



AVON DESCENT a novices account

Take 3 kiwis, with minimal paddling experience, limited time, with no real idea what the Avon Descent actually entails, no gear and no support crew. Give them a map, a kayak and a challenge and off we go!!!

When my boyfriend Scotty suggested this event (to use as training for an event we are planning to do in February back home) I had no idea what it was all about but thought, kayak race, can't be too hard? The Avon Descent is a kayak race as it turns out, but no ordinary kayak race. This is a 134km adventure on the Avon River in WA which changes shape at every section from grade 1 easy paddling, through tough T-Tree sections up to grade 4 rapids. Starting about 150km north-east of Perth at the town of Northam, the Avon river winds its way down the Avon valley, with some wicked grade 3-4 rapids along the way.

The Avon River is dry in summer and only really comes to life in Winter, hence the timing for this race. The Avon Descent is a legendary event in Perth and has a long history (starting in 1973) Initially established as a race for power-boats, it subsequently has evolved into a 2-day race for all types of water-going craft.

So we found ourselves a support crew and got into training. 6am starts down at Mosman Park were chilly mid winter but a great way to start the day and feel alive! As I was still working up in the mines when our training started I could only train every 2nd week which was tough. We managed to get a couple of river runs under our belt before the race, one being the weekend before when the Avon was in flood at a level of 1.8m (rather large), so that run gave us some confidence.

Typically the Thursday night before we were to head away we still had a million things to get done and found ourselves at Woolies at 9pm stocking up on the masses of food we needed for the weekend. Leaving work early on Fri I headed home to whip up a ridiculous amount of pasta and a couple of good old bacon and egg pies and then we packed up the car, picked up the crew and got on the road to Northam for registration. We finally got back to our campsite at Cobblers Pool at 10pm and bless our support crew (who had already put up the tents while we were at registration) we rolled straight into bed for a FREEZING night on a lumpy bed roll.

7am wake up. No need to dress as already wearing what we are paddling in to keep us warm during the night. Breaky and drive the 45mins back to Northam for the start of the race. So many people, not enough porta loos, atmosphere pumping, excitement and nerves high! 8am – We are off, down the Northam Weir to battle it out amongst the masses of kayakers for the next few hours until the field spread out. I was feeling great at Extracts Weir so only stopped with my support crew to refill the water bladder and carry on. The weather was gorgeous and sunny, competitors were in fine spirits and other than sore wrists (a reoccurring injury) I was feeling tip top. I made it to the finish of day one after 6.04 hours which put me at 12th for the women in my field. The coolest thing about day one was the crowd. They gave me massive cheers when I went past for being a chick on the river (I only saw 3 women the whole day). It was hilarious getting out of the boat at the end of the day and this women wanted my picture because I was a girl doing the race. Girl power! Camping was awesome that night, toasted marshmallows on the fire, some good jokes and a heap



of food...early to bed! 6am start on Sunday and it was so foggy we could hardly see. This was probably the worst part of the race as you have about 8km of tight T-trees to get through and the field is also tight so not much forgiveness, if you got a bit stuck (often sideways or halfway up a tree) a ski would come flying into your back! Once through this section there is about 35km of grade 3-4 rapids including all the biggies; Emu falls, Syds, Championship and Bells. I put on a rather spectacular show at Syds where I fell out and went down the rapid backward smacking my head into every rock possible. The crowd was massive and I got lots of ohhh ahhhh woahhh while I bumped my way down! While all girls complain of their butts from time to time and wish it was more toned and taught, believe me at this point I wish I had a butt three times the size to cushion the fall!!!



Bells was cranking, the crowd was awesome and I was happy to make it down with little drama...I figured I had already given the crowd enough of a show at Syds Rapid. My support crew met me at the bottom of the rapid and I guzzled some chicken noodle soup down me and they force fed me a banana sandwich...I was battling to eat by this stage! I knew I had to get a move on as I had a stuffed rudder and 16.5km of T Trees and long flat water ahead of me to get to Sandalford. With a smile and wave to the crew I headed off, I was feeling sore but still had some puff left and thought I would be fine.

My god the next two hours killed me. I literally didn't see anyone for an hour! The problem with being by yourself in the valley is no one to talk to and no one to compare pain with. I started singing to myself at points, one memorable moment was singing 'lean on me' which came out like a strangled cry as I was experiencing some pretty serious pain at this point and battling back tears. All I wanted was to see another kayaker and for them to tell me that I didn't have far to go. But as I realized later there were actually only two of us still on the water in that section as everyone else had either pulled out or been withdrawn at Bells. I had some pretty serious rudder issues at Bells which meant the next 30k was going to be a mission but I was confident I could keep going and make it.

The cut off time at Sandalford was 4.00pm and I got there at 4.10pm. I was absolutely gutted - I was in tears just sitting in the middle of the river in my boat. I feel for the poor police man who had to come down (once I had finally pulled into shore) and ask me to remove my timer and sign a withdrawal form while tears poured down my cheeks - I put that part down to exhaustion, I'm not usually such a baby!. I rang my support crew who had already set up camp 10km up the road along with Scotty and Dan to cheer me on. I was only one of two to make it as far as Sandalford who did not finish, and there were over 100 DNF's. The most gutting thing was that despite having slowed right down and feeling pretty knackered I know I could have made it to the end. Although people say to you that you really did finish, that you went through all the hard sections and only had 14km of flat water left, in your own mind you haven't - you need to get across



that finish line. It is a very gutting and hard way to finish but to put a positive spin on it I can only do better next year. Yep that's right next year... had you asked me straight after the race I would have told you to get stuffed, but as always that competitive streak comes through and you have to prove yourself (and everyone else) you can DO IT!



My body was black and blue but WOW what a race. All our support crew have expressed an interest to give it a stab next year as it was the kind of atmosphere that rubbed off on all involved, although I think most events like this one have that sort of effect on those who go along to watch or support. For anyone interested, check out the website or feel free to flick me an email sarah@trenchhealth.com.au You can do the event as part of a team or on your own but either way it's a fantastic race!

I'll be there next year at the start line ready to tackle my demons.