

X-RRA

EXPEDITION

T E D



On a remote hillside in Tropical Far North Queensland, no one can hear you scream. Except, perhaps, for fellow competitors in the XPD, Australia's last remaining expedition-length adventure race. And they're all screaming for mercy too. **STORY** Pat Kinsella **IMAGES:** James Pitman

AS SHANE SLIPS AND PLUNGES up to his chin into the raven-black water of the river, a look of pure panic flashes in his eyes. He bobs back out of the water as though his body was made of cork and swears impressively in a broad Kiwi brogue.

"The bloody mup!" he splutters. What? Oh right...yeah, the bloody map! We've only got one, and it's tucked into the front of his dripping PFD. It's wrapped in plastic, but if water gets in and ruins it we'll be left up a creek, with two paddles and no idea where to get out.

We are definitely the only people currently on this super remote section of the Walsh River in Far North Queensland. We've seen not a soul since we started paddling, some 40-odd hours earlier, and the flimsy paper map is the only thing that can tell us where the pull-out is amongst this expanse of utter wilderness.

It's dark and from all around eerie red eyes leer at us from the banks. The eyes belong to crocodiles, and we're trespassing on their turf.

Daytime temperatures have been soaring to well over 40°C, and the water level in the Walsh is a low as a croc's goolies, which means there's as almost much pushing and dragging our boat over super slippery river rocks as there is paddling. Our legs are battered and bleeding, we're thoroughly knackered, and the river has just disappeared right in front of us.

I shouldn't be feeling sorry for myself though. I'm doing this ridiculously soft compared to everyone who has come down this river before me over the last 48 hours.

THREE STAGES AHEAD OF US, AN EPIC BATTLE is unfolding between Australia and New Zealand under the rainforest canopy of the Tableland just outside Cairns. The combatants are two elite adventure-racing teams, Orion Adventure (NZ) and Blackheart, and the prize is the much-coveted right to add 'XPD Winner' to their adventure CV.

These guys (and girls – both teams are mixed) pulled themselves out of the Walsh days ago. At the last transition point – after more than five days of racing over nearly 700km, during the toughest adventure race anyone can remember – only 14 minutes separated them. The scene is set for a ding-dong dash for the finish line, but monitoring the live tracking program on his computer screen back at Event HQ, race director Craig Bycroft watches and wonders as both teams wander around in circles in the bush: has he set a course that will beat even the best?

"This year's XPD was certainly more adventurous and remote than past years," he tells me. "There were less legs, but each one was longer, and they passed through totally uncharted territory for most of the race. The navigation was testing."

XPD is now Australasia's only expedition-length adventure race. Craig doesn't think that multiday races are the only form of adventure racing worth doing, but he does rate them as the pinnacle of AR: "The original format and the inspiration of the sport – they are the *piece de resistance* of an adventure racer's career."

Featuring many stages and disciplines (mountain biking, paddling, hiking, rafting, snorkelling, wheelbarrow pushing...you name it), the 5- to 10-day race takes place in a different location every 18 months or so. It takes Craig and his partner Louise the best part of two years to plan each one.

A fully fledged member of the AR World Series, 2010 saw the fifth incarnation of the XPD, which has become universally regarded as a world-class race. So much so, in fact, that next year's event, to be held in Tasmania in November, will actually take the form of the AR World Championships. That's right, the World Cup of adventure racing is coming to Australian shores.

But that's all in the future. First we've got to survive the 2010 event. I'm only here to cover it, but conditions have been tough – even by XPD standards – and with competitors falling like flies, I've joined the one-man remnants of a visiting Kiwi team after one of their number was hospitalised with severe dehydration and the other two elected to stay with their stricken comrade. And so, suddenly, I'm up to my guts in this 70km paddle leg with Shane. Our team's name? The Crocodile Hunters.

AFTER A RELATIVELY CRUISEY DAY-AND-A-HALF of ocean paddling, snorkelling, white water rafting on the Tully, hiking and biking, things started to get serious for the teams taking part in XPD 2010 when they set off on the 47km hike through the Misty Mountains on day two.

