

19-Year-Old American Maya Merhige Swims Strait of Gibraltar, Completing Her Sixth Oceans Seven Crossing

Teen marathon swimmer aims to be youngest swimmer in the world to complete Oceans Seven while raising funds for cancer research through Swim Across America

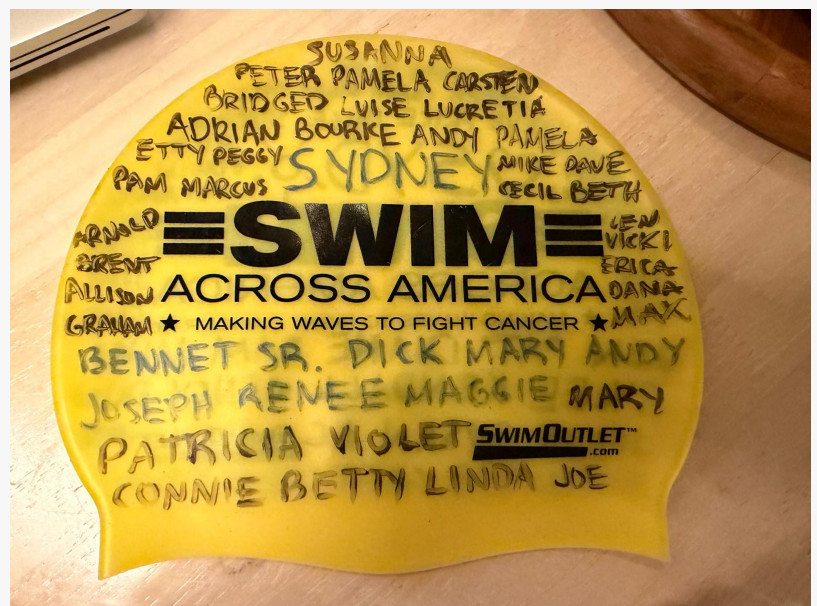
TARIFA, PROVINCE OF CÁDIZ, SPAIN, August 13, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ --

Teen marathon swimmer [Maya Merhige](#) of Berkeley, California, a rising sophomore at Georgetown University, successfully swam the Strait of Gibraltar from Spain to Morocco on Tuesday, August 11, completing the sixth of the seven legendary channel crossings that make up the Oceans Seven. Maya completed the crossing in 3 hours, 49 minutes and 49 seconds. The Strait of Gibraltar separates Europe from Africa and connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean

Sea. At its narrowest, the crossing is approximately 14.4 kilometers (8.947 miles), although tides and currents typically require swimmers to cover a considerably longer route. Known for abundant marine life and busy shipping traffic, the Strait also presents strong currents, unpredictable winds and strict maritime requirements. Crossings are overseen and certified by the Strait of Gibraltar Swimming Association (ACNEG), with only two or three crossings permitted each year.

With Gibraltar marking Maya's sixth successful Oceans Seven crossing in just five years, her goal of becoming the youngest person in the world to complete the challenge is within reach. Only 52 swimmers worldwide have completed the Oceans Seven.

Considered the aquatic equivalent of mountaineering's Seven Summits, the Oceans Seven



Marathon swimmer Maya Merhige writes the names of those fighting cancer or those who have been lost to the disease on her swim cap before her marathon swims. She swims to raise funds for cancer research with Swim Across America.

requires swimmers to complete seven of the world's best-known ocean channel crossings. Maya's journey began at 14 with the 32.3-kilometer (20-mile) Catalina Channel in 2021, when she became the youngest woman to complete the crossing. In 2023, at 15, she swam the 42-kilometer (26-mile) Kaiwi, or Molokai Channel, becoming its youngest swimmer. At 16 in 2024, she completed the 33-kilometer (20.5-mile) English Channel. In 2025, at 17, she completed the 22.5-kilometer (14-mile) Cook Strait in New Zealand, enduring hundreds of jellyfish stings. This past July, at 18, she conquered the grueling 34.5-kilometer (21.4-mile) North Channel from Ireland to Scotland. Now she has completed Gibraltar. Her final challenge is the 19.5-kilometer (12.1-mile) Tsugaru Strait in Japan, which she plans to attempt in 2027.

Maya has also completed the Tahoe Triple Crown, Manhattan's 20 Bridges swim, the Angel Island swim and the Three Rocks swim in San Francisco Bay. Just a week after her 13th birthday, she became the youngest woman to swim the width of Lake Tahoe.

Maya's extraordinary swims, however, have always been about something bigger than records.

Maya swims to make waves to fight cancer through [Swim Across America](#), the nonprofit she first joined at

age 9 in San Francisco to honor a family friend and three-time cancer survivor and remember another family friend who passed of brain cancer at age 12. Throughout the past decade, she has raised more than \$170,000 for cancer research and carried the names of friends and family members affected by cancer on her swim cap during her marathon swims. This summer alone,

she has raised more than \$20,000 toward her \$45,000 goal, with fundraising continuing throughout her swims.

