

HardTales in the Wild

Mini Peak Bagging on the Apple Isle - January 2004

Ever had one of those days where you feel ... not exactly bad, but more like you just don't feel anything? Your energy levels are depleted, and you couldn't be bothered doing much of anything. No matter what you try, you just can't lift or be damned? It turns out I was having one of those weeks. It was another in a long line of 'feeling flat' weeks that had been building up recently. I'd reached an insurmountable plateau in training and waking up with a sore back from the half-arsed bunk I'd installed in the van, made it feel like Groundhog Day. Even before the morning tinkle had petered away to a drip, normally a cause for relieved celebration, I was wishing the day would hurry up and end so I could crawl back into my home made hell home on wheels. The back of the van was looking more like a warren, packed so tight that the only entry point was to crawl over the seats into the darkness and musty smell of stale air.

Wearing underwear during periods of self-woe and degradation is out of the question and I was up to day five of 'going commando', problem was I hadn't changed my shorts or shirt in that time either and as I reached for them yet again, they covered away to a hide in a distant corner, but their smell gave them up and I was able to catch them easily. I'd last showered 3 days earlier, or was it four? Hard to say as every thing was a blur, but I was definitely getting ripe and the 'shower-in-a-can' was failing. A glimpse of my reflection made me ill as some toothless stubbled hobo stared back with beady eyes. My dentures hadn't left their watery grave since the last shower and a week of fast food had caused the gums to swell. For two nights running I had used whiskey to shut out the traffic noise and the coke I washed it down with didn't help the way I was feeling. There was a construction site not far from the vans' parking space and I figured using their port-a-loo would save a search and/or an indecent exposure fine.

One of the workers sprung me as I finished, but I didn't care. I walked off indifferently as he lectured me, which just made him furious. He called out "Next time I will throw you personally out!" to which I replied, "You will personally throw me out or will you throw me out personally?" it was nonsensical, but enough to confuse and elevate him to the next level of anger which resulted in him shoving me. I found cause to laugh and taunted him some more "If I pushed like that I'd take up knitting." This sent him to redline and he took a swing. It missed by a mile, but he'd put so much effort into it that he landed flat on his face. I giggled and turned away, his construction buddies looked on with silly grins. "Next time I will be for serious you dumb skippy poofter! You freckly friggin Aussie!" Musing over his words it dawned on me that I was in Melbourne. "You can't come to my country and make me for a fool you malaka!" at this I turned and replied "You don't need my help for that pal" I couldn't help

myself. Now his co-workers were laughing uncontrollably. "I will smash you with my fists!" He screamed. I shook my head at his persistence "Dude, you've got nothing. Do the world a favour and get yourself neutered." I don't think he understood what neutered meant because that shut him up long enough for me to move out of range.

Driving across town I was impressed by the number of people out jogging and riding push-bikes, but not enough to join them. Arriving at St Kilda I peeled my stinking shirt off, for all I know it's still on the beach, and kept walking straight into the ocean. It was fresh and three days dirt and sweat washed away in an instant. Oceans are so therapeutic. Salt water stung my eyes so I closed them and pressed on. When I opened them again the water was dark and choppy and the shore was 300m behind. I thought about sharks. Time to turn back.

That was twelve months ago and as I stepped into the crisp waters off St Kilda beach, it was Groundhog Day all over again. Fortunately this time I wasn't nursing a hangover and there was no construction site clown to kick off the morning, come to think of it, the bunk has been fixed too, but the traffic was relentless and sleep had still been poor. Feral from three days travel, it was good to slide into the cool waters off the mainlands southern end. Tomorrow would see me in Tassie, but I still couldn't get excited, as it wasn't anything new. Most people would be over the moon at waking up in a new city each morning, but after years of doing it for work and the last 18 months doing it for something less than work (more like good hard fun), a suitcase existence had weathered my enthusiasm. I haven't owned or even rented a house in the last six months and this suitcase and house hopping deal can be tough. If I am not actually racing, I get bored very quickly and without a routine to settle into, it was boredom I supposed that was making me feel... not exactly bad, but more like I didn't feel anything at all.

