

Great Barrier Wharf to Wharf Saturday 10 October, 2009

It all started with a friendly phone call from Sooz at Tourism Auckland... "hey Aaron, there's this event happening over on Great Barrier. It's a run and mountain bike, I don't really know too much about it but thought you might be interested in checking it out, given that you're into that kind of stuff". I said "cool, I'm in". Then I forgot about it for about a month and then finally remembered to tell my fiancée, Nicola, that we were heading to Great Barrier to do an event of some sort. "I think there's a couple of run options, mostly offroad (hopefully) and a MTB" – she didn't say too much so I took that as a sign of keenness...

So there we were, committed to an event I knew very little about, and one I struggled to find too much about on the Internet. The course itself was a bit of a mystery, so we were flying a little on the blind side. Speaking of flying blind, the flight over to the island was a little like that too. We turned up to take a 10.15am flight the day before the event, to hear that the earlier flights that day had, so far, been cancelled. It was a pretty uninspiring weather day to say the least, so we were a little on the nervous side. After a small delay, we were transported out to our bright blue (and rather small) plane via golf cart, and in we got. There were about 10 of us on the plane, along with pilot and co-pilot. She was a patchy old day with very limited visibility but the pilot did a tremendous job in getting us in at the Claris airstrip – well done to that guy!



I'll be honest, once I'd worked out that the first half of the event was trail / off-road stuff, and the second half was entirely on the road, I'd pretty much made a decision that I would only do the trail / off-road section and then thumb a ride to our place (2km from the finish). It wasn't until the evening before the event that I actually was able to learn the exact route the event would take the next day.

So, it was up early the next morning (alarm bells at 5am) and we were scheduled to be picked up from our lodge at 5.25am – seemed pretty precise but there was our driver patiently waiting for us at 5.24am – things had started well. Given that this is a "point to point" event, and we were staying very close to the finish, we then had a lengthy but relaxing drive to the start at the wharf in Port Fitzroy, where there was a wee registration area set up (we were required to check in again – very wise) and the other MTB'ers, runners and walkers waiting for a start.



For a small event (the smallest I've participated in), there was some real spirit to this sucker. And there were all shapes, sizes, ages, and ability levels on that start line. I had a look around and saw a few trusty total sport regulars, and was great to see that they'd made the trip over for this one.



There was a very thorough and “no nonsense” pre race briefing delivered by local copper and race director, Kylie, who reinforced what this thing was all about. The event is put on in memory of local legend Barry Mouat, who covered this course with his daughter of 9 years in around 8 – 9 hours, and from what I can gather, was instrumental in building the local MTB park, and spearheaded various other outdoor / adventure initiatives. Tragically, Barry’s life was cut well short when cancer took yet another good person from this planet well before their intended expiry date.

Then it was on, around 7.30am the MTB’ers headed away first, followed by the runners about 5 minutes later, then the walkers – we were into it.

While there were options to finish at a couple of points from around the 16.5km – 23km mark, it was pretty evident that people were here to “knock the bastard off”. So getting to the road section, where (before I started) I was pretty sure I would’ve been happy to call it a day (this first 23km took us about 3 hours), I just kind of said to myself, “bugger it, it’s only another 18km – shame it’s on the road”. What transpired from there, however, was a relatively easy (aside from the 2.5km climb out of Medlands that is!), steady run to the finish that I actually enjoyed (I can barely believe I’m saying that, as that is the longest road run I’ve done in probably 8 – 9 years).



Description of the legs;

Km’s 0 – 3 Undulating gravel road (along Kaiaraara Bay Rd), nice views to the water – more up than down. This bit reminded me of the Colville Connection MTB course, held in the Coromandel.



Km’s 3 – 16.5 Wide 4WD track (known as Forest Rd), with some technical bits, but over all run-able. 90% of the time, more up than down with some pretty solid (and lengthy) climbs. I was pleased to be on foot during this section because she was pretty slippy and rutted. Towards the end of this section we started to pass a few MTB’ers who’d had some tough times, including one kid who had been snapped his chain and had been pushing his bike 20 minutes into the event. He just dumped his bike at the road and then ran to the finish (ahhh, youth – I vaguely remember it!). This bit was “Waitakere Ranges (the wide track sections that is) meets the 42 Traverse” (National Park).



Km's 16.5 – 21.5 This bit was without a doubt the “oh my god” section! A short, but sharp climb, followed by about 4km of unbloody-believable trail goodness – as good as anything I’ve seen or done that I can remember. The closest we got to single track (the MTB’ers with any energy left would have been loving it) with some technical bits, boardwalks and views from out of this world – magic stuff!!



