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XPD 3rd Edition Reef Rainforest and Outback

By Delyth Lloyd

XPD 3rd Edition Course - Race at a glance

Location - Whitsunday Coast
 Date - August 2007
 Distance - approx 800km
 Winners - Orionhealth.com
 Winners time - 5 days 7 hours 16 minutes
 Last Team - Home Brew
 Last Time - 9 days 5 hours 50 minutes
 Disciplines - trek, mountain bike, kayak, snorkel, sail, navigation
 Started - 56 teams
 Finished - 35 teams
 Unranked Finish - 17 teams
 Did Not Finish - 4 teams

www.xpd.com.au

XPD drew teams worldwide to the iconic Whitsunday Coast for an adventure racing epic; 10 days, 800km, non-stop, bike, kayak, snorkel, run, trek. For 56 teams of four people this journey was the culmination of months of logistical, physical and mental preparation. Being an adventure race, the only thing known to competitors before the race was the location of the start line, where maps and course notes were distributed 24 hours before the start. Friends, family and colleagues were all more than familiar with what "XPD" meant for them as athletes gathered in Airlie Beach to begin the adventure of a lifetime, liberated into like company at last.

At the 'safety' briefing, organisers forewarned of the dangers on course (snakes, crocodiles, wild pigs, kangaroos, wallabies, cattle, wild horses, the Queensland sun, dehydration, hypothermia, poisonous vegetation to name just a few) leaving international teams somewhat disconcerted even before the local competitors issued a warning about the drop bear

population. Through the rest of the announcements we were distracted by the first challenge, surreptitiously sketching sail designs using "three broomsticks a tarpaulin and as much sticky tape and string as you like".

For the next 24 hours competitors hurried clumsily around, engrossed in preparation as the logistical miracle of organising 224 bike boxes, 280 one hundred litre gear trunks, 112 boat sails, and paddles, unfolded. All that mattered was how much stuff you could jigsaw into a bike box and have it still weigh in under 25kg, and mind boggling conundrums like 'we have a 50 hour leg of an undisclosed discipline probably around Day Six, so what should we put in trunk D?' Perversely having the race handbook in our possession did not bring the predicted peace of mind as the course was released in three stages. We only had part one.

In the glimmering blue waters of the Whitsunday passage the seemingly impossible task of getting excited adventure racers to line up straight gave way to the starter's horn. Brimming with anticipation of the expedition just begun, our promises of a conservative pace were forgotten, but only briefly; a token effort sprint for position would not be maintained for long on this 10-day journey. As idyllic as the postcards which lure the tourists here, our magnificent surroundings were a treat that we struggled to comprehend in the context of racing. Spectacular picture postcard beaches could be just a parking place for the hike to a ridge-top checkpoint were it not for our occasional and intentional reality checks.

Unaccustomed to such a long event, we struggled mentally in those early stages with the necessity of conservative pacing, and it challenged us in a way we had not expected. Travelling at an almost casual pace felt incongruous with the notion of racing, but entirely fitting with the dazzling scenery. Running along narrow grass fringed path we could have been anywhere, until a panoramic view of the Whitsunday passage intruded on our focus and dared us to stop and take a photograph. Under the strain of heavy packs which were to become part of us over the ensuing week, the sheer beauty of the surrounds could not but inspire.

We descended from the ridges in pursuit of reef checkpoints. Half of our team concentrated on snorkelling as efficiently as possible between checkpoints, allowing the swimmers amongst us to be tempted on a longer route down amongst the intriguing coral crevasses in pursuit of reef life. Amongst the dazzling array of coral textures there was a big blue wrasse (with very large eyes), black and white patched damsel fish, and another with intriguing giraffe-like camouflage. The mind boggled at the variety, colours shapes and sizes. Drifting in and out of race mode we were jolted back to reality every few minutes to check our direction, do a quick team head count, and refocus on checkpoint collection.

