



2-6 May 2022 - Clarence Valley

How would you spend 100 hours if you had the choice? It's just a little over 4 days, and my bet is you'd choose to spend it doing something you love. For us that meant exploring another patch of the world and challenging ourselves in the Clarence Valley, competing in the 2nd edition of the Raid 100, a 100 hour Adventure Race.



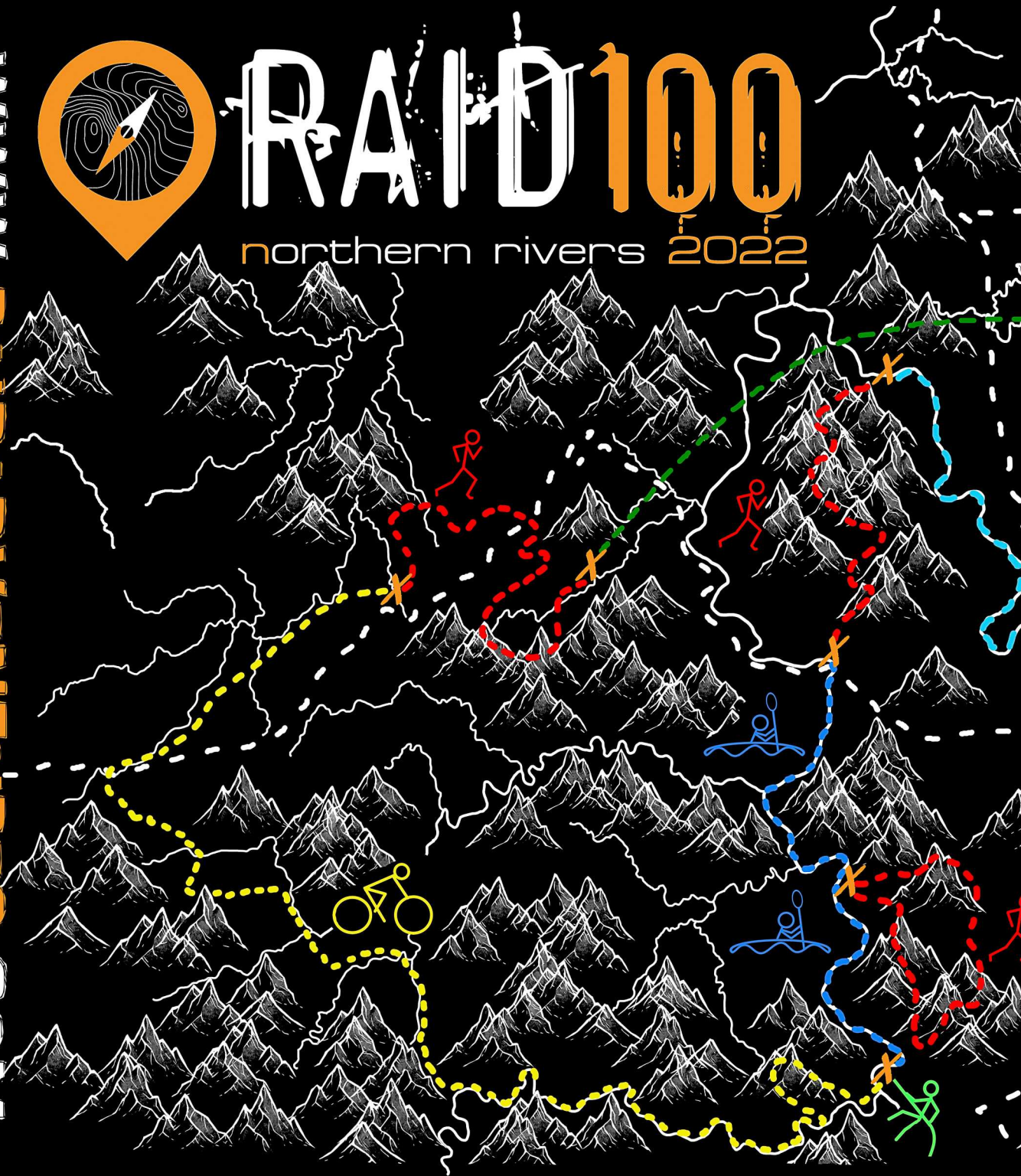
Shelley Bambrook & Andrew Renwick

