

whoanellie



stories about girls who play outside

## GIRLS' OWN MISADVENTURE



*Salami, spooning and social media ; it's the little things that get you through  
Australia's toughest adventure race.*

By Emma Francis

“Smile,” sings teammate Jan, as she whips out her trusty Lumina in the morning, four degrees, and we’ve been lost in the Paluma about 20 hours. I’ve had four fitful hours’ sleep in nearly ten days. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry, so I do both. I try to wear a semblance of serene, just as I’ve wrestled the dastardly rain into submission for the better part of a day, but fail miserably. This is not my most photogenic – I look like I’ve swallowed a lemon. I’m an adventure racer’s sock simultaneously.

Ten days from now, this photo will appear in the Facebook feeds of adventure racing athletes worldwide, thanks to Jan’s love affair with the medium. I’ll cringe with embarrassment, but quietly be grateful for her unwavering commitment to candidly document each sublime and ridiculous moment.

After all, if four female adventure racers shit in the rainforest, and it isn’t on Facebook, did it really happen?

This is one of the many existential questions I find myself pondering one week out from my first crack at Australia’s toughest expedition adventure race, the six-to-nine-day-depending-on-how-lost-you-get, XPD. As I frantically scour Wiggle.com for the last-minute essentials I never knew were essential (tip: whatever your budget is for an expedition race, double it), I keep clicking back to Facebook for the running commentary.

Product placement, selfies and hashtags abound. In the long, drawn-out lead up to this race (indeed, the preparation burns more mental calories than the actual event) it seems everyone has a personal brand to push or sponsor to sell, and my team is no different. We’ve been fortunate enough to secure an eleventh-hour sponsor in Inov8 Australia, and while I’m very grateful for the support and recognition, I’m somewhat ambivalent about tooting my own horn as a ‘sponsored’ athlete. After all, who the hell am I?

Welcome to adventure racing in the Social Media Age. With few frontiers left to conquer, or limits of human endurance to test, it sometimes feels like the achievement itself is less important than the marketing opportunity. What was once the domain of the exceptional is now fair game for every moderately fit

Follow

Follow

“whoanellie”

Get every new post delivered to your Inbox.

Build a website with  
WordPress.com



weekend warrior with a Twitter handle, smart-phone and suitable back-story. So now, instead of focusing on the task at hand - 700 kilometres of paddling, trekking and mountain-biking through Queensland's Dry Tropics, all while reading a map - I am warily crafting my own back-story for a magazine profile, and wondering how to tread that fine line between self-promotion and sell-out. Not for the first time, I am also considering closing my Facebook account and being done with the whole uncomfortable dance. After all, didn't I sign up for nine days in the bush to get away from all this nonsense?

Quit Facebook? Now that really would land me in the wilderness.

If you think I'm cynical, you'd be right. But, to be fair, I get it. I get that it's empowering and inspiring for ordinary people to read about other ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Just don't use the words 'inspiring' and 'empowering' within my earshot, and we'll get along fine.



L-R: Deanna, Emma, Clare & Jan.

And if it's empowering and inspiring you're after, then I guess our team, Kiss My Sweet Inov8s, has it in spades. We've got more back-story than you could stuff into Kim Kardashian's knickers. First we have Deanna Blegg, who, as an

adventure racing legend turned obstacle racing world champ, needs no introduction. Deanna is, in large part, the reason I've signed up in the first place. XPD has been little more than a faint blip on my race radar since I started this madness not more than five years ago; something I thought I'd get around to one day, perhaps after I'd popped out a couple of kids and my joints, tendons and feet had gained the wisdom of many shorter races under the belt. Indeed, I had pretty much eschewed all adventure races longer than eight hours since my debut at the 48-hour GeoQuest in 2012. While that was a great achievement at the time, I was glad when it was over and wasn't in a hurry for more.

But with Deanna on the team, I'm assured of one thing - we'll finish. She'll have too much racing nous and professionalism to let us quit, whereas I can easily be talked into pulling out when the going gets tough (whether by others, or that little demon on my shoulder). And, perhaps more importantly, because Deanna is unquestionably a superior athlete, I'll happily defer to her - we cynics hide big egos, after all, and won't be told what to do by just *anybody*.