Dry land was a relief for a field of aching arms, blistered fingers and pruned feet. Dispensing of sodden clothes, boats and paddles, competitors retrieved boxes and transition became a mass of cold tired people assembling bikes. Food was a high priority. We feasted on supplies stashed in amongst the trunk of wet clothes. Stale fruit bread never tasted so good! Packing up hurriedly for departure we checked up on each other, and gathered ourselves mentally for a long ride in to the dry grassy hinterland far away from the reef. Our sunburnt bodies were chased out of town by a thunderstorm. Though it was dark, the country was mercifully lit up by an enormous, golden moon. Our team of four travelled close together, making small talk and joking to stay awake. Not for the last time nature's obstructions intruded on our journey. Paths eroded to nothing, a tree stump swiped one of our derailleurs reminding

us acutely of our fragility in this remote country. Misfortune could end our race at any second, but luckily spared us this time.

At 3am on day three strange things started happening to us. It was dark cold, and the track off the ridge just wasn't there. We went up and down checking every plausible option until we disagreed about how many times we had been this way or that. Eventually we surrendered to the darkness and we bedded down for 2 hours of horizontal shivering.

Spooning up with the boys was a bit weird at first, but it became a comfortable necessity as it allowed for elbowing the one who was snoring whilst benefiting from combined body heat. Travelling twenty-two hours a day, eating and drinking every 15 minutes when the watch beeped, not sleeping and smelling so bad you could smell yourself, soon became normal. Dirt on your face was only strange if you didn't have any, sharing half eaten morsels of food was polite, and any unease about sharing water bottles was long gone. By Day Four we would un-stick a dusty hunk of tired chocolate from the pocket of a team mate's pack and eat it without reservation (unless you thought you would get into trouble for not sharing it). We were in a place with it's own special set of social rules.

Far from the reef, the sweltering heat of Sonoma's grassy peaks hosted the first orienteering leg. Physically demanding and navigationally unforgiving, those who dared to skimp on water were punished. Water, which was so plentiful yesterday was today the difference between making it, and not. Many teams conceded and returned dry mouthed to transition for re-supply. Traversing off camber slopes, vertical pitches and quad burning descents, even a seemingly tame creek opened up into a spectacular canyon. Tender feet were crushed repeatedly and painfully into every corner of their shoes, causing all manner of strange sideways blisters. Gathered together by a treacherous rocky ascent, Keen Torq'ers did not need to talk. Scrambling to the gnarly summit, we sighted a head torch with relief, realising later that it got no closer and was just a bright star. Chocolate coffee beans at the top were our reward as we clipped the final checkpoint and set a bearing back to transition.

Leaving civilisation by moonlight we pedalled through a sleeping township, and then were alone again. At least we hoped we were as we stopped for 2 hours shut-eye on the riverbank, impervious to the crocodile warning signs.

By this stage all teams were carrying an array of minor ailments, and many teams suffered a multitude of patience crushing difficulties including punctures - one team claim 36 (fixed with super glue when repair supplies at the local store were exhausted), and a broken seat creatively welded at a farmer's shed. Some people continued even through the torture of broken bones. It's incredible what people can endure when adversity taunts them.

The race continued with a 145km ride in the uncompromising outback: Long horizons, sparse harsh vegetation, and plains of nothing. Short sighted, we saw only the path immediately ahead, funnelled into the distance by a sparse sprinkling of vegetation. This only came to our attention when we tried to find a hospitable patch to rest upon under shade of a slight tree. Intrigued by the barren nothingness surrounding us, we rode in formation trying to blast our way as fast as possible out of that desolate place. Off track you could get lost for years and no one would ever find you. No one dared ask how far to go. Through the physical and mental fatigue came a perverse feeling of satisfaction. We did a good job, literally riding the red line. Even at the time we relished

the harsh beauty of the experience.

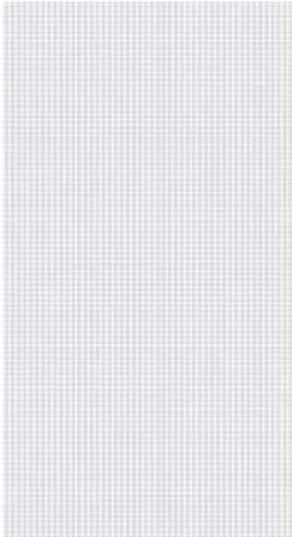
The outback eventually gave way to 'real roads' at Eungella dam, screened from the planes by a monstrous ridge, the ascent of which provided a spectacular view of the plains over which we had travelled. With the sun burning through our jerseys, and eyes stinging from sweat, we rode, pushed and shoved our bikes up that rudely steep rocky ridge. Miraculously the climb was worth it, having travelled as far as the eye can see during our long intimate day in the outback.