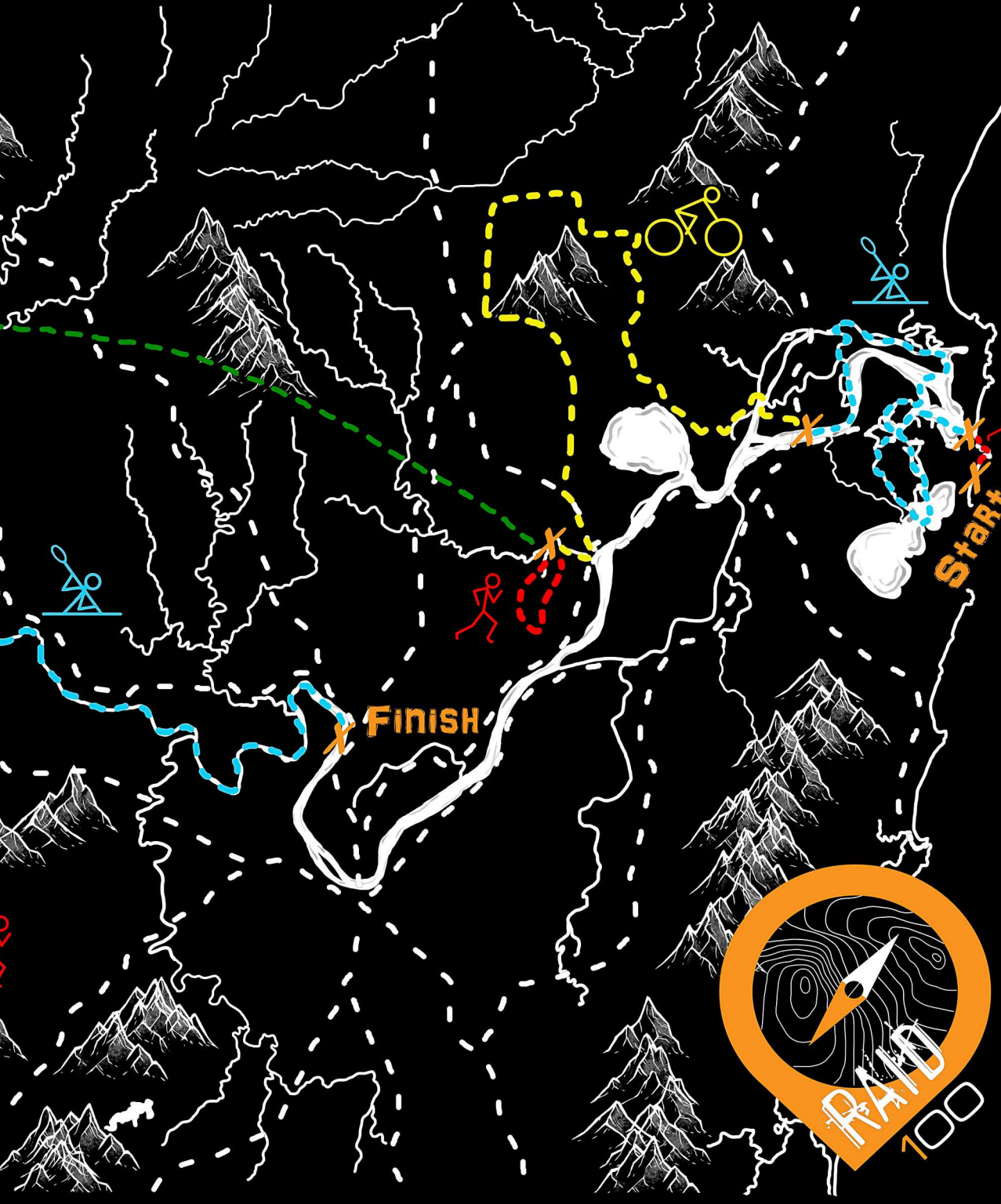
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RAID100

northern rivers 2022





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Getting four people to the start line of an expedition length race is always a challenge, and our not-so-friendly neighbourhood pandemic reared its head at the worst possible time for our team:

8 weeks out, BAM! My whole family is laid out for some quality home time.