Next in our line-up is Captain Jan 'Sparrow' Saunders, our chef, public relations co-ordinator, and spiritual guru all in one. At 53 going on 23, Jan is living proof that adventure keeps you young. A recently retired mounted policewoman who has fought her way back from a crippling back injury, Jan, in many ways, is everything I'm not: loud, confident, a bit ballsy, and without any discernible trace of cynicism - she always looks for the best in people and bad situations. Oh, and did I mention she's vegan? Don't worry - as the tired old joke goes, she'll let you know.

Finally, there's Clare Weatherly. Clare is what Jerry Seinfeld described Kramer as in one episode of his eponymous sitcom: a 'pod'. She is utterly unique and seems to operate within her own solar system, either completely oblivious to, or entirely unfazed by, the way human beings are meant to do things. For example, as part of her cross-training for XPD, she was prescribed a weekly swim session at the local pool. A few weeks in, she posted on Facebook a photo of her swollen, bloodshot eyes, asking, completely innocently, whether or not she should, just maybe, acquire some goggles.

Apparently it had never occurred to her.

On one hand, Clare's seeming country-girl naivety and lack of race experience make her a doubtful quantity. On the other hand, they make her the perfect teammate - no expectations, just an unadulterated sense of adventure. Plus, she



is no stranger to endurance. After a terrible car accident in 2009, and agonising two-year recovery, Clare discovered ultra running (as you do). Then, last year, with little fuss or fanfare, she took a few months off to cycle and run a lazy 10,000km around Australia, solo.



As for me, well my backstory is a bit more garden-variety, but no less dappled with light and shade. You see, while I don't doubt my fitness or race smarts, I do, at times, question my sanity. If you hadn't already guessed, with all this talk of cynicism, social-media phobia and demons on shoulders, the chink in my

armour is depression and anxiety. Indeed, this double whammy is what drove me to adventure sports in the first place. From ages 16 to 30 I was in and out of shrinks' offices and on and off pills, until one fortuitous day I met a bloke who spoke of this wondrous thing called adventure racing, where you kayak, and trek, and ride bikes, and abseil, and go non-stop for days on end. Suddenly, almost urgently, this seemed like something I needed to do — in fact, it seemed like the very thing I was *meant* to do. Why would that be, when I'd led a mostly sedentary, urban, desk-bound adult life, save for a pretty half-arsed commitment to yoga? Because, as clichéd as it sounds, it resonated with something very elemental within; something that had been nagging for satisfaction for the better part of two decades, but which I'd drowned out with unhealthy career choices, an unhealthy lifestyle and unhealthy relationships.

I wasn't always this way. I grew up in country Victoria, and on the eve of my first day of high school, I visited one of my local haunts — a modest little creek rich with biodiversity if you cared to look for it. As a pre-teen, I loved nothing more than hanging out here and playing (at the risk of sounding politically incorrect) 'Aborigines' with my friends. 'Aborigines' was a pretty simple game, which involved little more than taking one's shoes off (and t-shirts, too, if you were game, what with budding breasts and all) and travelling from one bit of bush to another, usually through blackberries, while pretending to spear things, find bush-tucker, and track kangaroos. Now, at 12 years old, on the eve of puberty, I knelt down at this creek and whispered a little prayer. "Promise you'll never stop coming here. Promise you'll never forget about this." Even as I said it, I knew it was hopeless, and tears welled in my eyes. Somehow, I already knew I *would* stop coming here, I *would* forget about this, as the imperatives of adolescence, then adulthood, forced me to 'grow up'. It wasn't long before a 15-year funk set in.

The happy ending is that, through adventure racing, I found my way back to that little creek, metaphorically speaking, and rediscovered my life's passion: playing outside. And that's how I find myself now, at age 36, playing 'Aborigines' in the *almost* impenetrable (I can, after all, vouch for its penetrability) rainforest of the Paluma Range, 60 kilometres north of Townsville. Day four, leg three of XPD 2015.



The only problem with playing ‘Aborigines’ at age 36, in an expedition adventure race, is that you don’t get to run home for Milo and cheese toasties when the game isn’t fun anymore. And for the last, oh, 20 hours, it hasn’t exactly been fun. But it has been bloody funny.

