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Ellie Ross has a shaky start at an urban wakeboarding centre in the middle of London

IT'S FRIDAY morning and I should be in the office, but today, a wire is pulling me across the water of the Royal Victoria Dock in East London. The passengers in the plane that just flew over my head are probably impressed, but my elation at making it to my feet first time lasts ten seconds before I overbalance and plunge into the drink. Welcome to Wakeup Docklands, the city's only wakeboard park.

For four years, everyone from office workers to families have been getting their adrenaline fix here, with two, straight-line cables to choose from. Advanced riders can get big airs using the 'gold cable', which spans 180 metres and features a series of floating obstacles, including kickers, ramps and rails. For beginners and

here. It offers an oasis of calm in the hustle and bustle of city life.'

And, thanks to the unique setup of cables, it's a forgiving place to try the sport. 'Unlike with regular cable parks, here the instructor controls the speed,' Jason says. 'We can slow the cable down, so you're more likely to get up first time and less likely to have a savage wipeout. As you get more confident, we increase the speed.'

Although the precise origins of wakeboarding are unclear, it was surfers who first developed the idea of riding their boards by holding a waterski rope attached to a boat. By the early eighties, special boards were developed and now you can either be pulled behind a boat or hold on to an overhead cable tow like the



Hanging on: Ellie Ross stands up first time
PICTURE: DIDZIS EZERINS

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those wishing to practice flat-water skills (me), there is the 'blue cable', a 160-metre line with no obstacles in the way.

Surrounded by towering flats, the silvery offices of Canary Wharf, the O2 Arena and City Airport, this is the most urban place I've ever tried wakeboarding. But it also offers an escape from city life, as Jason Bergin, a professional watersports coach, explains.

'The sense of space when you're on the water is overwhelming,' he says. 'The water is regularly tested and we also have a beach. People say they feel like they are on holiday

one I'm trying. Standing on the pontoon in a wetsuit and helmet, I face mirror-flat water, ideal for both wakeboarding and stand-up paddle boarding, which the centre also offers. Jason pulls me up using the rope, to simulate the feeling on the water.

'Keep your arms straight and roll forward,' he says. 'Let the rope do the work. When the cable starts to pull, bend your knees for balance and lean back so the front of the board doesn't nosedive and send you over the front.'

Then, I'm crouched in water, board half-submerged, a family of geese swimming to



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my right, anxiously waiting for the cable to take up the slack and haul me across the docks. I'm nervous. Previous attempts have involved painful face-plants and failures to stand up as my arms get yanked out of their sockets. But before I have another second to worry, I'm up and skimming across the water, feeling the wind against my face and screaming like a banshee.

From the pontoon, Jason calls encouragement and tips, gradually increasing the speed as my confidence builds. After a few runs, he asks me to go one-handed to open my upper body, then put weight through my heels to steer the board and create spray. It's a manoeuvre I never

had the guts to try before, but feels thrilling to accomplish. When I fall, it doesn't hurt. And the one time I do risk cartwheeling forwards, Jason anticipates it and decreases the speed.

Swimming with a board attached to your feet is unglamorous - and I'm glad those plane passengers are no longer watching as I splash, wallow and eventually roll myself back to the rope for another go. When my hour is up, I pass the cable back to Jason reluctantly, my thrilling escape from city life over.

Wakeboarding in the heart of London, with no whiplash the following morning? That beats being in the office any day.

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Stuart Hood meets Chloë McCardel – a record-setting open water swimmer who makes the impossible seem like nothing

CHLOË MCCARDEL isn't like other elite swimmers. I say this, because despite collecting an array of trophies and medals, she doesn't always race to win. And despite smashing a number of records, the 30-year-old Australian doesn't always set out to clock the fastest time. So why does the swimming renegade undertake extreme open-water challenges that sometimes involve striking out on a one-way trip to pain and suffering via hypothermia and jellyfish venom?

'Open water swimming is like being set free from a cage,' McCardel tells me. 'When you swim in a pool you go up and down the same black line in the same conditions time after time. When you swim in the ocean, you can plot your own course and you have no idea about the conditions and marine animals you are going to stumble across.'

After swimming competitively in the pool as a youth and experimenting with triathlon and marathon running as an adult, McCardel attempted her first marathon swim in 2007. It's fair to say it was love at first stroke. 'From the moment I finished the race in first place, I wanted to know how far I could push my body and I am still asking that question today,' she smiles. 'Even though I have set the world record for the longest unassisted ocean swim, I still don't believe that mark is my limit.'

Last October in the Bahamas, she swam 124.4km or 77.3 miles, which equates to 4,976 lengths of a 25m pool, or a little more than the distance between York and Newcastle.

'When you really open the floodgates, look at the world and put pins in the map, you begin to think, "How far can I go and what is my potential?"' says McCardel. 'My next big goal is to do a really long swim of around 200km in Asia, but there are a few issues. From a financial point of view, although Australian companies Lo-Chlor Chemicals and The Pool Enclosure Company help me out a lot, I would need a high-profile sponsor to help cover the expenses. And from a logistical point of view, a lot of authorities struggle to understand what I am trying to do. They can't comprehend that all I want to do is get in the water and swim.'



MY CORE TEMPERATURE LOWERED, & I BEGAN INHALING WATER. I ENDED UP BEING IN HOSPITAL FOR TWO DAYS

Until these issues are resolved, McCardel plans to sit around twiddling her thumbs, eating doughnuts and watching Game of Thrones. Yeah, right. In actual fact, the incredible Australian is spending her down time training wannabe marathon swimmers, giving motivational speeches and taking on the English Channel.

'There is no other swim in the world that can compare with the English Channel,' she says. 'The history of that swim and the challenges it presents means it is at the top of every marathon swimmer's bucket list.'

McCardel has previously achieved three single English Channel crossings and attempted four doubles. 'A double crossing involves swimming from England to France and back again,' she reveals. 'I have turned around at the French coast four times, but I have only completed the double twice. In

cold-water swims, hypothermia is a huge challenge and during my 2012 attempt it put me into a semi-conscious state. My core temperature lowered, and I began inhaling water. I ended up being in hospital for two days.'

The fact that McCardel got back in the water after this suggests mental strength is a big part of open-water swimming. And the fact that she kept going despite being stung by more than 15 box jellyfish during her world record swim proves it. 'Unless you can knuckle down and work through the pain, it will overpower you,' she says. 'Because of this, you need an element of grit and mental resilience to succeed as a marathon swimmer.'

But what else do you need? 'You don't have to be young or able to perform at an elite level to achieve incredible things,' says McCardel. 'Recreational athletes are completing amazing goals all the time, and last year a 73-year-old broke the record for being the oldest person to swim the English Channel. By the time I finish, it's possible someone aged 80 or 85 could have made it across.'

And could that someone be McCardel? 'Who knows?' she smiles. 'All I know is that I will still be swimming when I am old and grey.'

For more information, visit chloemccardel.com