4 weeks out, BAM! Ben's number comes up.

3 weeks out, BAM! Shelly A joins the unlucky majority.

With Ben and Shelly A sidelined and only a couple of weeks to the starting gun, Shelley B and I (yes, we had Shelley and a Shelly in our team and yes their surnames start with A and B) decide to take on the journey as a pair. Even though we had only met and spoken for a few minutes over the preceding years, with 100 hours ahead of us we would have plenty of time to get to know each other better! Approaching this race with the unknown of COVID fatigue was slightly daunting, so I tried not to dwell on it and just focus on the opportunity of a unique adventure.

Having not raced longer than 48hrs since my 9 year old was born, I quickly remembered the complexity of organising 100 hours of food, clothing and multi-sport equipment. I won't bore you with the minutiae, but there was plenty of cursing as I arranged my bike into a bike box (which I made a hash of) and stressing whether the body-weight worth of bars and snacks I had stuffed into snap lock bags would see me through to the end.

Before I knew it, the car was packed, kids kissed goodbye, and I was on the way to Grafton where Shelley had arranged an amazing farmhouse, perfect for our pre-race needs. We sorted gear, rested, chatted and eagerly awaited the map handout.

Finally, the time was upon us, and a flurry of activity ensued, pouring over the 17 x A3-sized maps which would form our world for the next 100 hours. Once maps were marked and boxes packed, I'd love to tell you we enjoyed a restful night's sleep before a relaxed starting process. Nope. Instead, a fretful few hours saw us boarding a bus at 4 am and making our way to the start line in Yamba.

For some race context: The standard format for expedition races is linear. Teams start and finish at the same place, complete the same stages/disciplines and visit marked checkpoints in order, with the fastest team to the finish line the overall winner. Raid 100 is a rogaine-style expedition, meaning that all teams start and finish at the same place and still complete the same stages/disciplines in the same order. Within those stages, however, teams are free to choose which checkpoints they will visit in any order they please. Teams accumulate points for each checkpoint visited and the team with the most points at the finish line is the overall winner. The multitude of options presented by this format means that route planning strategy, along with re-planning mid-race, is critical for success.



Stage 1 - run/kayak/run/kayak

~65km ~12hrs

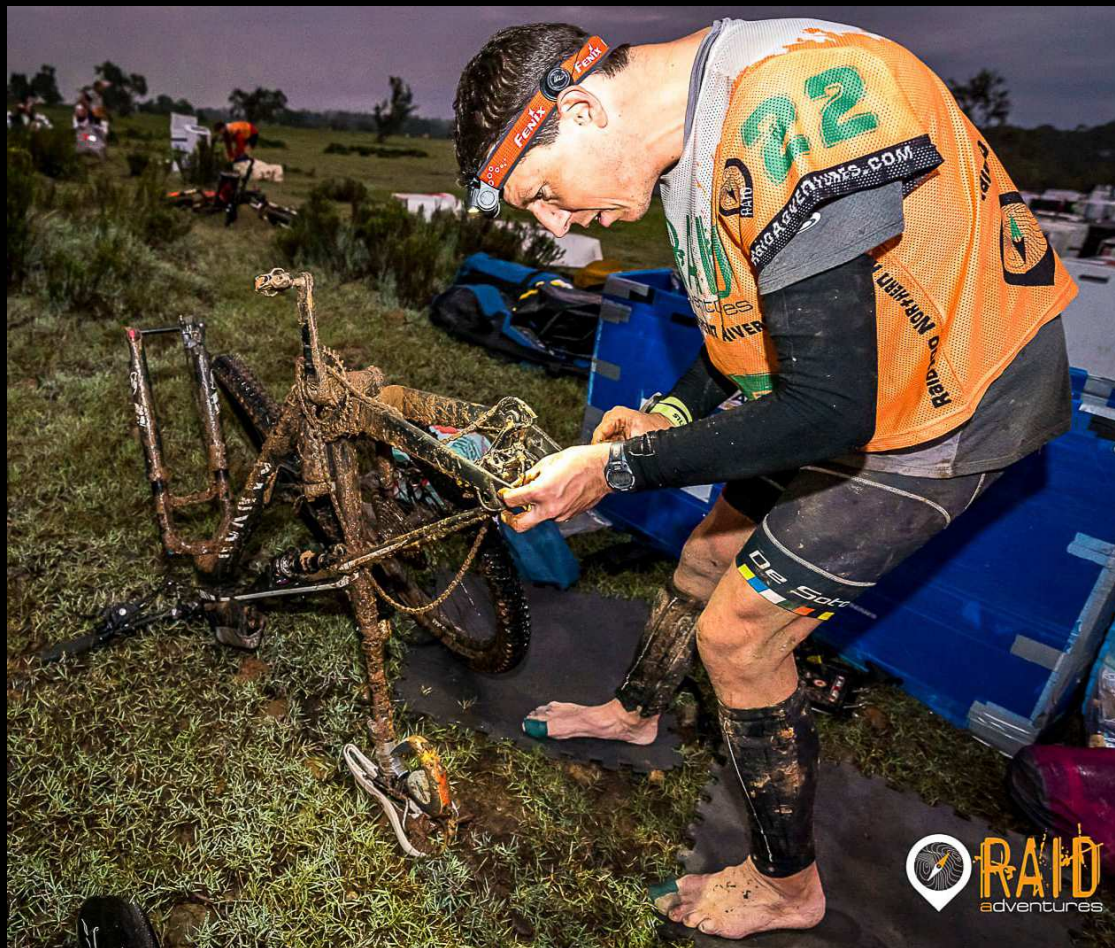
Our chosen route for the opening stage started off with a little bit of headland running, complete with the picturesque Yamba lighthouse. A brief 10km paddle was just enough to help us realise there was a long way to go. A further 15k run on track and beach before the final 35k slog through estuaries and the Wooloweyah Lagoon to the transition area.