They say all expedition adventure races have a crux – a definitive leg that decides the fortunes of a team. For Kiss My Sweet Inov8s, that crux is proving to be this second trek – a quad-busting amble from sea level to around 900 metres elevation at the roof of the Paluma Range. From here, we’re to complete a rogaine, before making our way to the TA in Paluma Village. Fastest estimated time is 11 hours; longest estimated time (which we are working to) is 20 hours. What could go wrong?

Plenty, as it turns out. In fact, what ensues is a comedy of errors so perfect we will gain instant admission into the XPD Interesting Route Choices Hall of Fame.

We like to call it The Bungle in the Jungle.

Like all tales of woe and misadventure, this one begins with high spirits and

the promise of a new day. After snatching four hours' restorative, albeit cold, sleep in the previous kayak-to-trek TA, we set off before dawn so as to hit the foot of the range – and the now infamous Foxlee's Track, which is meant to deliver us to the top – just after sunrise. After an impromptu breakfast of red capsicums slightly on the turn, courtesy of a somewhat bemused farm-hand who's throwing them to the chooks (so desperate are we for fresh vegies), we get ready to hit some vert. That's when we make our first rookie error.

A pearl of wisdom often drummed into novice navigators is to never trust man-made features on topographical maps. Tracks, fences and buildings come and go, they say; the compass never lies. But it's not as simple as that. Sometimes a track is a no brainer, even if it's initially hard to find. And an elusive track is worth gambling your first-born child on if the only alternative is bushwhacking through virgin North Queensland rainforest, dodging stinging trees, wasp nests, snakes, creeks and thickets of Wait-a-while palm.

Our mistake (or one of them) is to cling onto that pearl of wisdom so tightly, we don't know when to let it go.

Hence, after walking around in circles trying to find Foxlee's for half an hour, we casually relegate it to the stuff of fairytales and surmise that race director, Craig Bycroft, is just pulling off an elaborate hoax for his own jollies.

Bugger Foxlees, we think. We'll just follow a bearing up the spur the track *should* be on, and if it exists, we'll find it... eventually.

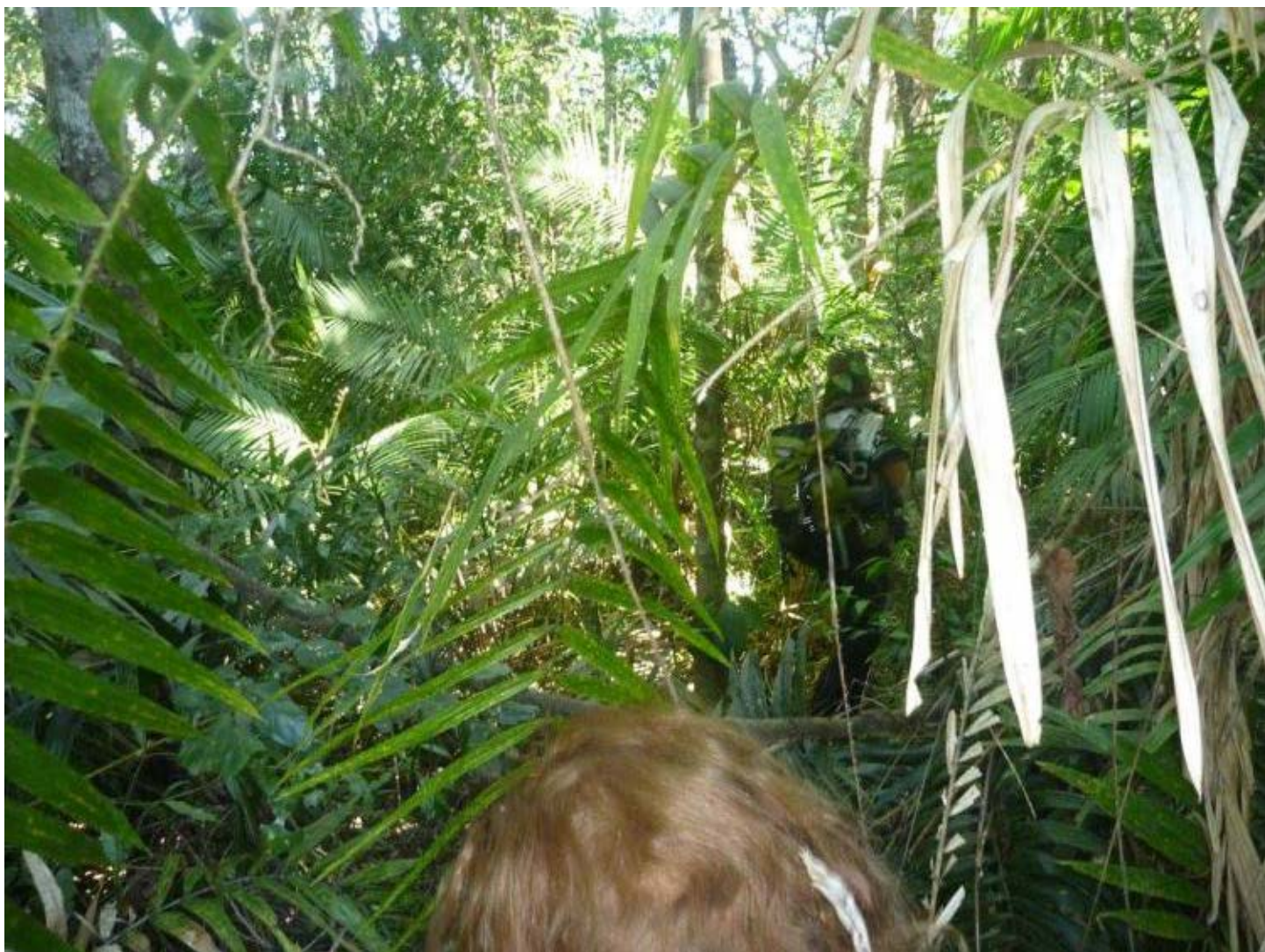
What a pity, then, that we follow a bearing up the wrong spur.

