

XPD

as much an expedition as a race

For the duration of 2008 the question: "how will I complete XPD?" has been at the forefront of my mind, but as of last Tuesday the 25th of November, it is done. Team Outdoor Australia crossed the finish line in Thredbo after 152hrs of racing.

Below is my account of this amazing event, I hope you enjoy the story and the photos.

Preparation

We arrived in Jindabyne on Friday night to allow two days for last minute preparation, packing, training and relaxation. Over the previous two weeks I had pre-bagged my food and clothing with the intention of simply kicking back for a couple of easy days before kick-off.



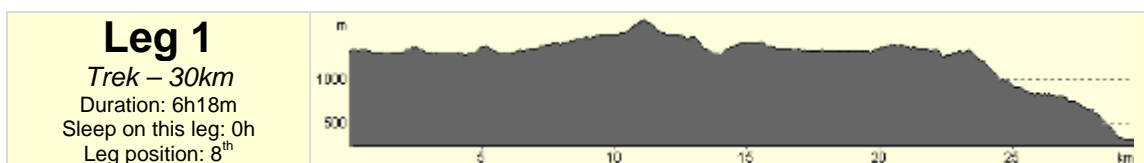
Not so, the house quickly descended into chaos, my carefully prepared and packaged food strategy went out the window and we spent two full days packing and re-packing in order to get our collective weights below the acceptable limits.

Monday saw the team complete their mandatory equipment and competency checks (any spare time was used to 'finish' packing) and then on Tuesday morning we were presented with our maps and our first look at what was in-store for the coming days.

We had 6hrs to prepare our maps, review the course and fill the five 120L tubs the organisers would place around the course for us. Of course we spent our time re-packing the food and equipment we had re-packed over

the last few days... Safe to say that we all learned a few hard lessons about how *not* to approach this event next time around.

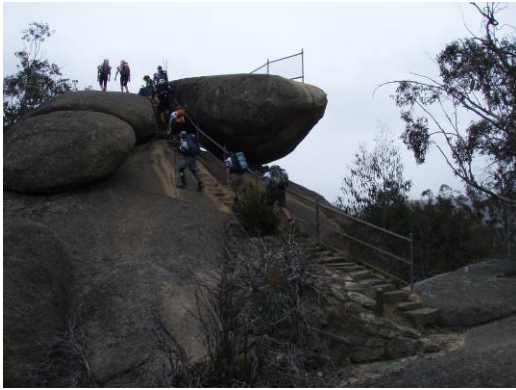
The following items were casualties of the "re-packing to make weight" process: 60+ tins of food (from big-eats to creamed rice), up to 3kg of fruitcake, fruit in jelly, fruit cups, anything with an ounce of fluid, and more muesli bars than I can poke a stick at. After dumping a huge amount of food I was fairly certain that I was going to starve some time in the next 10 days.



Like a true expedition this was to be a point-to-point event, starting in Mt Buffalo, VIC and finishing in Thredbo, NSW. Come 6am Wednesday the 19th of November 31 teams were loaded onto a bus for the 5hr interstate journey. Anyone who has travelled with me for any period of time will understand when I say that this was certainly *not* the easiest leg of the race.

After a short stop to re-build our bikes (they are transported around the course in bike boxes) we were off exploring various scenic locations around the mountain top.

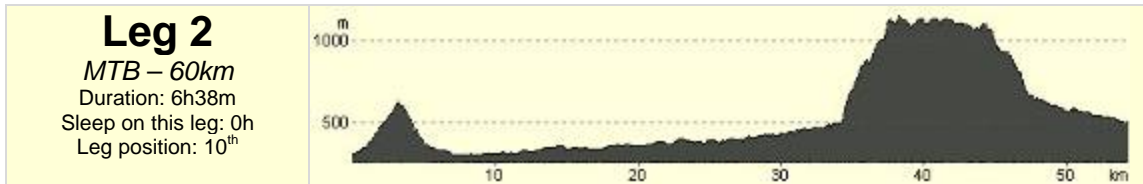




Mt Buffalo is a fabulous location with the only downside of this leg being the low cloud that rolled in shortly after the start, totally obscuring any views that were on offer.