Highlights from this stage include:

- The biggest Sea Eagle I've ever seen, gliding on thermals and scouting for fish.
- A school of stingray frolicking in the shallows.
- Dodging a massive wild boar deep within a lantana thicket.
- Suffering the combined effect of headwind, an outgoing tide and half a foot of chop as we progressed across a lagoon littered with sandbank.
- Paddling into the transition area as the setting sun painted the sky a golden hue. It was a glorious end to a long day on the water.

Expedition race transitions are their own special kind of fun, with kayak to bike probably the most challenging of the lot. This was not helped at all by the fact that my bike had been dismantled into a multitude of pieces to fit into its box. A fact that Shelley was quick to school me in, and we agreed to rectify for the sake of our combined sanity in subsequent transition areas.





Stage 2 - MTB ~76km ~6.5hrs

Total: ~141km ~18.5hrs

Stage 2 was a 70km+ ride up into the Giberagee state forest and had a hard deadline of 3 am, where we had to board a bus in the town of Lawrance. As such, we made the decision to forgo a number of more remote checkpoints and ensure we got through the stage without being stranded and suffering some stiff (but justifiable) penalties. Although wet underfoot and tyre, this stage passed without incident, and we made it to our bus rendezvous successfully. We made good use of our time with Shelley proving to me that, rather than a full bike strip down, she could, in fact, jam said bike into the bike box just with just the wheels removed! I'm still convinced she is some form of magician.

With dry feet for the first time in 20 hours(!), warm clothes and full bellies, we enjoyed our first sleep of the race on the bus ride up into the mountains.

Stage 3 - Trek ~55km ~13hrs

Total: ~196k ~31.5hrs // Total Sleep: 1.5hrs

Stage 3 was designed to be an extended off-track navigational challenge through the Gibraltar Range National Park. Unfortunately, at the 11th hour, National Parks revoked the off-track permit and Liam and the RAID team scrambled to re-route the course to stay within the confines of the track network. While disappointing not to see the remote corners of the park, the trek was spectacular, with granite boulders, lush bushland and clear-flowing rivers. Shelley and I navigated well through the track network, even managing to make some quality decisions that delayed a number of other teams. With a day and a half of racing behind us, we made our way to TA, looking forward to drying out our feet (again) and getting off the hoof and onto our bikes.

A note on racing as a pair - expedition-length races are usually undertaken as a team of four people. This has a number of benefits over racing as a pair, with the most noticeable being the ability to share navigation duties. Navigation is mentally taxing, and as a pair we were full-time navigating in parallel. I'm extremely proud of how well Shelley and I worked together throughout this race, sharing and supporting each other as the days wore on.



