

JACK MORPHET

TWO years ago, Lara Solomon would well up at the thought of dunking her head underwater.

But today, the 42-year-old will reach her 365th kilometre of open water swimming in as many days, when she swims the 2.8km from Palm Beach to Whale Beach.

Her feat marks a spectacular tumble-turn from a lifetime gripped by fear of the water.

Scared or stigmatised adults across the state, mostly immigrants, many of whom have never learnt to swim, are taking the plunge and learning the national pastime.

More than two adults drown in Australian waterways for every one child, according to statistics kept by water safety body Austswim.

LESSON PLAN FOR ADULT SWIMMING

Swim teacher Petrina Liyanage:

- Hop in waist-deep and get used to the feeling of the water.
- Wading deeper, blow bubbles through mouth, nose above water.

Last financial year 291 people drowned, of which 219 were aged 25 or older and the average age was 43 years. A total of 29 babies and toddlers drowned and 14 children between 5 and 15.

But, according to swim instructor Petrina Liyanage, teachers need even more patience to teach adults than children.

■ When comfortable with the bubbles, students go even deeper and try to exhale through nose and mouth at once.

■ Float on front and back while holding on to the edge of the pool. As confidence improves, move away from the edge and float with the aid of a kickboard

"I'm teaching people with a lifetime of fear, tackling the water after years of avoiding it," Ms Liyanage said. "Adults tend to overcomplicate swimming, whereas kids get into the water with a lot less fear."

The instructor has taught air hostesses and police officers, whose jobs require a basic mastery of free-style, but said the majority of her

(one of Petrina's students had 10 hour-long sessions just floating).

■ Kicking and breathing at edge.

■ Laps across the shallow end with a kickboard.

■ Treading water at deep end with a pool noodle. Then it depends on the student's dream: just having fun, or going for gold.

students are people who've always shied away from water.

"Some people don't even tell their immediate family or kids that they can't swim because they're ashamed or they feel of inadequate they don't know a basic skill people are expected to have in Australia."

Childhood holidays spent at icy British beaches Eastbourne and

Bournemouth had put Ms Solomon off the ocean forever.

Even at the beach in the UK you didn't swim so much as you went for a splash because it was so cold," she said. After three teary weeks in a pool, Ms Solomon mustered the courage to string together seven strokes of ocean swimming.

Now she uses a well-known rip at Manly to whisk her behind breaking waves, where she sets off for kilometres at a time.

Ms Solomon pledged the final few kilometres as part of Australia Swims, a campaign by Optus and Swimming Australia to encourage all Aussies to collectively swim the 35,877 kilometres it would take to circumnavigate Australia.

Go to <https://australiaswims.com.au/> for details.