If you are in the area visit Mt Buffalo and let me know what I missed out on!

We moved quickly through this leg, keenly aware that although there was over 770kms to go we had to reach the start of the first kayak leg before dusk on Friday (2 days from now).



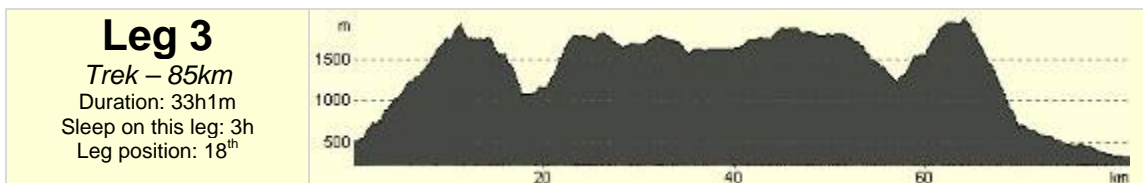
After a quick transition we were off on the first bike leg of the race. The first hill was a rude awakening and an indication for what was to come. Shortly thereafter bad weather rolled in, this combined with the terrain and a serious amount of mud meant we were in for a long night, with some quality time pushing our bikes.

One team described this leg as “a trek leg with where each person had to take a mandatory bike”. This was not far from the truth.

I am suffering suppressed memory of this leg and all I can report is that I was left with a couple of choice blisters on my heels courtesy of climbing multiple hills in wet bike shoes. We rolled into the transition area (TA) around 3am Thursday morning.



Casualties of this leg: 1) my sparkling white Earth Sea Sky Silk Weight shirt, it got covered in enough mud to stand up on its own. Thankfully it washes well and dries even better, a fantastic piece of clothing. 2) Sean's bike shoe, it had to be gaffa-taped to his pedal after the cleat packed it in.



We left the TA just before dawn and it was immediately apparent that transitions were certainly not our strong suit. It had taken us just under 3hrs to eat, pack up our bikes and get ourselves ready for the walk. We were far from the slowest team but even further from the fastest.

Dressed in our wet-weather gear we headed out for what was to be by far the longest trek my three teammates had undertaken, I was fairly confident having completed Oxfam earlier this year but even still 85kms of wet feet is not to be taken lightly. 15 minutes down the track the sun rose and the weather cleared, off came the jackets and we were underway.

Our next checkpoint (CP5) was on top of Mt Feather Top, 12kms away, all uphill. The higher we climbed the thicker the mist became and once we hit the exposed ridge it was past time to rug up and throw the waterproofs back on. Our feet, which had not really dried out from the bike were once again saturated and there was still a long way to go.

From there we made our way through to the ski-resort town of falls creek. As darkness descended for the second time we decided to push on for a few more hours before having a sleep.

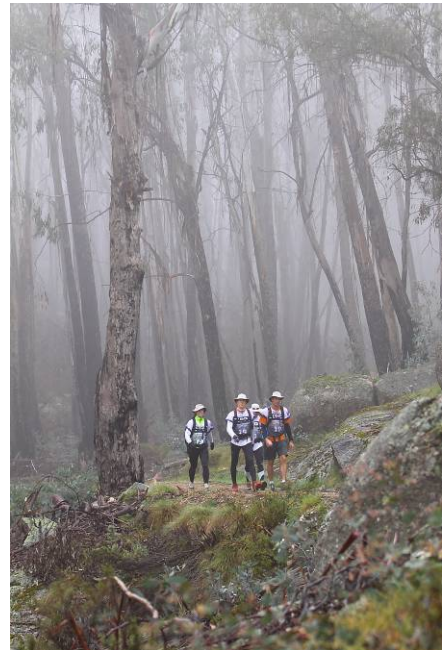
Our destination was Roper hut, about 15kms outside of Falls Creek, and we pulled into the area around midnight. After the initial scare of not actually being able to find said hut we were further disappointed when the green, wet firewood forbade us its warmth. After a quick meal of dehydrated goodness we bedded down for the night.