Still, what we lack in map reading skills, we make up for in dogged determination. Like gambling addicts at a poker table, we keep playing our lousy hand, ever hopeful that a track – any track – will materialise at any moment. But all we get is thick bush, indifferent to our plight, which only gains malevolence with altitude. And before long, we find ourselves corralled by one of Mother Nature's sick jokes (along with mosquitoes and Melbourne weather): the aptly named Wait-a-while palm.

If you've never encountered Wait-a-while, let me describe it for you, as I know it intimately. A more hostile example of flora you will never meet – it is the ISIS of the plant kingdom. Ostensibly beautiful, like something you might buy at Bunnings to brighten up a dull corner by the Jacuzzi, up close it quickly



reveals its sinister agenda. Not only is its trunk covered in the most ghastly spines – the kind that dislodge in an unsuspecting hand innocently seeking something firm to hold onto (yes, I'm talking about you there, by the creek at one in the morning, you arsehole) – but it also sprouts forth multiple flagella covered in the most vicious, razor-sharp barbs that, at best, tear lovely Inov8 jackets, at worst, tear earlobes in two. And here's something they don't tell you in the textbooks: those flagella move; they are like heat-seeking missiles that hone in on bare flesh.



*“No! You wait a while!”*

Little wonder it takes us 12 hours to cover five kilometres. Not that we realise how slowly we're moving. We have already entered the adventure-racing equivalent of the Twilight Zone: a kind of parallel universe where time and distance become irrelevant, or at least relative to the task at hand. Questions like, “How far?”, “How long?”, “How much?” and “When?” give way to “Left or right?”, “Over or under?”, “Around or through?” It is decision-making at an invertebrate level.

Measurements give way to moments and, without even trying, you achieve the holy grail of enlightenment: living in the now. It's the great gift of adventure racing.

The other great gift of adventure racing is being able to simultaneously plumb the depths of despair and scale the heights of joy. As the sun starts to retreat to the west, and we finally reach the summit of what we later confirm is Mt Leach - a heartbreaking 500 metres south of where we want to be - we can't help but feel a little chuffed at our accomplishment, no matter how absurd. We have just done what, quite possibly, no human has ever done before, or will ever do again (if they know what's good for them): scaled the Paluma Range completely off-piste and sans sharp implement.

We are pioneers!

