

When I learnt of the chance for a kiwi team to be sponsored to race in China I was on the blower to the team-mates straight away. This would work in well with my goal of heading offshore for at least one race a year, and fitted in nicely with the build up to the world champs in November. Team leader Wayne was keen, as was Sonya. Wayne Hodgetts would not be able to make it though so a few calls were made and former team-mate Carl Bevins was added to the line-up.

A few other teams were keen as well so the CV was dusted off and sent to the appropriate people. Not sure if they were impressed more by our race record or our good looks but the end result saw us (team OrionAdventure.com) as the selected team. We were on the way to race in the Wulong Extreme Mountain Challenge in Wulong County, Chongqing, China as team Pitopan of New Zealand.

As the departure date approached more details of the race filtered through. It would be a 3-day stage race, about 5-6 hours per day, all equipment provided and we'd be racing against 8 other International teams and 11 local Chinese teams. With adventure activities including abseiling and caving involved we departed for China mid October looking forward to a fun race and quietly confident in our chances of winning.

A cancelled flight barely slowed us down and we touched down in Chongqing airport to be greeted by throngs of cheering fans. Turns out they were cheering for some pop star who happened to be on the plane – was quite strange – they didn't seem to know who we were at all.

Figured out on the bus trip to Wulong that it's best to sit at the back. It does nothing for your nerves to be watching as your driver overtakes other large vehicles on blind corners and does his best to ensure that he spends an equal time on each side of the road.

After arriving (thankfully intact) at Wulong we are allocated our helmets (tip 1: bring own helmet next time) and as we try on the bright yellow skid lids we are shown to our bikes (tip 2: take a longer seat post). Scrounging some longer but still woefully inadequate seat posts we got the undersized bikes as ready as we could before heading back to the hotel for dinner, briefing and a final sort through of gear for the next day.

After plenty of ceremony with speeches, dragon dances, parades and no mention of obeying road rules the race got underway on a misty and wet morning. It would continue into a misty and wet afternoon and in fact apart from a short period on the last day of racing it was misty and wet the entire time. Good for racing, not so good for getting any views from the 1800m mountain you've just climbed up.

With 2000 or so schoolchildren lining the streets along with half the local population, the initial stages though the town were a huge buzz (Amazing how much faster you run when there's a crowd screaming at you). The Chinese teams were fast at the start and we lost more time as the undersized bikes started taking their toll on the 18km climb out of the town. A good 10 mins down in 4<sup>th</sup> by halfway through the day we pulled out our trump card at the first adventure activity and blitzed the jigsaw puzzle to take the lead. (Vital part of AR training are the jigsaw puzzle evenings).

Just after this however we lost the lead again when we threw Sonya into the river. Despite us thoroughly enjoying doing this it was for her own good as she was suffering from an attack of atrial fibrillation and by the time we had that under control we were back in 4<sup>th</sup> and the leaders were well out of sight. The rest of day 1 was solid uphill climbing and pushing hard we finished the day in second, 3 minutes down on the leaders. (This was later adjusted to 7 minutes due to some dodgy Chinese time credit system)

Day two was all about mud and with racing in mud being a kiwi speciality we made the most of it. The Chinese teams raced ahead at the start again but by two hours into the day we had reeled them all in and started pulling ahead. A big part of our success on day two has to be put down to excellent teamwork. In all the races I've done this was probably the best example of the whole team functioning as one unit, doing whatever was required to keep the whole team moving as fast as possible. Not without hazards though – on one of the running

legs Carl took a fall on a downhill while the whole team was roped up and was dragged through the mud for a good distance until we managed to rein Wayne in. With a few Krypton factor obstacles and a bout of horse-riding thrown in we completed the day 18 minutes clear of 2<sup>nd</sup> to take the overall lead by 20 minutes going into day 3.

We led out from the start on Day three with Wayne doing his best Lance impersonation, time-trialling through the first bike stage with the rest of the team hooked in behind. As we hit the "build a raft to cross the river" stage we were 5 minutes up and looking forward to an easy trip to the finish line. The first paddling stage ruined that idea though and by the time we worked out how best to paddle the inflatable bathtubs with the beach cricket bats provided our lead was down to less than a minute. Holding onto our slim lead we split up for the next activity. Carl and Wayne detoured to enjoy a thrilling if not quite OSH-compliant flying fox ride before catching up to Sonya and I again for a trip through the caving section. Interesting combo there – magnificent natural beauty highlighted by red and blue lights better suited to a disco. Far from having given up the following teams chased us hard all day. Although our overall lead was pretty secure we were keen to take line honours again. A broken paddle and swamped "bathtub" didn't help our cause and we hit language barriers once more when the message was relayed that we had broken a leg. Finally getting hold of a replacement paddle we held off the next team for the remainder of the final river leg and after a last abseil and run through Wulong we finished victorious, 6 mins ahead for the day and competition winners.

Prize giving was another flashy affair with lots of pomp and ceremony and afterwards every important person from the police chief to county mayor came by to drink a toast (which appeared to mean scull a glass of red wine). Not wanting to break local custom we did our best to properly toast all comers and were starting to get really warmed up when the ceremony drew to a close. The ensuing night out in Wulong is a story in itself or would be if I could remember past the first karaoke bar.

Myself and the rest of team OrionAdventure.com have had a fantastic time going to China to compete in this race and are very grateful to the people and sponsors who have helped to make it possible. Kevin and Echo of Pitorpan were fantastic with their support and Pro-4 as well as our Team sponsors (Orion Health, Horleys, New Balance and Mountain Hardwear) also helped contribute to our success.

Looking forward to going back next year – just have to get the bike shop to supply some longer seat posts to take with us.

Stuart Lynch – Team OrionAdventure.com