The next day, completely over the idea of ferreting for my belongings in boxes and bags, I decided to simplify yet again and break from the training routine. Loading my 30-litre race pack with;

Thermals,

Gore-Tex jacket,

Buff,

Mini port-a-stove,

Hiking socks x 4,

Compass,

1st aid kit,

Mini sleeping bag,

Hutchie, (pronounced Hootchie)

Rations

and a tooth brush

I headed for Cradle Mountain and the famous Overland Track. I bought a 1:100,000 scale map of the area on the way and my plan was to hike the track, all 80ish kilometres, and back again in 4 days, sound ambitious? Here's what happened.

With an absolute lack of regard for proper planning, story of my life, I arrived at the Cradle information centre at 11:45am. Some guy pointed me in the direction of the shuttle buses and quipped "It's a little late to be starting out today." so I grabbed my pack and thought, "Jeez it's cold!" As the shuttle took off I reached into the pack and pulled out the thermals. I stripped seductively for the half day-trippers and threw the warm gear on. Exiting at Ronny Ck, I looked up to see a filthy black belt of clouds lining the skies in the direction of Lake St Clair (my turn around point), and grabbed the Gore-Tex Jacket as well.

A couple of hours later I had summited Cradle Mountain (1,545m) and Barn Bluff (1,559m) before arriving at the 1st Hut at Waterfall Valley, drenched with perspiration and face stinging from the sleet across the plateau. The warden and his wife were a great couple and Ian, having run the track in 12 hours (during the Overland Track foot race – 85klm) inspired me to push on and harder. By 7.30pm I had reached the halfway mark (for one way) and the New Pelion Hut. It was packed but I was stuffed! 40-45klm in less than 8 hours and it was time to eat and sleep before pinching a bunk and curling up. The next morning everything hurt like hell and it dawned on me that my training had been almost entirely on the bike and in the boat since October.

After a lazy start, I picked up the pace and had finished the track by 3pm, taking in Mt Pelion East (1,433m) and Ferguson, Boulder, D'Alton and Cathedral Falls along the way. Lake St Clair was gorgeous and I swam near the jetty for about 1 minute before hypothermia set in. With daylight remaining, I upped the pace some more and hit the grinding trail up to the Parthenon Range and The Acropolis (1,471m). Still thinking there was time left I ducked back to the Pine Valley Hut and shot out to see The Labyrinth, an incredibly beautiful set of lakes in the middle of the Tasmanian wilderness. Two hours before sunset I attacked a small chunk of the return journey and made it to a ramshackle little hut at Windy Ridge. The Hutchie was proving useless and dead weight as I bunked down for the second night in cabin comfort. The day ended with a double helping of Tuna and Pasta. 60-65klm on top of the previous days 40-45 and my feet were blistered and burning. The animals that had grown for the World Championships had come back and were pretty angry with me.

To finish the final stretch home (60-65klm) meant an early start so I set the alarm and jumped with a start. It felt like I had slept for about 3 seconds! Donning two pair of socks and removing the inner soles from the runners, I scoffed down a Musashi bar as I headed for the door. A couple of Tiger snakes later I needed a wash. The stink of the previous days clothes (and my recently soiled shorts – thanks Charley Blake) led me to believe they were trying to escape their cage and overtake me so I stopped at the halfway mark and went the nuddy in

a beautiful little stream. Whilst waiting for my clothes to dry (they copped a scrub but still smelt off) I heard hikers heading my way. Too bugged to care, I sat there and watched the billy boil until they had passed. I copped a few whistles and there may have been some unso-licited photography, but they were generally courteous and moved on quickly.

Back on the trail, there weren't many side trips left. I had taken in Mt Ossa (1,671m) and picked up Hartnett Falls earlier in the day and the last stretch was pretty quick, although I did take the muddy trek out to Lake Will and back. The finish came around 8pm and the friendly Wardens at Waterfall Valley asked if I had turned back early then handed me a cup-per. Apparently two and a half days to do the track is pretty good, and that's just one way. I had knocked over both directions and taken in most of the side trips before my third day had ended.

It was amazing how good it felt just to get out there and push. With proper planning it could be done in less time and that's good to know. The miles in my legs will help with races to come and I proved to myself that maybe its just the challenge I crave for and not the racing after all. With 6 days off now until Wildside, it's time to repack the van and head for the east coast.

I'll catch you on the return trip.

Angry Man