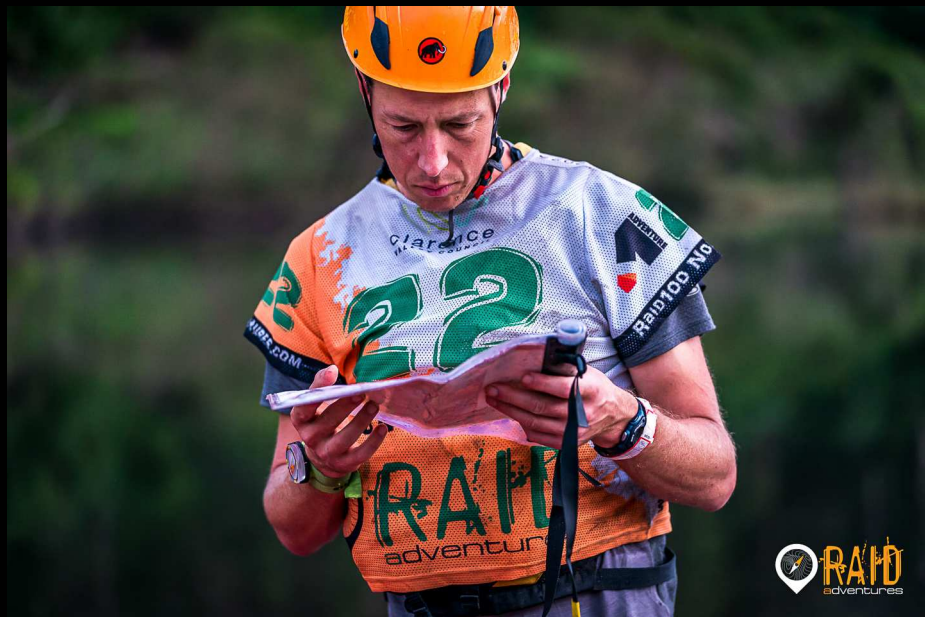


Stage 4 - MTB ~125km ~14hrs

Total: ~321k ~45.5hrs // Total Sleep: 3.5hrs

After many soggy hours underfoot, we were super stoked to don dry socks, jump on our bikes and head into the hills. The first 15 kilometres were on the Bicentennial Trail, and due to all the rain, it should be better known as the Bicentennial Swamp... complete with fallen trees and other goodies to ensure our dry socks stayed dry for about the first 5 minutes. With few checkpoints and decision points along the way, our accumulated fatigue started to take its toll, so once we hit more formed roads, we opted for our second sleep of the race. 2 hours, wrapped in everything we were carrying to fend off the cold, saw us back on the bikes through still sleeping farmland to Mount Mitchell state forest.

Our reward for our toils was a couple of relatively easy checkpoints and then an extended bitumen descent down and along the Boyd River. This was glorious, twisty and steep and most importantly, down... For a really long time. Mostly it was dark and slightly surreal then, at some point, the sun came up and with it the energy for the final push into a checkpoint that involved strapping ourselves in for a short abseil into the river itself. From there, a short spin into the transition area to dismantle our bikes and blow up our packraft, though not before a mystery checkpoint! Huge kudos to Shelley, who took on what can only be described as a sketchy-as tree climb to punch the card and score us some extra points.





Stage 5 - Packraft / Trek / Packraft ~61km ~27hrs

Total: ~382k ~72hrs // Total Sleep: 7.5hrs

Stage 5 was an extended paddle along the Nymboida river including a loop trek about halfway through. With multiple fast-flowing rapids, teams had to be off the water overnight, and we had timed our commencement fairly well to ensure we would get through to the loop trek with plenty of time before dark... or so we thought.

Part 1 - Water, rock and tree.

We set off with a little bit of trepidation and a fair bit of excitement about paddling fun whitewater in an amazingly beautiful location. We got through the first few rapids well, paddling strongly, building confidence and having a few laughs as we bumped our way down the river. Then the tree section came... and one of those trees decided it wanted our packraft and there was not a damn thing we could do about it! We dropped to the top of the rapid, the raft went a little sideways... Suddenly, we were in the water.

