

*Starting in the Cradle Mountain National Park, outside the Waldheim Huts, runners gather pre-dawn. This year cradle fell on a relatively hot and dry day. As the light starts to creep over the ridge, we start off on a short stretch of downhill duckboard over prime wombat grazing and small alpine streams, until we hit a rocky, gentle uphill track that meanders in and out of buttongrass moorland and rainforest, beautiful with a myriad of intricate glossy, deep green tiny myrtle and crinkle cut fagus leaves. Past the sheer sided crater lake and picturesque wooden boat house, a steep rocky climb up to Marion's Look Out and the alpine view's open up. I see my first cushion plants, multitudes of tiny interdependent plants, growing slowly together, different species intermingling creating low rounded mounds in shades of green. Often mist and cloud obscure the craggy peaks of Cradle. This year, as the middle of the pack runners traversed the base, the dawn sun broke out from behind the top of the craggy peaks, illuminating layers of mist, spotlighting the bruised red moorland intercut with streams and distant peaks stretching out to the horizon.*

*Whilst still early in the run, running past the emergency shelter, with mist obscuring Barn Bluff runners have settled in, the field has spread out and conversations between old and new acquaintance flow. Sweeping into Waterfall Valley, after a glorious run of rocky trails and duck board, we were greeted by sleepy hikers, clutching their morning cups of caffeine. I was lucky to see a friend and her family who whooped their appreciation. This chance meeting powered me across the high plateau, undulating through an alpine landscape of lakes and tarns. Rhythmic running and rock hopping and a gradual descent into myrtle forest, we slowly ascend and the eucalypt forest eventually gives way to Pelion Plains.*

*The Pelion Hut check point, at about 35 km is for most runners, about a third of the way through the run. For those unable to make the 12:00 pm cut off, they will use the 14 km Arm River trail to hike out. The lovely check point volunteers, fill my water bottle and offer me some lolly snakes. I remember the sense of elation from reaching this point last year and then the dawning realisation that I still had to keep running. This year I was ready for the long climb up to Pelion Gap, I was passed effortlessly by one of the serial cradle mtn runners, sauntering effortlessly up the climb with running pack slung over one shoulder. Reaching Pelion Gap is glorious, gently descending duck board gliding through the mountains, Ossa, Pelion East and the Du Cane Range.*

*As I hit the forests again, I pass the time with another runner, a good 12 years younger, clearly fitter and way more dedicated to training. He had only recently recovered from a bout of COVID. I was pulled along in his wake, until eventually I couldn't keep up.*

*As I enter the tall eucalyptus forest, I grind my way along the track, I know not to be deceived by the glimpses of water, Lake St Clair is still a long way off. As the trees give way to button grass Mount Olympus comes into view, its bulk is impressive against the deep blue sky, I am happy to be out of the forest, crossing the suspension bridge and into the Narcissus check point. At this point, I know that some of the front runners are finished. I smile, gulp down a coke and carry on.*

*The undulating path through the rainforest is unusually dry, the moss normally sodden and deep green is dry and light. I pick a line, despite my best efforts I cannot get into a rhythm, the roots, the slightest incline. I wander off the path. I'm hot and the clear lapping water of Lake St Clair looks so inviting. I would love to stop and have a swim.*

*I'm glad I'm alone, my pace is slow and the slightest incline slows me to a shuffle. Up and down, the path goes on and on. I check my watch. I try to focus and run. The kms move slowly by. I start to make deals with myself. If I get in soon, I'll never run around Lake St Clair again, if I get in soon, I'll drop out of my next race, I'll give up ultra-running, I'll.....*

*Imperceptibly, the rainforest gives way to eucalyptus trees, and suddenly the path broadens, sign posts appear, interpretation signs, traffic bollards, gravel road, I round the corner and there it is, the finish line. I am yelling, and shouting and I'm in. I've finished and I'm laughing and grinning. I'm elated and that was amazing and that is the Cradle Mountain Run, epic and absolutely fantastic.*