We were sleeping on the floor of Roper hut, on our two mandatory foam mats (between four) in our emergency blanket bags. If you have not had the pleasure of experiencing one of these bags then do yourself a favour and *never* buy one to sleep in. It started off so well, warm and toasty. That lasted for about 1.5hrs at which point I shivered myself awake, splashed and slithered my way out of the pool of sweat that had become my bed. Not pretty.

As bad as our 3hr sleep may have been it was still better than our friends the GuRus who had bedded down 100m away unable to find our not-so warm and cosy hut.

Come 3am we were off again descending to the Bundara river, this was a top walk which included a sunrise breakfast (muesli & powdered milk, the choice of kings), some magnificent views and the opportunity to get our nice dry feet wet once again as we crossed the river.



It was now Friday morning and by this stage a number of teams had been *short-coursed* due to the need to complete the next kayak leg before nightfall.

Next for us was a 6km climb to Mt Bogong, the highest mountain in Victoria. It was a long 6kms, made harder by the seemingly ever present mist & rain. After spending some time searching around Mt Widowmaker convinced we were at the top, the mist cleared enough for us to see the remaining 300 vertical meters we needed to climb. "Onwards and upwards" as they say.

Mirroring the climb was a 6km descent that will be forever known as *the punisher*. 2.5hrs of walking downhill. Steve and Kelly were already suffering knee issues and every step down was a serious effort.

The last 13kms of this leg were on tar, mostly flat but after 70kms nothing is easy. By now Sean had a serious case of trench foot. Every step was agony, with old mate Neurofen, the promise of sitting in a kayak and a good dose of stubbornness the only thing keeping him going.

The combination of 4 bung knees, 2 rotten feet and fairly average weather made for a tough 85kms but finally we were there. This should have represented a highpoint for the race, not only was the longest trek done but we had made it to the kayak before nightfall... not so. Upon arriving we were greeted with the news that the river was swollen from all the rain and the boats were a further 11kms downstream. Punishment, but if we did not make it to the boats in time we would have to walk a further 20kms. We had to keep moving and we had to do it quickly.

Casualties of this leg: 4 knees, 2 feet and at least 8 pairs of socks.

Leg 4
 Kayak – 32km
 Duration: 4h58m
 Sleep on this leg: 2h
 Leg position: 2nd

We arrived at the TA hurting and were greeted with the news that we had 50mins to get to the 6pm cut-off point and avoid walking the final leg of this paddle. Only one team had done this section in under an hour. For the sake of Sean's feet and Kelly's knees we desperately needed to avoid any unnecessary walking.

So no rest for the wicked, we jumped into our boats and were off. For our team this leg represented a sprint race rather than an expedition. With little water and no food we gave it our all, headed down stream, constantly thankful that we were no longer on our feet.



Having never paddled white-water before I was very glad that Sean knew what was going on. There were some fantastic rapid sections and our team was one of the few who made it through without going for a swim. The rock and willow-tree fast water sections were absolutely amazing. This leg was the highlight of the race. If you have never kayaked on white-water get out there and have a go, it is so much fun.

We made the cut-off, just. Race organiser Craig Bycroft shouted from the bank, "don't stop, you are doing well but you have a long paddle ahead, you must be off the water by 8". It was 6pm Friday.

Hammer and tongs we continued down the river, the fear of walking still looming large, but not enough to stop us enjoying such a fantastic part of our journey.



Again we made it, just. At 8pm we pulled into Keegan's bridge, it was starting to get dark, we had not really eaten or drunk for the past 3 hours and even though we did not end up swimming we were saturated. It did not take me long to suffer the chills and start to slide the slippery path towards hypothermia.

I thought I had been cold before but never had I been cold like this. My mind was treacle, my body wooden, I was speaking garbage and there are a couple of hours missing that I will never get back. I owe a big thanks to Sue from the GuRus for helping me change and get warm once again.

Meanwhile back in the world of warm-people discussions were underway regarding the weather that was bearing down on the next leg of the course. Blizzards and a top of -1 degree were forecast and word *severe* was on everyone's lips. I was oblivious, my treacle mind was simply following instructions from my team to pack my things and get ready to go.