I grabbed hold of Shelley, and our bodies got dragged through the remainder of the washing machine, thankfully without injury or further incident. We made it to the riverbank, and after checking we were both ok, we looked around to locate our raft. Ohhhhhh bugga 50 metres upstream, there's our raft, nicely wrapped around a tree branch in the middle of the river. Not ideal.

I won't bore you all with the deliberations involved as to what to do. In short, it was either figure out a way to get out into the middle of the river and retrieve the raft or hit the emergency beacon and await a rescue, basically ending our race. With that in mind, and with Shelley perched on a rock in the middle of the river with a throw rope, I found myself jumping into the water upstream, swimming into the rapids, and shimmying out along the offending tree branch to spend some quality time working out how I could release the raft and continue our journey.

I'll take a moment for a massive shout-out to two teams who paused their race to help us through this situation and give us the confidence to operate well outside our comfort zone to solve this problem. Thank you, team #32 AWOL, who waited on the bank in case things went horribly wrong. Along with team #14 Rewild Turbo Moxie Tigers, who waited downstream and collected our things as they disgorged from the whitewater.

Releasing the raft involved three key activities:

- 1) The Slippery Log Challenge: think carnies and fairy floss, except instead of winning a plush toy, the reward of staying on is not getting caught up in a strainer and having a more serious problem to deal with;
- 2) The Acrobatics Challenge: how to reach the air release valve, conveniently located under the whitewater out of arm's reach (hint: this involved gripping the aforementioned slippery log with my legs and no small amount of thoughts and prayers)

3) The Thread-the-needle Challenge: sending the deflated raft and all our gear down the river without getting anything hung up on anything else.

Against all odds, we got it done. Incredibly, our raft re-inflated and we were able to continue down the river, albeit a little shaken, a little colder and definitely pushed for time to make it to the midpoint before dark.

Part 2 - Big hills, thick scrub.

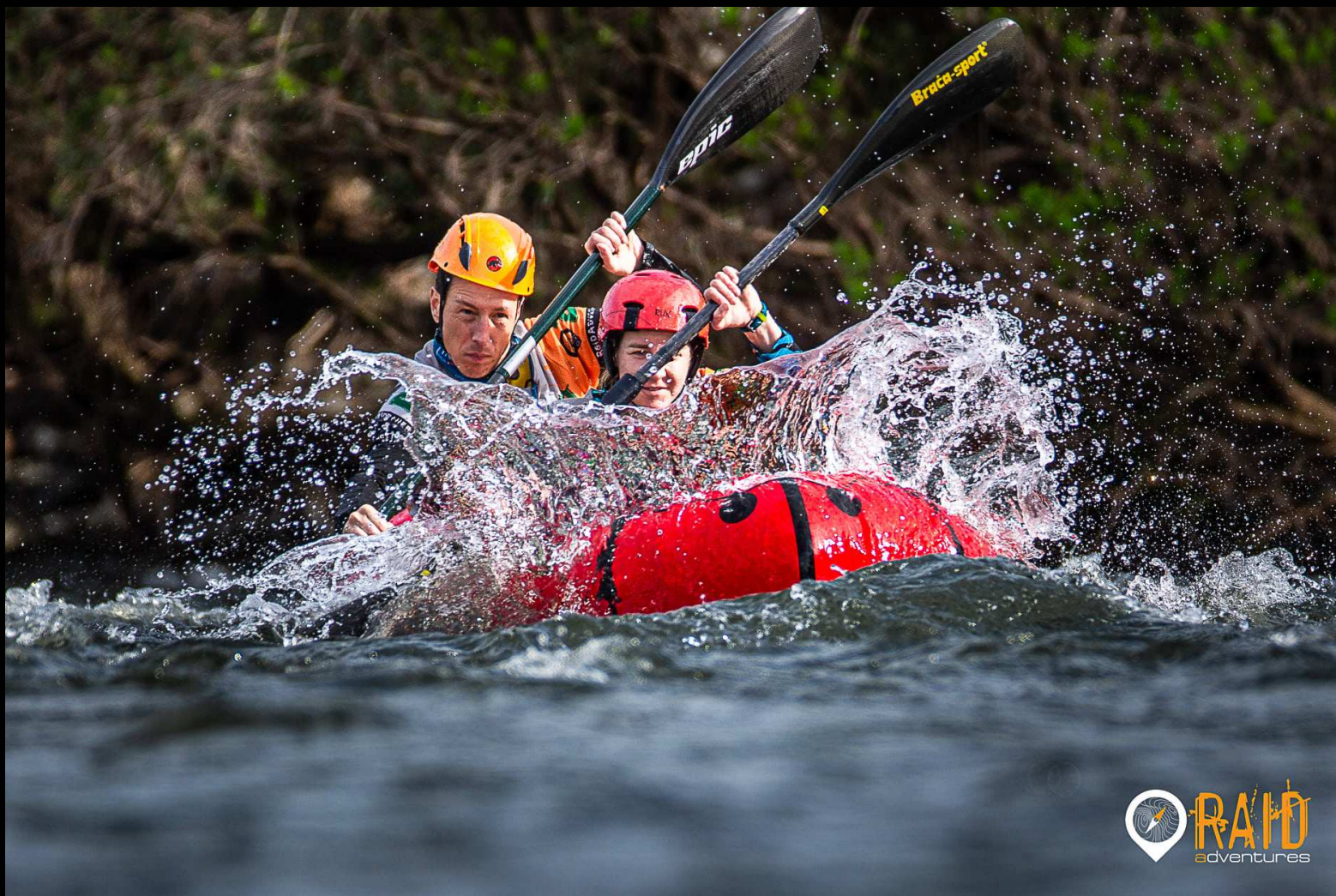
Strategically placed in the centre of the long river section, Liam and the organising team had kindly arranged for a remote trek rogaine to keep us all entertained for the night while we could not paddle on the river. Far from relaxing, this section was characterised by never-ending hills and copious amounts of lantana. The combination of steepness, gnarly bush-bashing and 65 hours of racing started to take its toll, and we opted for an extended sleep before heading back down to the river. Choosing a patch of earth for a kip mid-race is always a gamble and often results in waking stiff, cold and sore. This time, however, we hit the sleeping jackpot - a cleared, recently mown field, with the cut grass lying like hay ready to welcome our weary bones. We drifted off for 4 glorious hours, waking at 4 am for the trek back down the hill.

