

TEAM MACPAC

girls on top

have tamed the beast that was the XPD

By Debbie Chambers



MISTY MOUNTAINS TREK



OVERGROWN GRASS TRACK



ADMIRING THE VIEW

The XPD expedition adventure race in Cairns Australia saw 47 teams attempt to travel 700kms, over six - ten days. The disciplines they faced included; mountain biking, kayaking, hiking, rafting, snorkeling and wheelbarrow pushing all with tricky navigation. The terrain was unforgiving and remote and teams were sent through dense untracked rainforests with leeches and stinging tree, rugged outback areas full of spear grass and spider webs and rivers low in water and home to fresh water crocodiles.

21 of the 47 teams made it to the finish line including New Zealand's all female adventure racing team Macpac Girls on Top.

Here is the race report from the team captain Debbie Chambers.

What an experience - we were pushed to our physical, mental and emotional limits. This is one race Team Macpac Girls on Top; Debbie Chambers, Anne Lowerson, Zoe Albon and Viv Prince will never forget.

The lead up to this race is always frantic and this year was no exception as, due to injury to teammate Erin Roberts six weeks out, we had to find a last minute replacement. Luckily Viv Prince stepped up. The new team came together in Cairns two days before the race.

The day before race start the maps and course were revealed. The team split into pairs with Anne and Viv marking the maps and planning our route and Zoe and myself

working on logistics. Each team has five bins and four bike boxes which are transported around the course by the organisers. In each bin you have to have enough supplies for the following leg. The trick is anticipating how much food and gear to put in each bin as you are only given distances of each leg. We loaded the boxes onto the trucks at the end of the day dreading we would get to a point in the race and not have something we absolutely needed.

Race day dawned and we were transported to Dunk Island for the race start. Leg one was 25km and saw us running, kayaking and snorkeling around Dunk Island. We hit a reasonably urgent pace in this leg hoping to get as much rest as possible later on in the course due to the dark zone on the up-coming rafting section. We sailed around this leg without too many problems, although we had to use all our will power not to throw up in the rough seas both in the kayak and the snorkeling.

Leg two was a 100km mountain bike ride which was relatively flattish with easy navigation so we managed to complete it in reasonable time. The highlight of this leg was meeting up with Team Yogi Bears - we had a good old sing along with them and arrived in transition in time to catch three hours' sleep in our cosy Macpac tent.

Leg three saw us getting up at 5.00am and power walking nine km to the start of the raft section. A rare quietness had

descended over the team but it wasn't due to the pace, it was due to the fact that we were all worried about tipping out in the grade four rapids. We needn't have worried as the raft was a blast with full on rapids, wonderful scenery, and a competent guide.

Soon after getting out of the rafts we set off for the 47 km Misty Mountains trek. We expected this leg to be on nice walking tracks as the map supplied was a tourist walking map. We were wrong! This trek was a mission and gave us our first introduction to the large variety of painful Aussie plants, including the infamous "stinging tree" which injects silica glass hairs containing neurotoxins into your skin; and "wait-a-while" which grabs you with its vine and tears everything in sight. At the end of this trek Zoe and I had to get medical attention for the stinging tree hits. The treatment is so painful - first they douse the area in hydrochloric acid - then they wax you with hot wax. We both ended up on the floor feeling a little woozy and traumatized. Meanwhile Anne and Viv were tending to their leech bites and making sure there weren't any leeches in strange places.

This was our welcome to the reality of racing in rainforest in Aussie. We realised that this race was going to be tough. We had planned to have a sleep at the end of this leg but as soon as we lay down a number of other teams arrived and started unpacking next to us. Our planned two hour



TEAM MACPAC GOT - VIV, ANNE, ZOE, DEBBIE

sleep turned into short lie down and with much frustration we bundled ourselves out of transition and onto our bikes.