After some warm food I started to feel human again and the weather hit. Our team, packed and ready to go, decided to have a sleep in order to ensure I was warmed through and to give Steve's knee some time to recover. We woke after a couple of hours but were stopped from leaving by Craig who, after consultation with National Parks, made the right decision to put the course on hold and move all the teams to mid-camp at Tintalra.

Casualties of this leg: 1) my modesty, getting changed in plain view on the back of a truck when it was very, very cold.

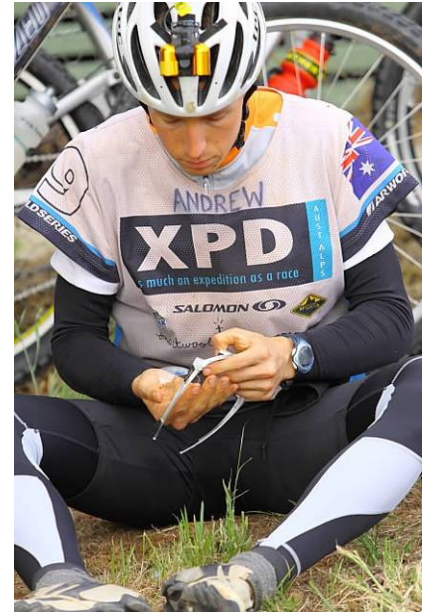
Mid-camp

Duration: 30h+
Sleep at camp: ~10h
Leg position:

Come Saturday afternoon the sleepy town of Tintaldra was not expecting 200+ people on their doorstep any more than we were expecting snow in summer or that the course would be shortened. That did not stop Alf and Maja at the Tintaldra pub putting on a fantastic spit roast dinner or the teams getting together and enjoying the extended break from the race.

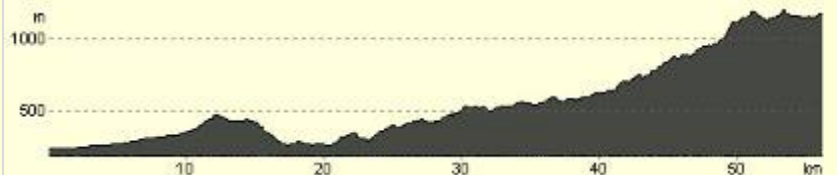
The break made for a fantastic race experience, increasing the social side of XPD and making the second half interesting by compressing the field. I don't think that too many teams were too disappointed. We organised ourselves a cabin in the local caravan park and allowed our bodies to recover.

On Sunday morning Craig announced that the race would restart at 6pm. Another round of re-packing followed this announcement (due to slight course changes) and a couple of hours more sleep. By this stage the team was feeling great and amped for the restart!



Leg 7

MTB – 65km
Duration: 5h38m
Sleep on this leg: 0h
Leg position: 6th



The restart proceeded in time-trial fashion with a 30 second gap between teams. With so much recovery time we went out charging, drafting and working together to post the 6th best time in the field.

Looking back at the altitude graph I am struggling to remember that there was so much uphill... the mid-camp rest obviously did wonders for the legs.

We pulled into TA without incident, ready for the coming trek.

Leg 8
 Trek – 25km
 Duration: 10h30m
 Sleep on this leg: 0h
 Leg position: 16th

This leg involved 25km of orienteering to collect 7 of 8 checkpoints. A combination of bad route choices, tough terrain and sore knees made this one of our slowest legs but the abundance of snow certainly made it memorable.

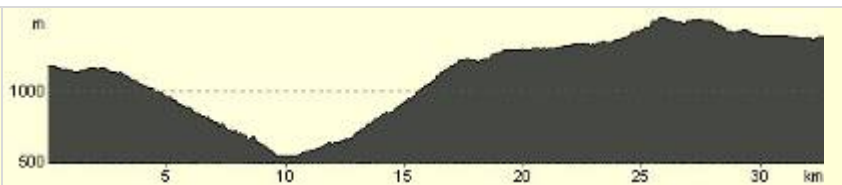


We started out by choosing the one checkpoint that almost all the other teams decided to skip. It involved a bunch of off-track navigation, across a hill and down a spur and more brambles than I care to remember. Not ideal for just after midnight on a Monday morning.