We imagine the consternation of the punters at home following our 'dot' (our online GPS tracker that shows our position on the course) and have a wry chuckle. Someone then conjures up the disturbing image of race-director, Craig, crouched over his computer, engaged in an act of autoerotic schadenfreude, and we collapse in hysterics - once again proving that our capacity for ribald humour is unflagging.

But we are, for all intents and purposes, lost, and for the first time in the race the seeds of doubt - and, I'll admit it, panic - creep in. It is such an unfamiliar feeling being lost in an age where it is almost impossible to be lost. Even when you know you are not *truly* lost. It feels oppressive - a sense of impending doom - and as night falls, the rainforest becomes stifling, if it weren't already. For a while, we circle around the peak, searching the map for clues, offering up theories. I come close - so close it doesn't bear thinking about now - but my suggestion to head north seems too risky when we're not entirely sure where we are to start with, and we're low on water. So instead we plump for west, where we are sure to hit a track one way or another.

What ensues is another eight hours of bushwhacking, this time in the dark, and with the added challenge of sketchy creek crossings. Then the sleep monsters descend and we are moving like drunken zombies, stumbling dangerously across moss-covered logs and, in my case, laughing so irrationally I can't see for the tears. We need to sleep, but it's four degrees (the coldest night on record for Paluma, we are later told) and our bivvy bags don't quite cut it.



There's only one thing for it - spooning. Cue the filthy minds.



After a cold and restless night getting up-close-and-personal with each other (even Clare, the anti-spooner, succumbed in the end, declaring, at 4am, "Let me in, or I'm going to die!") we wake to the most raucous, enchanting birdsong heralding the new day - a fresh start. Surely this bodes well? After some alfresco ablutions, and thinking more clearly after some rest, it occurs to me to check our 'Yellow Brick' spot tracker-cum-communications device, in case Craig has taken pity on our wretched souls and provided a clue to our whereabouts. After all, we have now exceeded 24 hours on this leg, and someone must be getting worried, besides Mum.

Sure enough, we've got mail:

*Awesome effort girls, but you need to go 500m to your north. When you reach the high point, head a further 200 metres north to find the track.*

Bugger. It was north all along. Hang on, though. When was that message sent?



What if it was sent last night? There's no time on it, so how do we know the directions apply to our current location? Well, we'll just have to go with it - it's not like we have any better ideas, right? Except, as we later find out, the directions **were** sent the previous night, when we were circling around trying to figure out what to do. And our current campsite is, in fact, just 100 metres from the very track we hoped to hit by heading west. And, to add insult to injury, on the other side of that track is a hut, with actual beds, actual food, and an actual fireplace! And to think I had Deanna's toe jammed up my nose half the night.

If you don't laugh... well, you know.

The good news is that, despite the bungled directions, we do eventually hit a track to the north - what's a couple more hours' Wait-a-while wrangling amongst friends? The bad news is that we are now so far behind the rest of the field, we will have to be fast-tracked through the course, missing the rogaine and the next epic trek through Running River gorge.

(And just to shore up our status as the biggest losers on course, we also have to abandon the Paluma to Hidden Valley mountain-bike leg after Jan suffers a major mechanical just 200 metres in. You can't make this stuff up.)

And we are now, like our only rival girls' team, the indefatigable L-Platers, unranked.



### *Biggest Losers?*

It's a bittersweet realisation. Our goals for XPD weren't lofty, but we did expect to finish in the competition. Plus we have been carrying around the unspoken weight of expectation that comes with being a rarity - or, some might say, oddity - in the field: an all-female team.

"Please don't be one of those all-girl teams that screws up the nav and doesn't finish," said a sceptical well wisher prior to the race.

We laughed it off at the time, but now it has almost come to home to roost, we're forced to digest it. Have we done our gender a disservice, or is this just a typical case of women having to overcompensate for their perceived weaknesses? After all, plenty of blokes' teams screw up the nav - and worse ☒ and no one attributes it to their gender. And supposing we were an all-blokes' team, would we have come this far - still laughing, still positive, still a cohesive unit - after kicking such a devastating own goal?