The jungle nasties of the tropics raised their ugly heads early here, when the frontrunners were suddenly and savagely attacked by the heinous stinging tree – reputedly the most painfully venomous plant in the world. This ferocious form of thuggish flora penetrates the flesh with hollow silica-tipped hairs, causing excruciating pain, sometimes for months.

The thorns of the wait-a-while vine got busy too, and a member of team 39, the Muppets, woke up from a recovery doze to find a leech in their mouth. By the end of the stage, people are describing scenes reminiscent of a battlefield hospital in a theatre of war.

"We have just arrived at Ravenshoe and it resembles a Mash unit," reports Geoff Hunt (AR World Series Director). "Some of the toughest men in adventure racing are being reduced to near tears by the pain from the stinging tree. The treatment can be even worse – hydrochloric acid applied to the affected areas – in some cases the entire legs, the arms, the hands...I do what I can...tea, a hand to hold, removing socks and leeches. The floor is covered in patches of blood."

"The sound of the screams coming out of the makeshift hospital in Ravenshoe will stay in my mind for a while," says Blackheart team member Rob Preston, a veteran adventure racer and winner of the 2008 XPD.

Indeed, Blackheart thought the sound of people receiving treatment was so disturbing, they began the 130km mountain bike leg over Mt Misery without stopping for medical attention. Instead they had their wounds looked at during the compulsory six-hour stop at Mid Camp in Dimbulah, where, according to team captain Kim's comments on the team blog, the boys "screamed like little girls".

It wasn't all bad though. "Seeing [teammate] Damon crying as he got his legs waxed after the treatment was probably a highlight of the race for me," Rob tells me later. Nice.

The stage following Mid Camp featured a challenge that Geoff Hunt for one thinks was a first in the history of adventure racing: a 20km wheelbarrow push. While some race directors throw novelty stages into their events for fun, Craig is not a man for nonsensical frivolity.

This leg was inspired by the history of the region, which experienced a gold rush back in 1873. When hopeful gold diggers rocked up here looking to get lucky, the only way they could transport their picks and possessions inland to the banks of the Walsh River, was by pushing the whole lot along in a wheelbarrow. Now racers were going to have to get their gear and their inflatable Sevylor kayaks to the same river in the same way.

In the 6AM half-light of a tropical Queensland morning, we carry the boat across sand to the tinkling water, watched by the silvery stare of hundreds of spiders as their eyes reflect the beam from our headtorches. Before Shane had agreed to take me on board for this stage, he wanted to know one thing: "How's your nav?" he'd asked. "Eh, not too bad..."





I lied. "Good – because I'm certainly not the team navigator." Oh, well, I thought. We're paddling down a river. How lost can we get?

As it turns out, this stage threw up some navigational problems that nearly defeated the country's very best. Rob – Blackheart's navigator, who found out the day he finished the XPD that he'd been selected to represent Australia in the World Orienteering Championships later this year – later confessed that he'd suffered a double stuff up while looking for the first checkpoint on the paddle. First he'd missed the checkpoint (CP), and then he couldn't find the boats again. Worse still, while wandering around lost in the woods, they'd bumped into their first-place rivals, Orion Adventure.

We have no such worries. There is no one behind us at all. We're effectively the course sweepers, and have agreed to take down the checkpoint flags for Craig on our way through. So there's no pressure, but then there is no cavalry to come in and save the day if something goes horribly wrong, either. It's just us and the utter wilderness.

The only way to travel this section of the Walsh at this time of year is in an inflatable kayak. Judging by the flotsam decorating the high branches of the canopy, this river can obviously flow with the best of them during the wet, but rainfall is a distant memory during our descent. We later learn that the water had dropped by a foot since the lead teams had gone through.

Consequently, in-between waterholes, there are long stretches where we have to drag and pull the kayak across thinly covered rapids, flapping around on ankle-busting river rocks that are coated in super slippery slime.

Initially – scared of getting a puncture – we treat the boat like a princess, but after hitting the hundredth rapid the tenderness evaporates and we drag her over rocks and through trees with complete abandon. It proves one thing: these inflatable Sevylor kayaks, while a complete bitch to steer, are tough little buggers, with skin as thick as an elephant's arse.