Part 3 - Rapids and repairs

Pre-dawn, we got ready to recommence our river journey at 6 am sharp. Neil Tahi, one of the wonderful volunteers, met us at the water's edge and suggested we pair up with another team for safety on this stretch as the lower half of the river is more involved than the upper. Given that our intimate encounter with a tree was still fresh in our minds, we teamed up with Gavin and Dylan from team #38 Marginal Gains. The guys were great, we had some laughs, shared some stories, cursed carrying our rafts through the mandatory portages and collected a few checkpoints along the way. At some point our raft started deflating, just a little, enough to stop every 10 minutes or so to re-inflate... then a little more frequently... then a little more. Until Shelley would paddle as I lay over the back of the boat, providing a continual stream of air to keep our raft afloat. What started as an inconvenience had turned into a full-blown problem: a leaking raft in the rain with no obvious place where the air was making its escape.

Knowing this was going to take a while for us to solve, we thanked the boys and let them on their way. The first task was to get as warm as possible, and in the process, golden-ears Shelley says, "shush, shush, I think I hear it!" She was right, locating a mounting point where the glue had given up, letting our precious air out into the ether. Luckily I had purchased a roll of magical Tyvek tape in the preceding days... unluckily, Tyvek is not so magical on the side of a river, in the pouring rain, without a stitch of dry anything between us. Our inner MacGyver kicked in. Using our throw rope as a wedge and the weight of my behind, we managed to stem the flow enough to see us through to the end. Safe to say, we were both pleased to see the end of what had been a very eventful two days on the river.





Stage 6 - MTB / Trek / MTB ~70km ~16hrs

Total: ~452k ~88.5hrs // Total Sleep: 7.5hrs

Our transition to bikes was pleasingly hampered by the good people at the Mann River Caravan park serving up what could possibly be the world's best burgers and sweet potato chips, totally delicious and totally worth every one of the 72 hours it had taken us to get to this point. With full bellies, we set off as the sun set, peddling up the hill towards Grange State Forest for the final trekking section of this race. Trekking was swampy, but that meant nice and soft underfoot. Our navigation and route choices were strong, resulting in efficient execution before mounting our bikes once again and heading for the hills.

