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HISTORY MAKERS

When I entered the Transpyr Gran Raid MTB with my friend Annie, the organisers were excited to tell us that we were the first ladies' team to have entered. We thought nothing of it, but on Day 1 we found out that, in its nine years, there hasn't yet been a ladies' team able to complete this 800km race over the Pyrenees that averages 10-12 hours in the saddle every day. Talk about pressure!

WORDS BY MIRODA OTTA PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANCESC SOLA CAROS

I remember the day at Cape Epic last year when I met Adolfo at the finish of one of the longer days. We were both just sitting there, looking at each other completely exhausted from the day's riding, devouring our famous Woolworths lunch packs. It's amazing how suffering and hardship can create an instant sense of camaraderie and friendship, knowing that the person sitting opposite you understands exactly how you feel. We started talking about mountain biking in Spain and he told me about the Transpyr race they have over there, and said that my friend Annie and I should come and do it the next year. The Transpyr is considered one of the 10 best mountain bike adventures on the planet, according to National Geographic.

We entered the race purely on Adolfo's recommendation and didn't even look at the race profile. I was just thrilled to be able to do my first mountain bike stage race in Europe and assumed I'd be fine after having done both the New Zealand Pioneer and Cape Epic.

NERVES KICKING IN

I have to admit that I had a small panic attack when I first saw the route profile about a month later when looking at where the small towns along the route were located, on Google maps. We weren't just going to ride over the Pyrenees once or twice, we were going to follow the Pyrenees all the way from where it starts on the east coast to where it ends on the west coast of Spain – around 800km with about 20 000m of accumulated vertical gain. This equals a daily average over the seven days of approximately 110km of riding, with 2 800m of climbing. To put it into perspective, both Epic and Pioneer had days averaging 2 000 to 2 200m of ascent over much shorter distances. At Cape Epic 2017, we did 691km with 15 400m accumulated vertical gain over



eight days. The longest day was 112km and the most climbing on the Queens Stage was 2 750m.

Our two hardest days at Transpyr were Day 3 and 4 with distances of 114 and 136km respectively, and ascent of 3 500m and over 3 000m according to my Garmin. It took us more than 11 hours of riding to finish stage 3 and just over 12 hours for stage 4!

The most accurate way to describe Transpyr to anyone was Annie's words on the longest stage: "Every day of this race is like the hardest one-day event you've ever done, and then you keep on doing it for seven days in a row."

Transpyr offers several different options that even includes road cycling or, if you are not keen to ride the whole route you can do it as a relay team where you and your group ride different sections of the stages. You can even opt to do only the first three or the last four days of the race. You also

have the option of doing it on an electric bike, which might sound ideal, but it was definitely not that simple and involved quite a lot of challenges. Our friends with electric bikes ran out of battery a few times during the race and had to make sure that their extra batteries were fully charged every night. They also had to get [them] delivered to the right people the evening before to be taken to the water points along the way. The other problem with riding an electric bike, that I never even considered before, was the weight of the bicycle when the batteries run out or when you have to get off and push!

There were quite a few places where it was impossible to ride because it was too steep and rocky or there was no grip with all the mud and water. In my opinion, I doubt that any normal woman would have been strong enough to push a heavy e-bike up there when we were battling with our light bikes that weighed





less than half. I definitely think that there is a place for electric bikes in future on long stage races like these but I think they will still need to improve battery life significantly and reduce the weight of the bike.

Unlike other races, the race is not timed overall and you have a few sections during the day where they time you. I liked this way of doing it because it gave the competitive riders the chance to also stop and enjoy the water points and the scenery along the way without racing past everything. Another great thing is that one had the option to book hotel packages to stay in. I am not a fan of tents or big sports halls and it was lovely to have a proper bed and my own bathroom every night. The only disadvantage was that we stayed outside town for two of the nights which was

a logistical nightmare getting back and forth to town for massages. Luckily, we had the people from Masquebici (who we did the bike maintenance and massage service with) to drive us around, and I'd highly recommend using them to anyone wanting to do the Transpyr. It is one race where you do not want to struggle with bicycle issues or washing your bike when you only get to the finish between 5 and 8pm.

We started the race on the back foot because Annie arrived in Spain on the Thursday with a sore throat and was feeling sick, which was worrying. I was also very stressed out about the Achilles tendonitis I had in my right foot, which I got from walking part of the Camino Santiago three weeks prior. It was really difficult to find the right balance between resuming

cycling training and resting enough to recover from it. What also stressed me out was that I had taken two weeks off cycling training to do the walk and had to get straight back into riding as quickly as possible afterwards. I ended up pushing it as hard as my foot allowed, rested for eight days before the race and went for some Traumeel injections. Annie and I went into the race very nervous and just prayed for it to all work out.