The heat during the day is searing and it's a pleasure to jump into the water to get some relief, but when dusk descends, there are more compelling reasons to stay in the boat.

Although under no pressure, we stick to a race strategy and continue into the night. As darkness envelops us and we flick on our headtorches, it's not just the spiders' eyes that stare back at us from the bank. Our first croc encounter seems to startle both parties equally. Paddling along, immersed in silent thought, I suddenly hear Shane exclaim:



"Shiiiiit – that's a lot bigger than I was expecting!"

An almighty kerfuffle erupts on the left bank beside us as a six-foot real-life dinosaur plops into the water. I have to agree. That was a big one. Just then Shane bobs up into the air in front of me – we've hit a rock. Reluctantly we lower ourselves into the waist-deep water to heave the boat free again.

And so the evening continues – paddle, pull, paddle, push – with red eyes peering at us from the bush all the while. What starts off quite menacing soon become slightly comical – reminding me of a jungle scene from a kids' cartoon.

These are harmless freshwater crocs, as we all know. Although later I read that one racer had to leap back into their boat after being snapped at during a night-time rapid crossing.

BY THE SECOND DAY, after a couple hours of sleep, we settle into an established paddling rhythm.

The canopy regularly closes in over our heads, and some of the webs that we pass beneath look big enough to catch the sea eagles that pass overhead. Brushing the branches, we're often boarded by stowaway spiders.

Increasingly the river spreads itself thinly between the trunks of the trees. On a couple of occasions we lose it altogether, and have to go hunting through the forest for the sound of running water.

By nightfall, figuring that we're only a couple of kilometres from the pull-out, we decide to continue into the night. Things soon become very interesting, however, as we pass through some fast moving sections in utter darkness. Branches come jabbing out of the darkness several times, coming perilously close to poking my eye clean out.

Following the sound of running water to remain on course we round a tight bend where the gurgle abruptly turns into a growl and the boat is suddenly sucked under a semi-submerged fallen tree. Our comfort zone is instantly shattered and we're thrust right into dangertown.

Bailing out of the boat, we lose control of the situation completely as the current snatches the kayak from our hands and tears it right under the tree. For a few seconds blind panic ensues and we come close to losing everything to the white water melee.

Eventually, I manage to scramble over the tree and recapture the boat as Shane recovers our gear.

FROM THE TOP: long grass, nasty beasties; looks easy on paper; into the jungle; deep breath, the check point is down there somewhere; rafting the Tully; Outward Bound push on; Team Macpac Girls on Top roll with it.

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Assessing the situation on the other side, we discover a slight problem. We've lost Shane's paddle. It's black, and it has been carried off into the inky water below.

About to call it a night, I scout around for some flat land to put the tent up as Shane searches some eddies downstream. Against all odds he finds the prodigal paddle in one of them. Sod it, we decide, let's get this done and dusted.

Shane completes his faultless feat of navigation by finding the pull-out without any problems. There's no one there, but we haven't missed them by long – the fires where teams have dried themselves off before beginning the hike to Mt Mulligan are still warm.

As we deflate the kayak, Shane reveals the real reason for the panicked look in his eye when he fell in the deep water way back, and it has little to do with keeping the bloody mup dry. "I didn't want to worry you mate," he confesses. "But I can't swim."



THE HIKE STAGE FOLLOWING THE PADDLE was, by all accounts, brutal. From the banks of the Walsh, teams had to trek 60km through 'tiger country' to Mt Mulligan – an iconic lump sometimes known as the Ayers Rock of the North.

In the midst of a million acres of scrub, where station owners use helicopters to round up stock, it's tough enough to find the settlement at Mt Mulligan in a car. Out on the course the navigation was heartbreaking. After carrying a millbank filter around in the army for 12 years, Owen George from Townsville Adventure Racing had to use it for the first time in his life during this stage, to drink from cattle-polluted mudholes. He was lucky. I also heard tales of teams licking the moisture from the leaves of plants and even resorting to drinking their own urine.

