

It was 9pm on a Saturday night in the heart of Rio de Janeiro city and we should have been on the start line ready to begin the Ecomotion 2007. We were not on the start line, and we were not ready to start racing. We were about a kilometre away parked up in a Naval base on the side of the road trying to get a little sleep. Running on "Brazil time" the race was showing no signs of getting underway anytime soon. The original start location had been changed at the last minute and there was a distinct lack of kayakers at the (rumoured) new start place. Leaving the support crew to check on progress we were trying to squeeze in a last few minutes of rest while we still could. Finally at about 10:30 we were prodded awake and kitted up for a long kayak leg, the first stage of the race taking us from downtown Rio under the shadow of the Cristo Redentor to the upper reaches of the harbour. 48km in slow ugly plastic sit-on-tops - it was going to be a tough start!

Although late, the start was impressive with hot air balloons lighting up the beach and helicopters circling overhead. With the sound of the hooter followed by the clashing of paddles the race was on as we pushed off into the water and fought to clear out from the mayhem. Quickly locating Wayne and Brent in front we paddled on with another all-kiwi team - Merrell - as around us shouts floated back and forth across the water from teams trying to locate their teammates lost in the dark. With a long way to paddle and nothing but distant lights to aim for we settled into a steady rhythm and slowly left the lights of Rio behind.

Around 10 hours later we pulled into TA1 in equal first place with Team Merrell. Behind us the outgoing tide was causing major problems for the slower paddling teams. Sinking nearly to their waists in the deep stinking mud they were dragging and pushing their kayakers as they made their way to the deeper water of the river that lead to the TA. Also behind us were kiwi Marcel Hagener and his team Sole. While the other lead teams had navigated their way up the harbour to the river mouth where the first CP should have been (and wasn't!), Sole were led astray up the wrong river by lights which turned out to be from the incorrectly placed CP. Remarkably they minimised their losses by paddling through an irrigation channel and then portaging to take them back to the correct river where they surprised TA officials by arriving from the opposite direction to everybody else.

An energy sapping mountain bike ride in the heat of the day took us to the first supported transition where Roy, Fi, Lynne and our local man Vava gave us an energy boost and set us off on the first major trek of the race. This spectacular but tough and navigationally challenging trek proved to be the decisive element of the race with the top positions remaining almost the same right through to the end of the race. With more navigational errors than we would have liked and a team not quite firing at 100% we dropped back to third behind the French team Wilsa Helly Hansen and Buff from Spain who stormed through this leg to take the lead. Team Sole also started out well on this stage, pushing out to a 30 min lead at one stage although a costly nav error near the end of the leg dropped them back to 4<sup>th</sup> again.

The next few stages were a mix of hope and frustration as some poor tactics and unfortunate navigation errors prevented us from closing in on the leading teams. Finally after a good trekking leg we closed within sight of Wilsa although the next obstacle in our way was the horse riding leg.

Horse riders we are not, and this showed as we coaxed and prodded and pleaded with our horses to make their way up the hill. Still, it was a welcome break from being on our feet and although we lost some time to the two teams in front it was not too much. What really set us back was some confusion from the CP staff. Directions given to us indicated a walk up the road, marked on the map as out of bounds. Experience should have told us to double check as a similar situation at the AR World Champs in Scotland earlier this year cost us a one hour penalty. Although there was no penalty this time we lost about half an hour backtracking to the original course after having the confusion cleared up by another official.

After a long cycle leg where the mud and grit played havoc with the brakes and gears on our bikes and caused no end of frustration we were into the last day of racing. Shorter than any other expedition race we have done at only just over three days long the end was coming up faster than we had expected and we realised we had little time left to make up the deficit. Finally we were racing well and it showed as we started reeling in Buff and Wilsa. The torrential rain that had been with us almost constantly since day two brought up the river levels to make for an exciting river kayak stage but plagued our support crew who were struggling to keep themselves and the gear dry as they rushed from transition to transition.

With only a few stages left we had to hope for some luck in the mystery railroad stage. Adventure races seem to always throw something new at you and this one was no exception. Given a cart (basically a sheet of ply with some small wheels attached) we had to make our way 15km down the railway to the next transition (leaving the cart behind was not permitted!). After a bit of trial and error we hit on a pretty successful method of travel. Two people sat on the front of the cart while the two behind sprinted to build up speed and then jumped on to coast. We made good progress like this until we came to the first corner whereupon our cart dropped a wheel off the rails grinding to a halt and pitching us poor racers into the gravel. Despite having guide wheels to keep it running on the rails the cart designers had not taken into account the fact that the rail tracks widened slightly on corners. It took a few more crashes for us to work this out by which time our cart was starting to shed wheels. Luckily we were passing through a small village and a bit of gesturing and very bad Portuguese yielded us a hammer and some nails to make some running repairs. With not many stretches of straight track left ahead we decided to not risk busting the cart again towed it the rest of the way. Finally reaching transition we collapsed for our last compulsory stop having closed the gap to Wilsa a little.

With just a bike ride and a paddle remaining the chances of catching Wilsa or Buff were slim but as a good kayaking team we still had hope so pushed on hard through the bike

stage. Arriving at the final transition we were keen to get on with the paddle and get the race finished however it was not to be. Encountering very rough conditions on the exposed sea paddle Buff had radioed in to say that they were struggling and the race organizers were stopping any further teams from starting the final stage.

Apparently the conditions were not so bad as to stop Buff and Wilsa from continuing and they paddled to first and 2<sup>nd</sup> place respectively while we waited for the go ahead the next morning to take to the water and paddle in for third place.

As enthusiastic as ever our support crew greeted us on the finish line in the sleepy coastal town of Buzios with champagne, hot chips and ice-cream (now a post-race tradition). The effort over with, we could finally lie down and savor the delicious post-race feeling of having nowhere in particular to go. Already any painful memories were fading and we swapped stories with Buff and Wilsa and got to know the people we had spent the last 4 days trying to beat. We'll work on that for the World Championships race in Brazil next year but in the meantime we had two days for drinking caipirinhas on the beach and surfing – we were in Brazil after all!