From there we climbed for a while until the whole area was covered in a four inch blanket of snow. The next 6 or so hours were spent crunching or sloshing our way to each checkpoint. As you can imagine, my lightweight breathable shoes were fantastic... on the up-side the snow did help reduce any swelling we may have been suffering.

After failing miserably on a trackless shortcut across a couple of hills and gullies we trudged our way back to TA, our previous elation at being a "fast" team had certainly evaporated.

Leg 9
 MTB – 60km
 Duration: 5h30m
 Sleep on this leg: 0h
 Leg position: 11th



Due to the conditions this leg was extended past the next trek (leg 10). The total distance was approximately 60kms.

For what seemed like the first time this race the sun was shining and the first 10kms of this leg were all downhill. So downhill in fact that we clocked speeds in excess of 75km per hour on a tar road to the river. Bliss.

The next challenge involved loading 4 bikes and 4 people into an inflatable kayak and paddling it (without paddles) across the river. The upside of this was that we did not have to swim and that none of the bikes ended up on the bottom of the river.





What goes down must come up, right? What followed was an 8km consistent climb.

Now, I'm not sure why or even if I could repeat the feat but for some reason it was within my power to sit and spin all the way to the top. I even remember enjoying it. Surely I must have been delirious.

With brake pads down to metal, Sean's bike was "screaming like a baby" and made this tough ride even tougher for him.

We found a couple of teams on the way up. Another benefit of the mid-camp stopover was that we got to know other teams a little better meaning great camaraderie out on the course.

Once we hit the tar I found the going easy and we worked as a team to get through to the end.

Casualties of this leg: 1) my sunnies that I intelligently hung on the front of my shirt, never to be seen again... what is worse, I actually rode back down the hill to look for them...

Leg 11

Kayak – 30km

Duration: 8h40

Sleep on this leg: 2h

Leg position: 12th

It was 8pm on Monday and none of us were looking forward to the paddle across Lake Eucumbene. We got all our gear ready and decided to have our first sleep of the second half of the race before heading out. We knew from then onwards with only two legs to go it would be non-stop till the finish.

Navigation on this leg had the potential to be the toughest for the event. The map we were given did not reflect the lake geography due to low water levels, in addition it was a misty night with no moon and a touch of rain. After 5 days of racing we were all on the tired side of awake, making the possibility of *sleepmonsters* even more of a reality.

We had to carry our boats for 2kms before we reached the small river that was our entry point. To our delight it was flowing and flowing well. Easy kilometres!

This situation continued for much longer than we expected, so much so we began to doubt that we were in the right place. Being a river it did not give us much choice so we persevered. Eventually we popped out onto the lake proper, and without the assistance of daylight or an accurate map our approach was to hug the right-hand bank and keep heading south-west.

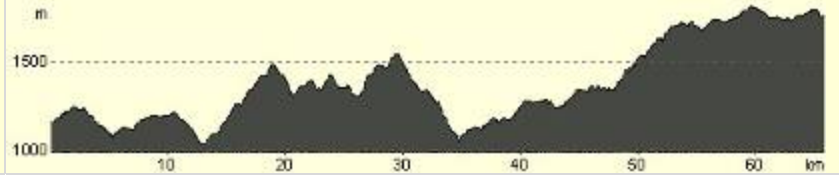
We ended up in what we thought was only a single bay away from our destination. It was 4:30am (Monday) and since we could not be totally sure we stayed put and waited for daylight. The cold on this leg was fairly intense, on the water there is little relief from wind nor rain, mentally this was probably one of the toughest legs for us and more than once I caught myself succumbing to sleep.

With the light increasing and our position confirmed we pushed on the end of the leg, everyone was suffering, but our spirits soared as we approached the back to see we had visitors. Julie, my mum and my dad had camped out in the car at the TA, waiting to see us come in. It was fantastic to see them and it made carrying the boats straight up a big hill easy (almost).

Casualties of this leg: any lasting thought that kayaking at night was fun. Cold, wet, dark, no idea where you are, then your arms start to hurt...

Leg 12

MTB – 65km
Duration: 7h30m
Sleep on this leg: 0h
Leg position: 5th



After once again spending way too long in TA we were off for the final bike leg of the race. There was little left between us and the finish line.