As the teams trickle into Mt Mulligan, so do some extraordinary stories. Rachel Ockleford from another Kiwi crew, Team Osprey Packs / nitelights.co.nz, had a very close call after falling 10 metres down a waterfall in the dark, landing on a ledge that prevented her from plummeting another 60 metres. Rachel had been in wars already, having suffered a couple of black eyes and a gashed nose during the white water rafting stage on day one.

Later, after the teams have endured a further marathon 130km mountain bike ride, I get to join Rachel and Team Osprey Packs for the last paddling leg across Lake Tinaroo. They're a man down, and I hop on a kayak with Mark Hearfield so they can avoid cramming three in one boat. During the paddle, Mark tells me about how they'd taken a power nap during the mountain bike stage and had woken up surrounded by guards and dogs – inadvertently they'd strayed into the grounds of a prison.

This paddle is simple compared to the river, even in the pitch dark. After three hours we reach the far side, where the teams who are still able to continue huddle around fires and prepare themselves mentally for the last stage: a trek through the Tableland to the finish line at Cairns.

This year's XPD, by common consensus – from the elites through to those newly baptised in expedition-length adventure racing – is the toughest on record. Only 24 teams are still standing from a starting line up of 47, and several of those are missing team members. A few more throw in the towel before the last stage, and I ferry some broken bodies back to Cairns.

Incredibly, even while they nurse wounds and exchange horror stories, my passengers chat about what they're going to do differently next time round. It seems as though the harder the race is, the more people dig it. At least in retrospect.

"Hard and challenging is good," agrees Craig. "Most teams that don't finish, return and use their first experience to complete the race and sit in Finishers' Lounge next time."

The pull of that Finishers' Lounge drags

ABOVE: A novice crocodile hunter pushes on through the night; Shane takes a bearing. LEFT, FROM TOP: that's got to hurt – getting treated for stinging tree wounds; a river runs through it... occasionally; Team Blackheart marching home to victory.

many a team through the last hike, but the local fauna continues to stick the boot in.

"Zoe got a leech in her eye during the final trek leg," Debbie Chambers, captain of the all-female Macpac Girls on Top team, tells me after the race. "Luckily we were with some other teams and they helped her get it out. They had to wait until it consumed enough blood before they could get a good grip on it though. It was a bit freaky."

The freaky creature factor had been a talking point since the start. In her post race report, Fleur Pawsey from team Orion Adventure wrote: "I'm used to New Zealand race briefings – thanks to the sponsors, an outline of the course, a weather forecast, and a safety warning: stay on the left hand side of the road. The XPD briefing was a little different. There were just a few things we'd need to watch out for and know how to react to: crocodiles, jellyfish, snakes, spiders, stinging tree, spear grass, sea snakes, sharks, dingoes, leeches, dehydration, dodgy water, big birds that charge (cassowaries), wild horses, wait-a-while vines, feral cattle... Oh, and just like in NZ, we had to keep to the left of the road. But cars weren't the problem – in Australia they have road trains."

In the end, Fleur's team was indeed brought undone by beasties, and cruelly it was right at the death of the race, when captain Brent was left unable to walk another step by severe swelling in his ankle caused by an infected leech bite. This ended the enthralling duel that had pushed the lead teams all through the race, and left the way clear for Blackhearts to take out a consecutive XPD victory.

Blackhearts cross the finish line in the evening of day seven at 20.55. They're the only team to finish Cairns XPD 2010 within a week. It was a well deserved win for a well organised team, and one that will take pride of place on their mental mantelpieces.

"This year's XPD win was much more satisfying for the team than our 2008 win in Thredbo," explains Rob. "The quality of competition in Cairns was truly world class, with many strong overseas teams including 2008 World Champions Orion Adventure. Since 2008 we have continued to show we are the best Australian team, but now we have proven we have the ability to compete with the best in the world."

A statement of intent for the 2010 Adventure Racing World Championships (which will be held in Spain in September–October) if ever there was one. First though, they have to get there. Blackheart are lacking a major sponsor at present and if they don't score one soon, Australia may have to wait until the ARWC lands here, in 2011 before our most tried and tested team can prove themselves on the World Stage.

For more: xpd.com.au. To check out plans for the Adventure Racing World Championships 2011: arwc2011.com. Fancy sponsoring Blackheart? teambblackheart.com.

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