RACE REALITY

The race started on a Sunday from Roses, about 200km NE of Barcelona. We opted to get there with a private bus transfer that we shared with some other riders. On the bus we met two new Spanish friends, Alejo and Xavier, who became "Lego" and "Savage". They were on electric

bikes and we saw them quite often during the race, flying past us on the up hills when their batteries were full.

The location of the registration, opening ceremony and race start in Roses was at the lovely Ciutadella de Roses, a ruined fortification dating back to the 1500s. At the opening ceremony Annie and I got handed a bicycle drawing done by a child, and a special Transpyr passport from the mayor, that we needed to transport to the next destination. These items were passed on to different riders to carry every day, until it reached the finish in Hondarribia.

After Day 1, we realised there were not going to be any "easy" days on this race. It took us 8,5 hours to finish, and we finished relatively well in the first half of the field! Those who have done

it before then told us that Day 1 is relatively mild compared to what was still to come. We could hardly imagine it getting worse and didn't know that 8,5 hours would end up being our shortest day out.

One thing you quickly realise when you are in Spain in summer is that you shouldn't focus on the time of day too much and that you do not sleep a lot. The Spanish live completely according to how the sun rises and sets. Early nights and early mornings don't exist. Our normal daily routine was to get up at 5.15am to be ready for breakfast at 6am. Then we collected our bikes to be at the compulsory gear check point at 7.30am, with the first riders starting at 8am. Dinner and prize giving was at 8pm and we never had time to get our massages in before 9pm because we had to attend the prize giving every night to receive our ladies team leaders' jerseys. This meant we only got to bed around midnight, surviving on about 5 hours of sleep a night. I have never felt like falling asleep on a bicycle but there were days on the Transpyr where I think I was basically asleep except for my eyes that were open and my legs that were pedalling.

Every day was a hard day, and our goal was just to cycle from one water point to the next. The mountains we rode up were steep and the climbs seemed never ending, but the scenery was breathtakingly beautiful and we wanted to stop everywhere to take photos. Some of the mountains even had snow on them and we were so high up the one day that we cycled past ski lifts and a huge patch of snow that had not yet melted. It was lovely to see everything so green and lush and to hear the noise of cow bells and horses as you cycled past. I never imagined Spain could be so pretty with so many

rivers and streams and forests. We often stopped next to little streams and waterfalls to fill our water bottles with fresh ice, cold water from the mountain or just to cool our tired feet.

We were lucky the race didn't start the week before because there had been a huge amount of rain and it was terribly muddy and slippery, making riding extremely hard. There were sections where we literally rode through water streams on the jeep track and other places where the mud was so bad we had to carry our bikes through it. The mud also made riding really slow and tedious because our wheels were getting sucked into the ground and we had to pedal twice as hard. There were

also great downhill sections, some of which we sadly had to walk down, that would otherwise be amazing to ride in drier conditions. On Day 4, the last 18km was mostly downhill riding all the way until the finish, and I felt like I was in heaven. It was just a pity that we were already so extremely tired by the time we got there so we didn't have the energy to enjoy it as much as we could have.

Day 6 was my hardest day. It was 136km long and took us over 12 hours to finish, but I just felt like I could not find my cycling rhythm and the kilometres were dragging on. The first 80km was relatively flat and 10km after the lunch stop we got to one of the

steepest climbs in the race that was impossible for anyone to ride up. It was also incredibly muddy, with rocks all over, and we had to push our bikes uphill for almost 2km while muddy water came flowing down from above. I'm still amazed at how Lego and Savage managed to push their 25kg electric bikes up there (if it had been me, I'd probably have thrown my bike off the mountain at that point). After that, a nice downhill section took us right down to the same elevation from where we started ascending to yet another climb that was 15km long and never ending. We also had a small detour at the start which added an extra 2km to the total riding distance of the day, and as small as it might sound now, those extra 2km at the end felt like 20km when you had your mind set on doing only 134km. It was, and will hopefully stay, the longest day most of us have ever spent on a bicycle or will ever have to spend on one.

Our race finished at the marina in Hondarribia after a very rainy and muddy start in Burguette. It was such an amazing feeling to cross that finish line, and I cannot describe that moment to anyone. There were so many times along the way where we had no idea how we'd be able to keep on going. This race required so much mental and physical strength, and when I look back now at our ride history, it all feels a bit unreal that we did so many hours of riding and metres of climbing. I'm just extremely grateful that all worked out well for us in the end.

We celebrated in true Spanish festive style with a sardine braai, a massive barrel of local cider and the Yellow racing team rounding it off perfectly, cutting *jamon Iberico* (cured ham) for everyone. The Spanish sure know how to have a good time, on and off the bike! 🍷

"EVERY DAY IS LIKE THE HARDEST ONE-DAY EVENT YOU'VE EVER DONE"