Not eating enough when I am kayaking seems to be a bad habit of mine and my energy for the initial part of this ride was low. Sustagen and positive thoughts about the finish kept me ticking until I could get enough food in to recharge.

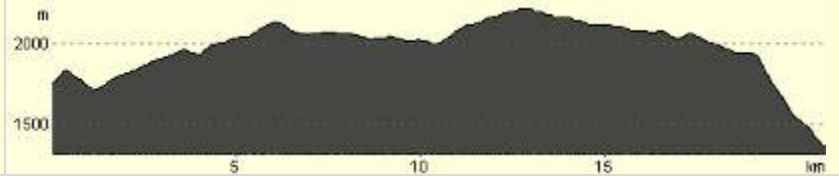
Surprise, surprise this leg contained hills and as the day heated up it was punishing. Temperature regulation became an issue especially above the snow-line, we would cook on ascent and freeze our way down the other side. There were not too many complaints though, we were all just happy that it was not raining.



From Smiggin's to Charlotte's tarred roads were once again met with enthusiasm, as much as we enjoy the off-road component of our sport the dirt can really sap the energy. We pushed on, sit-bones howling in agony, not long to go now.

Leg 13

Trek – 13km
Duration: 4h59m
Sleep on this leg: 0h
Leg position: 12th



This leg was shortened due to snow on the main range. From Charlotte's we trekked directly to Kosciusko rather than via Carruthers peak.



We pushed through our last transition in record time knowing that our good friends the GuRus would be fast approaching. They entered TA as we were climbing the hill under the chair out of Charlotte's Pass village.

Hot footing it, knowing we had a meagre lead, we pushed for Kosciusko. Kelly suggested a bit of running but her knees did not hold up their end of the bargain.

The GuRus caught us about half way through and with little encouragement we agreed to finish the race together.



Reaching the final checkpoint of any race provides an amazing sense of achievement. This checkpoint represented the fact that we had covered close to 600km of some very tough terrain and only had 5km to go to the top of the Thredbo chairlift.

The scene was amazing. It was close to sunset, the weather was clear and we were injury free. What more could we want... except to make it in time to catch the last chair down.

It was not to be so. We got to Eagle's Nest some time after 9pm knowing full well that the bell had rung and the already tough course was leaving its corner for the final round. 5km, straight down hill, pure punishment for tender knees. With the finish glittering like diamonds on velvet below we summoned the courage to take it on.

At 10pm on Tuesday the 25th of November Team Outdoor Australia and the GuRus completed XPD in 152hrs (just over 6 days). It was an amazing journey with many memories and more lessons than I care to count.

XPD 2008 provided a unique view of our wonderful country, along with a good dose of personal challenge and the opportunity to enjoy working as a team throughout an expedition. For those of you thinking of taking something like this on, you should. For those of you thinking I must be crazy, you should too. Why? *Because it is easier not to.*

Andrew Renwick.
Team Outdoor Australia

10 things I would not leave home without

1. Injinji socks - if you are walking further than your corner store, wear Injinji. Not only will they protect your feet but the individual toes make a great talking point.
2. LineBreak Velocity Tights - I wear LineBreak for all my events. Warm or cold, wet or dry, whatever the conditions my legs are supported and protected.
3. Walking poles - a must. They help support your knees and your feet. Trust me, the annoying tic, tic, tic sound fades after a while.
4. Sustagen Sport - it will pull you out of a hole time and time again, tasty too.
5. Endurolytes by Hammer Nutrition - forget sweet powders and salty foods, Endurolytes allow you to drink water and manage your electrolytes with ease.
6. Toothbrush - after long days of race food your mouth becomes a furry mess, give it some love.
7. Camera - to capture those special moments ☺
8. Foot/Chamois Lube - whatever your poison, take a lot. For this race mine was Qoleum, apply it and don't be shy.
9. Buff - they look a little strange but the possibilities are endless.
10. Dirty Girl Gaiters - lightweight and great for keeping annoying bits and pieces out of your shoes.