Or, as my partner, elite adventure racer, Jarad Kohlar, maintains, should we all just race in the mixed-gender category and get over it? Adventure racing is one of the only sports I can think of where men and women race together at an elite level, as equals, blending their particular strengths to create the kind of magic that sees mixed teams take line honours in pretty much every major race on the AR circuit.

Shouldn't we embrace this?

In hindsight, it was inexperience, not gender, which led to our downfall. As Jarad had warned me ad nauseum, "Don't take it for granted that you'll finish ranked." I scoffed at the time. But then Jarad's team, Peak Adventure, which was leading by a country mile for most of the race, pulled out at the final checkpoint due to injury – the dreaded DNF. Proving the only thing you can take for granted is that a lot can go wrong in an adventure race.

It's how you bounce back that counts.

So bounce back we do. The only thing for it is to swallow the disappointment and reprogram our mindset from racers to adventurers; living up to the event tag line, 'As much an expedition as a race'.

"Look at it as an epic nine-day adventure holiday, with a team of people moving our gear around and making sure we're okay," says Jan. Suddenly the \$2000 per person entry fee seems pretty cheap.





With the pressure of performing lifted, we happily settle into the rhythm of tourists – hardcore tourists, but tourists nonetheless. Our goal is to suck every last experience out of this thing and savour every morsel; every sunrise and sunset; every bend in a river and crest in an outback road; every Jabiru, Brolga and Brahman; every toasty campfire, and delicious dehydrated vegan meal courtesy of Jan. While the teams around us suffer through the cold nights, chasing down teams in front, or staving off teams behind, we take our sweet time, prolonging the experience as much as course cut-offs allow. That's not to say we aren't working hard – we are still talking 20-hour paddle, bike and trek legs through remote outback Queensland. But it doesn't feel like work.

It feels like... romance.

As we move through the course, something I never expected happens. I feel my body getting stronger and younger with each step. My skin and hair feel soft and smooth; my legs feel powerful, taut and supple; even my technicolour mix of cuts, bruises and abrasions is healing before my eyes. All the chronic niggles

that plague me in my daily life - sensitive skin, bad neck, tight hip, random bouts of debilitating fatigue - vanish. All this, and I've been living on a diet of chocolate, salami and baby food, and sleeping fewer than six hours a night!

This wasn't in the script. I was meant to finish XPD feeling accomplished, but utterly destroyed, with weird skin rashes, blisters, tendonitis and dreadlocks - much like I had GeoQuest. Instead I feel utterly...well...well.

And it feels a bit like being in love.



There must be something about perpetual motion, about connecting brain with body so intimately - so primordially - that is almost sensual. I am reminded of a quote by Ann Trason, the American ultrarunning legend, in Christopher McDougall's, *Born to Run*:

*"You have to be in tune with your body, and know when you can push it and when to back off. You have to listen closely to the sound of your own breathing; be*

*aware of how much sweat is beading on your back; make sure to treat yourself to cool water and a salty snack and ask yourself, honestly and often, exactly how you feel. What could be more sensual than paying exquisite attention to your own body?'*

All I can say is it's a good thing I'm a happily shackled-up woman, because with all this primal sensuality vibrating through my bones, and all these paramedics, firemen and soldiers circling (tip for single ladies: if you want to know where all the good men are, they're in an adventure race), I could get very primal indeed.

So could adventure racing be the elixir of youth? The antidote to existential angst? Judging by some of the weathered faces at the pointy end of the field, not necessarily. But playing outside? Adventure? Connecting your brain to your body on a regular basis, while disconnecting from the relentless busyness of modern life?

Absolutely.

Maybe that's why an unspoken melancholy descends on the team as we roll into the outer suburbs of Townsville on the final mountain-bike leg home. The traffic, billboards, and gridlines of urban planning foretell of what's awaiting us when we reluctantly cross back into the 'real world': work, stress, responsibility, emails... Facebook.

So how will we hold on to this experience when it's all done and dusted? How will we make sure we keep returning to that little creek that runs through all of us?

Sign up to XPD 2017, of course.





---

Share this:

Twitter **2**

Facebook **25**

Google

Loading...

---

[BLOG, FEATURES, RACE REPORTS](#)

[EMMA FRANCIS](#)

[0 COMMENTS](#)

[HOW TO: SURVIVE YOUR FIRST OCEAN PADDLING RACE](#)