Approaching mid-camp town, road signs came in to view; relics from the other world that felt welcome but a little strange. The remote community hall was much more used to junior basketball than hosting the field of adventure racers that now streamed through. Here we had our six hours compulsory stop. We longed for six hours of sleep but there was too much to do so we made do with three in amongst cleaning and fixing bikes, charging lights, and packing food, water and clothing. New maps were released for the course's daunting final stages "so Del, how do you fancy going to live in the forest for a week - that's how long this last trek is going to take!"

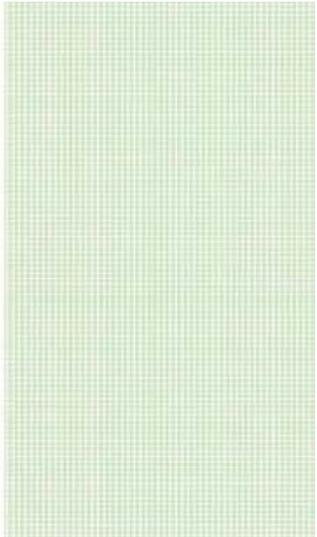
Eating on the move as we exited mid-camp at 1am on foot, it was raining as we traversed down into the dense steamy rainforest. It certainly smelled like rainforest though our head torches lit up only the path ahead, and we were all too tired to attend to anything but the bare necessity of moving forwards. Pigs Might Fly were perhaps lucky to have their alertness peaked by a blacksnake, but throughout the journey wildlife was no joking matter. Adrenalin Adventure TerraX were swiped off their bikes by kangaroos; Vignette got chased through the woods by a family of wild pigs and the French Teams had a close call with a charging bull (this was after they learned the difference between 'close the gate' and 'no entry' which caused them substantial confusion and some detours early on).

Queensland has a lot of sugar cane, and no report could be complete without acknowledging what a curious world it is. Perhaps heightened by the nature of our journey through it's country, the sugar industry seemed to us an eerie and curious human pursuit. The processing factory was ablaze with floodlights and a hive of activity as we kayaked past at 11pm. Then we rode all night alongside the perfectly flat fields of homogenous cane. Singing, joking and telling stories to stay awake as the night passed, we were so acutely in tune with each other (not literally) that we fondly remember every minute of what seemed like a strange dream, the whole scene enclosed in a rail network which runs all night.

At dawn on Day Six we set off on the final 80km trek past a "steep climb" warning sign, which was no understatement. The forest vegetation became increasingly dense and verdant. As if tormenting us it completely concealed the first checkpoint and kept us looking for ages. A poor route choice then took us to an enclave of thick rainforest, an obstacle course of vines which grabbed at our packs and tripped us up. The creeks were steep sided and full of debris. We could have spent all night stumbling around in its dark decomposing floor and having had just a brief encounter with proper rainforest, we retreated back to the track. Thankfully the majority of the terrain was more accepting of our presence, though none of the checkpoints would be gained without due labour. Some teams were out on the trek unseen for 36 hours in the difficult terrain, burdened by heavy packs carrying up to two days of food and supplies. Bearing raw and swollen feet, some people emerged from the trek in just their socks.



After five days the leaders rode in to the finish. First OrionHealth.com (NZ), then Melbourne team Mexican Stingers Carboshotz and Norsewear (NZ). Over the ensuing days, teams stumbled over the finish line in Airlie Beach to the warm welcome of champagne, ice cream and pizza on the finishers couch. Each team brought home their own stories, no two teams having had the same journey. And perhaps one of the most fascinating and special things about XPD is that many teams were not there for the race, but the expedition (some even called it a vacation) and the privilege of living life on the move, surrounded by best mates in the outdoors. It took up to 10 days for everyone to make it back. Certainly XPD's 3rd edition was a flood of intriguing and magnificent experiences with all the ups, downs and diversity that not only thrilled racers at the time but also resonated deeply with what AR is all about. The country challenged and thrilled us, true colours were unveiled, and the bonds formed will last a lifetime.



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