Km's 21.5 – 40.6 Road, road and road. As far as a road section goes, this was pretty good. A couple of reasonable climbs and one bloody good one (started at the “10km to go point”) that went for a good 2.5km. A lot of dropping in and out of very scenic bays with a flat 1km to the finish at the Tryphena wharf.



Overall course description – if on a dark and lonely night, the Waitakere Ranges, Colville (Coromandel), Waiheke Island, the 42 Traverse and Rotorua’s Redwood Forest met and set about on a night of unbridled group passion, and then 9 months later the “party kid” was born, it might look quite a bit like the Great Barrier Wharf to Wharf course...

What surprised me most at the end, which was very cool and personal, was that I was feeling OK. I was greeted at the finish line with a Speights Summit (yay!) which went down very quickly – I was kind of sick of water and squeezies by then. I pulled Malcolm (the GPS) out of his pouch and looked at the distance I’d covered – 40.6km. Excruciatingly close to a Marathon. Normally (being an off-roadie) this wouldn’t even come close to bothering, or even registering with me. If, for example, the event had been 35 – 36km (eg. Abel Tasman), I wouldn’t have given it a second thought and would’ve just gone and found myself another beer.



YUM!



It might have been the conversations had with the total sport boys during the preceding week when I was explaining what I was up to for the weekend. As one would expect, the conversation naturally steered itself to the event distance – to which I stated it was a 41km event, and to which the boys pretty much stated that if I didn't find an extra 1km at the end to make the Marathon distance, then I was rubbish! So, Speights Summit downed, I decided to plod back to our place of abode (Pigeons Lodge; www.pigeonslodge.co.nz – very cool spot with lovely hosts, Ann and Jim), a mere 2km away. Yes, I am a sad case but I did manage to talk two others into joining me for that last leg too – nice one Jill and Mary (they comfortably beat me on that last leg)!

OK, let's now talk about the “operational” side of this event for a moment. Nicola and I arrived with very few expectations and really didn't know how things were going to play out. Yes, it was a small event (in number terms, certainly not in the logistics department though) but BOY, the people running the show here were not only super-friendly and personable, but they were highly organised. I've been involved in organising some reasonably large and technical events over the years, and was thoroughly impressed with the way the (completely volunteer) event team nailed this beast. In what I'm sure is a pretty tough place to cover from a communications perspective, they just completely over delivered.



The view from our deck at Pigeons Lodge



The Wild Rose café – very good food!



And right next door – the Irish pub

We got off the plane and were told that our race packs had been delivered to our accommodation. At each of the drink stations, you were welcomed and called by your first name and given accurate information about how far there was to go. When Nicola decided to pack it in after the off-road section (which was always her plan – you did awesome Nic), sure enough there was her gear bag waiting for her, and she was whisked away by an event team member before I'd even knocked a squeeze and a few lollies down! These guys and girls know what they're up to with this event. I heard from a few locals on the organisational side of things that they (the team) were taking a conservative approach to the event (which was limited to 100 participants) because this was the first time the event had been open to “non-islanders”. WOW – to the organising team, that was pretty bloody good, and if you want it to, this thing can grow and become one of those “must do” events.

So, for those of you (and I know there are plenty of you) looking for that incredibly unique and tough event challenge and experience, I would highly recommend popping it on the 2010 “must do” event list. Take your time to enjoy what this incredible place has to offer and make a weekend of it - it is an absolute goldmine of off-road delights. Thanks to all of you that made our time on your magical island so incredibly enjoyable – we were sorry to leave, but we'll be back again in 2010!

For the record, regular total sportster, Matt Murphy won the Marathon in a time around 3 hours 15 minutes – great work Matt!

Not important, but potentially interesting stats;

Event distance; 40.6km (according to Malcolm, our supremely reliable GPS unit)

Vertical metres climbed; 1100

Number entered (across all categories); 101

My average heart rate; 144 (My max is about 190), so that's a 76% of MHR

My moving time; total – 4 hours 50 minutes

Trail section (21.5km) - 3 hours

Road section (19.1km) – 1 hour 50 minutes



PLEASE READ THIS

Our vision for this Mountain Bike Park is simply to encourage young and old to enjoy a beautiful natural environment in doing so building a stronger healthier person. We believe initiatives like this one are essential in helping to strengthen this vibrant community. The development of future track maintenance and upgrading relies heavily on your donation as we receive no funding from any other avenue

Thankyou
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For Great Barrier Island Visitor Information

www.thebarrier.co.nz