

Over Cradle Mountain

2010 Cradle Mountain 82km Run Report

By Elizabeth Bennett

What an adventure.....

I met my minder at Canberra airport at 6am on Friday and we flew to Launceston via Sydney. After collecting the hire car at Launceston airport we drove to Cradle Mountain with plenty of time up our sleeve. We checked into our lodge and got the open fire going before heading off to the race briefing and compulsory gear check. The race briefing was scheduled for 6pm but these ultra runners are a pretty cruisey lot and it didn't start until ~7pm. Of course when it did start the cruisey lot turned serious and were very strict with the gear inspection and the safety rules. By the time we'd got through all that and back to the lodge it was close to 9pm and bed time for me.

The alarm went off at 4am and I got up for some unappetising but essential toast and vegemite (really, who feels like it at 4am?). And then it was off to the start. Another role call along with a reminder about the check in point procedure and the need to leave back packs with numbered ribbons on the trail if we left the trail for any reason (read: toilet stops) and we were shuffled down to the start line in single file. 6am on the dot and we were off.

The first few kms were on relatively new duckboard but since it was still dark and the boards were narrow we all started cautiously. And then we started climbing, initially up sets of wooden steps and then up rocks come boulders. As we got closer to Marion's Lookout the boulders got bigger and so did our strides (by necessity). I felt decidedly disadvantaged alongside all the long legged men but just took 2 steps to every one of theirs. The climb to the top of Marion's culminated in us having to pull ourselves up by a chain on the left hand side and counter balancing ourselves as best we could on the right hand side. I found that bit slow going. Once up though, the view was magnificent. It matched, if not surpassed, the views I have seen in Austria and Switzerland. It was also at this point that I felt glad that I had long sleeves on as the wind picked up and there was a significant drop in temperature.

From Marion's to Kitchen Hut there were some short steep climbs and the running surface was a pretty even mix of either duck board or big stones with sharp edges. I ran on the duck board (although still cautiously as it was covered with wire mesh and where damp the wire was slippery) but had to walk on some of the stones for fear of twisting my ankle or falling on my face. From Kitchen Hut to Pelion the mix of surfaces was the same but the quality of the duck board was much worse and there were more marked ups and downs in the terrain. In many places there were big gaps in the duck board, wide enough to get your foot stuck in, and the wire (theoretically) holding it together was loose and stuck up in the air just waiting to grab you around the ankle.

I was worried about missing the first cut off at Pelion at midday and so pushed on running and walking fast as/where I could. I ended up making the first cut off with 50mins to spare (whew!). Pelion was at about the 32km mark and I was already feeling the impact of the walk/jog, stop/start, climb/brake, rough/smooth on my legs. It was also starting to warm up. So, at Pelion I took my long sleeved top off and continued on in my singlet. I also got my vegemite sandwich out and re-filled by fuel belt at the water tank, and I was off again.

Just out of Pelion I almost dropped my sandwich and so I slowed to unwrap it properly. Just as I did the most enormous black snake came alongside me. I think my sudden halting and plastic wrap rustling disturbed him. I froze in my tracks. We'd been told to stay still if we came across snakes but this wasn't a voluntary thing for me. I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to! I patiently waited for him to decide which way he was going to go and then gave him a wide berth and went around him.

From Pelion to Du Kane and then to Windy Ridge Hut the terrain just got tougher. The tree roots were phenomenal. I'd seen photos of them but just couldn't fathom them until I came across them in real life. There were many that when I climbed over them they came up to my groin. Over quite a vast distance all I was doing was walking and clambering. I had slowed down to a frustratingly slow pace and it all felt disjointed and "1 step forward, 1 step backwards". I made the cut off at Windy Peak but only by about 30

minutes.

From Windy to the next check point at Narcissus it was 10km but all the previous race reports said it could take "average runners" up to 90mins to "run" it. If I took 90mins I was going to miss the cutoff. So, I got a wriggle on, ran more wrecklessly over the rough stuff and just "went for it". I got to Narcissus with only about 3.5mins to spare. Whew!

Around there, my minder met me. She'd run in from the finish with a bottle of coke for me. Bless her little cotton socks! We walked mostly and jogged a bit to the end, followed closely by the sweepers. I was 2nd last across the line.

I felt a bit bad about appearing to perform so poorly - 2nd last - but to help put it in perspective I was reminded that there were several people who pulled out along the way, several others behind me who missed the cut-offs and were taken off the course, and there were others who "fell by the wayside" with injuries (1 guy fell and hit his head, and another female dislocated her knee and that was the end of her day too). So, all in all, 2nd last didn't seem so bad. At least I was in one piece and finished!

It was an adventure indeed. I achieved what I wanted to achieve - ie, finish an 82km self supported ultra marathon. But it was a tough day for me. I thought I would be able to run more of it than I could and I thought I'd be a bit quicker than I was. But, it's a hell of an event.

Will I do it again? Hmmmm may be, but not for a long time (famous last words?!?!). I think I'd prefer to do it as a 2-3 day hike with my husband and teenage kids, and concentrate on runs that I can actually run (not walk) on less technical terrain. And my days of running with a pack = 10% of my bodyweight are definitely over (my poor little back is still sulking). For now though, I'm proud enough of my effort and very keen for some proper recovery time.

Elizabeth Bennett