Up, up and more up, probably with an equal amount of riding and pushing. By this point, I was in a world of hurt, feet totally trashed after days of saturated socks and shoes, plus my lower back was on fire after riding my bike for more in the preceding 3 days than I had all year (I checked Strava). Thankfully we were well stocked with pain meds, and even more thankfully, Shelley is super strong and stoic. There was nothing else for it other than working to keep up and keep my old man noises to a minimum. At some point, a thick mist descended, so we had darkness, steep hills and don't forget the mud to keep us entertained... Eventually, we made it to the top.

The next section had a special note in the course description: Course vetters note that the recent rain events have resulted in a lot of damage to the trail network. Demonstrate caution, particularly on the steep descent into CP91. What this should have said is: If you happen to be attempting this mine-shaft-like descent in the dark and rain with a thick mist, get ready to fall off... a lot...

It was part comical, part soil your pants type fun. I went over the bars at least 4 times, and by the time we made it to the bottom, I could smell my brake pads and was quite happy to still be in one piece. In contrast, Shelley descended in her usual fashion, much more gracefully and with a lot less cursing. We were both glad to be off the mountain with, what we hoped, was a fairly straightforward route alongside the Clarence river to our final TA.

Instead we had three hours that shall hence be known as the fire trail of doom. 30 odd kilometres in the dark, through featureless cleared land with what felt like hundreds of near identical switchbacks - ride up the hill, hard right, ride down the hill, hard left. All the while hoping we can determine which of the corners housed our next checkpoint. It was mildly soul destroying, though like most things, perseverance leads to eventual success! Finally we found ourselves peddling through the pre-dawn into our final transition, all smiles and no small amount of relief. It was time to eat, pack away our bikes for the last time and get ourselves on the river. During this process, as I removed my rear wheel, my rear derailleur fell clean off my bike, onto the ground. Shelley and I looked at each other in disbelief, any earlier and that would have made for a very difficult race. We just laughed and thanked the adventure racing gods as I stuffed the lot into the bike box. A problem for another day! This had been an extremely challenging ride and we found out later only 8 other teams chose to traverse that mountain, a decision that made all the difference in our standing at the finish line.





Stage 7 - Kayak ~48km ~7.5hrs

Total: ~500k ~96hrs // Total Sleep: 7.5hrs

The final stage was upon us. A straightforward paddle down the Clarence River, complete with fast flowing water sure to make the final push an enjoyable one... or so we thought. Climbing into our kayak, we launched out into the current as the morning sun lit the sky. It was glorious, with minimal effort to stay with the water and watch the world zip by. We chatted and laughed, buoyed to be approaching the end of our journey at pace! On and on we bobbed, and then the world just stopped... our boat was no longer moving forward without our intervention.

We were becalmed, just 10k into 48.

After a short period of desperation for what could have been, we started moving forward again, this time under our own steam. After 90 hours of racing, this was flat water paddling at its worst, and fairly soon, we were both falling asleep at the wheel (or paddle as it may). Caffeine tablets were consumed, then consumed again. Delirium led to hysterics, yet all the while, we paddled, knowing that every stroke was one stroke closer to our goal, that resting would get us nowhere, and that surely the map was wrong, and our finish was just around the corner.

Then we were there. Clambering from our kayak, we made our way to the finish line, surrounded by smiling, tired faces, where we were greeted by the news that we had won the pairs category (what!) and placed 6th overall (double what!). Our perseverance and willingness to keep pushing for 4 full days scored us top of the podium glory, a prize swag but more importantly, an enormous feeling of achievement that we shared with everyone who had taken part in this amazing sport. A sport that asks a great deal of both body and mind, but that gives even more through shared joys and suffering.

Huge thank you's go to:

Shelley, who was a wonderful teammate.

Liam and the Rogue Adventure team for setting a fantastic race.

All the super amazing volunteers who willingly give their time and energy to allow us to compete.

Our fellow competitors, especially those mentioned for the parts you played getting us to the finish line.

Till next time.