The following leg was a 130km bike with a 10km orienteering section in it. This section was hot and hilly but with mid-camp just around the corner we were pretty motivated. The orienteering course gave us our first introduction to spear grass - nasty stuff that burrows into your shoes and into your feet. We moved reasonably well but struggled to find the last checkpoint. Perhaps our interrupted sleep at transition was coming back to haunt us. We left the orienteering course for the final bike into mid-camp right on dusk. The ride was a mix of heaven and hell. We spent some of it pushing up steep inclines, some of it skidding uncontrollably on loose rocks and some of it flying down a 4wd track at high speed hoping not to come to grief in the many soft sandy sections along the way.

Midcamp is a six hour compulsory stop where the organisers feed you and provide you with a tent. We packed away our bikes before eating a delicious feed of bacon, hash browns, baked beans, tomatoes and toast. This was followed by a couple of hours' kip and then we were back into it - our next task was to load up "Warren the wheelbarrow" with two kayaks and push him 20kms along a road to the river.

We headed into the early morning mist dreading what lay ahead. However, we soon got into the rhythm of taking turns to push "Warren" and found there was something oddly therapeutic about having something different to focus on.

Leg seven was a 70km paddle along the Walsh River. The next 30 hours were spent jumping in and out of the boats pushing them over rocks and through rapids, avoiding low hanging branches, searching for channels in the dark, emptying out our

boat, portaging a big rapid and trying to protect ourselves from sunburn. We also spent a bit of time looking back at the red crocodile eyes watching us in the dark of night wondering how big they were. This leg was the most physically exhausting leg and we left more than a few expletives behind us in the shallow rapids. We arrived at the next transition glad to be exiting the river.

Another epic leg - a 60km trek - loomed ahead of us. We set off on this trek focused on our compass bearing and our surroundings but somehow lost concentration and ended up taking a detour. This took us over a 639 metre hill where we were forced to sleep and wait for daylight. Once daylight broke we were on our way again and spent the next 40 hours clambering over rocks, avoiding massive spiders, navigating through hectares of untracked bush, and sitting around waterholes to cool down and rest our feet. This leg was an absolute treat. After 48 hours on this leg we were once again ecstatic to be heading into transition.

Only 130km of biking, a 15km paddle and a 60km trek to go! One of the ladies in transition kept saying, "You're nearly there guys!" However, we knew better and opted to focus on one leg at a time. Another guy was overheard muttering, "These teams are nuts but how does that girls' team manage!"

The next bike leg was a navigator's nightmare with tracks going in all directions. At one point we found ourselves pushing our bikes on a track through grass twice our height. Not much fun - luckily the main road wasn't too far away and we burst out of the grass with relief written all over our faces. Just before transition we stopped for a chocolate milk, burger and chips. Yum!

The 15km kayak across Lake Tinaroo was stunning. The lake was like a millpond. We struggled to keep awake and focused but luckily we managed to stick to our compass

bearing and hit the transition.

The final 60km trek leg was upon us but we knew the lead team had taken 30 hours to complete this. Things started off smoothly but it wasn't long before they got complicated. We came across four other teams who were confused by two tracks heading off in different directions with track ribbons going both ways. We made a choice not to muck around but to take the left track away from the other teams. We weren't always confident it was the right choice but we eventually ended up where we needed to be.

From here we simply needed to find a ridge, head down it and we were home. We made four attempts at finding the ridge but failed. On our fifth attempt we joined two other teams and tried to hit the ridge on mass - once again we missed it. Now our only option was to bush bash four km north through dense rainforest until we hit a road. From 8.30pm to 6.00am we scrambled up and over ridges and dived deep into ravines. Zoe got a leech in her eye at one point - luckily one of the guys knew how to get it out. Just as we had almost given up hope of finding the road in time to make the cut off at the finish line, someone shouted "power line!". You should have heard the yells of delight from the three teams - we were so happy. Now it was simply a matter of hoofing it to the finish line in Cairns.

What a feeling! Now we could start to believe we might finish this race. We crossed the finish line nine days and six hours after we had set off.

Thanks to Macpac for supplying us with awesome gear that made our lives so much more comfortable out on the course.

Next up for us is the Geo Quest 48 hour in Port Macquarie, Australia on August 21. ●