mind it's not a straight A to B swim—it's more of an "L" turn. Follow these tips to get the most out of your time in the bay.



To help prepare for the swim and the rest of race day, check out the videos at [Escapefromalcatraztriathlon.com](http://Escapefromalcatraztriathlon.com).

Sighting point #1:  
Fontana  
Apartment  
Towers

Sighting point #2:  
Trees of Fort  
Mason, an old  
Army base

Sighting point #3:  
Three piers of  
Fort Mason

Swimming technique: "Don't go great guns to begin with—just get in and adjusted to the water," Gilsenan says. "Five minutes in, roll on your back and look at Alcatraz and remember you're swimming in the fourth busiest shipping channel in America."

What to wear: A full-length wetsuit and two latex caps work best. "When you cover your ears with a neoprene cap, you lose some of your balance," Gilsenan says. "It may keep your head warm, but after a few minutes it has diminishing returns."

Boat/jump tip: Avoid jumping too deep by performing a lifeguard jump: keep your legs apart and put your arms at your sides 90 degrees, and make a downward snow angel-like motion. 2,000 people have to get off the boat within a matter of minutes, so jump in and get out of the way.