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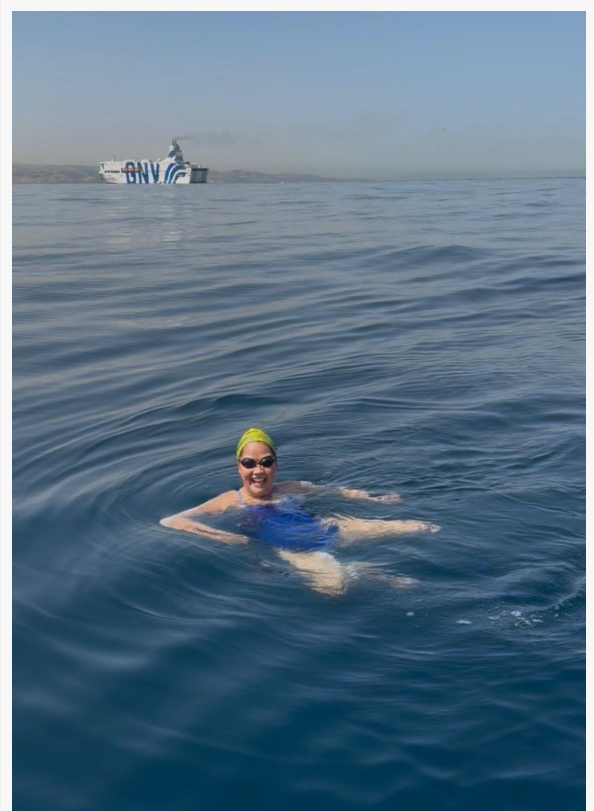
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Maya Merhige

“Every time I get in the water, I am carrying others with me who have had a far more challenging journey than I'm undertaking,” Maya noted. “I am swimming for those whose names are on my cap, for families who need hope and for the research that can lead to better treatments.”

With the Strait of Gibraltar swim, Maya was also swimming

in memory of Sydney Towle, the 26-year-old social media content creator who died August 5 after a nearly three-year battle with metastatic cholangiocarcinoma, a rare and aggressive bile



Maya Merhige is a 19-year-old marathon swimmer from California who is working towards becoming the youngest swimmer in the world to complete the Oceans Seven Swims. This week she completed her sixth swim, the Strait of Gibraltar.

duct cancer. Diagnosed at 23, Sydney became known to more than 1.2 million TikTok followers for candidly sharing her experiences with cancer and treatment as a young adult.

Before the crossing, Maya shared Sydney's story on her @chasing_channels Instagram account and thanked Sydney's brother, Austin Towle, for allowing her to honor his sister through the swim. Sydney's story reinforced Maya's commitment to raising funds and awareness for cancer research that can lead to new therapies and more options for patients.

Unlike many of Maya's previous solo channel swims, Gibraltar is frequently organized with swimmers of comparable speed crossing together. Maya was paired with Carles of Spain and Dan of the United Kingdom, with a simple goal: start together, finish together and have fun. Sunny skies and crystal-clear blue water provided perfect conditions.

The swim was also a family affair. Maya's mother, Liz Tung, joined her crew boat for the first time since the Molokai Channel crossing three years ago. Her father, Chris Merhige, once again served as the "calm force" behind the operation, while her younger sister, Lucy, joined an escort boat for the first time.

Last month's North Channel swim, known as the toughest Oceans Seven crossing, took Maya 12 hours, 19 minutes and 37 seconds to cover 34.5 kilometers from Ireland to Scotland. The swim came exactly one year after Maya underwent major surgery following health challenges stemming from the discovery of a benign pancreatic tumor after a 2023 ski accident.

Those experiences have given Maya a deeper appreciation for what patients and families endure during serious health crises and strengthened her commitment to using swimming to help others.

"Swimming for me is easy compared to what those with cancer have to go through," noted Maya. "If I can help raise funds that help fund critical cancer research through Swim Across America, and help find more and better cures through swimming, I'm going to do just that."

Funds raised by Maya through Swim Across America directly support pediatric cancer research and patient care at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland Research Institute and the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital San Francisco Survivors of Childhood Cancer Program.

Nationally, Swim Across America has raised more than \$150 million for cancer research since its founding in 1987. The nonprofit has supported research and clinical trials of immunotherapy treatments that have led to FDA approval for numerous types of cancer and supports more than 60 cancer research projects annually at leading cancer institutions across the country.

To support Maya's Oceans Seven journey and fundraising efforts for cancer research through Swim Across America, visit swimacrossamerica.org/maya.

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