Extracts from team blogs completed on course

CP4 - Harrietville

Thursday 4:04am - outdoor Australia - Steve

At transition now and we are soaking wet. The bike was ok but the weather is crazy! so wet ! then 7km from this transition (where we have now changed into dry clothes and are eating warm rehydrated food! Yummmmmmmmm) oh yeah, 7kms out Sean's shoe cleat broke and he could no longer un-clip his shoe from his bike. With a bit of gaffer tape we taped his shoe in and prayed he didn't need to unclip. We are now deciding when to push through the 85km trek... we need to leave ASAP to get to the kayaks before the cut off! We still have to pull our bikes apart and pack up and put wet clothes back on and head out. Hoping to sleep a bit in a hut on the 85km trek up near Mt Bogong

CP6 - Falls Creek

Thursday 9pm - Team 19 Outdoor Australia - Sean

Hi all. The race is on to make the first (white water) kayak leg by Friday lunch. We are all doing well, but it hasn't been easy going - harsh weather and lots of ups and downs and ups and downs, etc. Still have not slept during the race - tonight will be our first - hopefully in a warm alpine hut. Best moment of the day was stopping in at a hut for a late lunch and finding that there was still a fire alight from the previous occupants. Toughest moment of the day was freezing on the top of Fethertop, after 12km of uninterrupted uphill on foot. Hope you are all well.

CP12 - Tintaldr Mid Camp

Sunday 2pm - Team Outdoor Australia - Steve

Well lots has happened since last time. After leaving Falls Creek we trekked up the hills towards Victoria's Highest point Mt Bogong. Feet hurting and very cold and sleepy we tried to get some sleep at Roper Hut. We spent a cold 3 hours sleeping on the floor because all the fire wood was to green or wet. At about 4am we continued along the trail stopping for breakfast then making our way up to ridge to the trig. The weather up top got worse and worse with sideways rain and sleet. The trail down was a knee killer and everyone was hurt by the end of our 6km, 2.5hr descent. We made good time along the road trying to make the paddle in time. We made it with only an hour to get to the first cut off bridge. We paddled the hardest that we had ever done, our legs were so sore that we were all keen to stay paddling and not miss the dark zone. Finishing the paddle we decided to get some sleep and start in the morning in to the mountains again. THEN the race was put on hold. Now we are in mid camp, we have found ourselves a cabin in the caravan park with lots of rain and snow around us. Recovery is going along well, with everyone suffering from foot fatigue and sore knees. We are all keen to get going and get to the finish now and the rest has served us well. With still a lot to go spirits are high and we can't wait for the restart at 6pm this evening.

CP14/15 - Maragle

Monday 11am - Team 19 - Team Outdoor Australia - Andrew

The ride was smooth and fast, plenty of hills but most of them rideable. The dusk was amazing with brooding dark clouds, rainbows and soft light, perfect for some pics!

Then to the rogaine and I think this is as close to a white Christmas I will get in Australia! At least 10cms of snow made for interesting walking and cold toes. It was slow going but we got through. Off on the bike again!

CP21 - Denison

Monday 9pm - Team 19 - Outdoor Australia - Kelly

Sean's bike was sounding like a screaming baby today and has now been given some love while we are at the transition into the kayak leg, so it should make it home ok. I'm very scared about the paddle that is coming up for us now, approx 30km in freezing waters and conditions. there is not much we can do except layer up and don't stop! we think it will take us 9hrs. we plan to sleep for 2hrs now and do the long portage down to the lake and start off. Then its on the home straight and no more sleep... just try and get to the finish line. We were doing really well with our positioning until this mornings rogaine..... Knees that had walked over 100km earlier in the race could not keep up with those that hadn't and we are now at the back of the pack..

Finish

Tuesday 10pm - Team 19 - Outdoor Australia - Sean

So that's XPD. This was a new type of adventure for all of us - no real understanding of what would happen. To get an understanding we suggest - get a box set of wonders of the Snowies DVDs and watch them back to back while a friend beats your feet with a mallet. Then go to sleep outside for 2 hours, wake up and repeat. Alternatively, try it for yourself. It was a great experience, and certainly fitted the bill as a challenge. There is no doubt that many of the things we did over the last 6 days we would never have experienced if not for this race. Off to showers and bed. We feel we've earned it.