

## **Verdon Trail Adventure**

### **21<sup>st</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> June 2006**

After taking 10 weeks out with Achilles tendinosis and just 4 weeks of short distance running behind me I went to Europe's Biggest Canyon – the Verdon Canyon for a 4 day stage race with 7000m of climbing. This would be good training for my Lands End to John O Groats record attempt and if the Achilles was not healed I am sure this would tell me the answer.

The race started on Wednesday but as Bill was coming with me we decided to have a week in France and have a few days acclimatisation before the start. We left the rain in Glasgow and flew to sunny Marseille on Sunday morning and hired a car to take us to Aiguines. We finally settled in the race campsite at Aiguines, a small village nestled in the hillside with gorgeous panoramic views. In the evening music was playing in the streets and people were dancing, the place had real charisma. By the end of the evening Bill had around 30 insect bites on his back looking very swollen.

On the Monday I followed the GR99 some 700m up the hill, a distance I thought was 5km, I thought it may take my 45 minutes to climb and then 30 minutes to return and took 500ml of drink with me. By the time I reached the views of the Canyon and surrounding hills at the summit I was nearly out of drink and it took me 61 minutes. I spoke to a few French people near the top who were surprised I was out running on my own, they asked where should they report the corpse to if they find me on the way down!! I made it down safely ¾ of an hour later, expecting Bill to be anxious at being half an hour late, he hadn't even realised what time I set off and was relaxing in the shade reading. In the afternoon we drove down to the lake at the base of the Canyon and took a paddleboat to see the Canyon from the bottom and then relaxed on the beach eating ice creams. In the evening he was fully clothed to combat the insects and only got about another five tonight.

On Tuesday I skirted round the base of the campsite in search of a less steep run, my quads were quite tight after yesterdays hilly run. The route started easily but soon started to climb again and came out at a road hairpin where a stall was selling cherries. I ran up the road for a bit as it was more even underfoot and after being out for half an hour turned and ran back to the campsite, it took 45 minutes this time. It was obvious that many of the people at the campsite were taking part in the run. It was a big campsite and the facilities were very clean and tidy. We had lunch in Aiguines today at the hotel we were to stay in for the race.

Wednesday saw the arrival of another three British men in the campsite, they had driven here overnight and as they put their tent up and slept, we dismantled ours and booked in at the hotel. We registered and received a race number and chip that had a Velcro strap on for the wrist. It was later that evening that the rest of the party arrived and had dinner. It was great to meet Luke that I first met last year on the Transalpine Run and Laurent who had invited me. The rest of the runners were very lively and also had a professional boxer Cathy Brown attempting the event for charity.

The prologue of 10km that night set off at 9:30pm, it was still daylight at the time but the light was fading. We were not provided with maps but were assured that the route

was easy to find and was well marked with red and white tape. We hair-pinned down the road out of Aiguines and headed down to the lake, after 15-20 minutes of running I began regretting haven eaten so much for dinner and was feeling very uncomfortable. I was running behind the first lady and was content just to pace myself here. On hitting the lowest point at the lake I needed the head-torch on as light faded quickly as we went through the trees and lost sight of the runners in front I had been following. The route went through a rough patch underfoot and was hard to follow the markers in the trees. I started climbing again and caught up with another runner who was helpful trying to find the marker tapes in the dark. At one stage we hit the road and as we hair-pinned up I found markers in the trees descending again, after running down through the trees we bumped into runners coming in the opposite direction. I was baffled but it made sense to be climbing and not descending and so did a u-turn and followed. On hitting the road it became obvious that I had missed the markers in the trees, followed the road and then found the markers where I should have emerged onto the road and followed these in reverse. It didn't take long to return and was surprised to finish as first lady, just under an hour of running, it became evident I was not the only person to take a wrong turn. It made for an eventful night but no one got drastically lost and was quite fun really. It was 1am before I finally slowed down enough to go to bed.

Thursday we were up for a 7am breakfast for 9am start. Typical French style breakfast with just bread and jam. Today's route was 25km and guessed that an hour for yesterday's 10km would mean I would be out for approximately 3 hours, how wrong I was!! It was hot and sunny for the start and ran down to the lake again but in a different direction, I was leading again until just before the lake we hit a steep rough section, lots of runners overtook me and I was now second lady, I was very weak on these sections and was fearful of turning my ankles having taken 10 weeks off running. I would have to work harder on the uphill sections. Not long after we made our first detour of the day, climbing up a steep scree slope that was not part of the course, I did not enjoy the next section climbing across boulders and rock faces getting back on route. I was well down the field again now as I overtook Laurent and Luke again. Shortly after a feed station was a massive steep climb, I was in my element overtaking many people at I walked up the hill. At the top the views of the Canyon opened up and was well worth the effort, but was aware that I had drunk 750ml of my drink and only had 250ml remaining for a long descent. The descent was not as bad as I was expecting and contoured bits and dropped bits in stages, at one point where the ropes guided us over a rocky section the cameras appeared. By the time I reached the bottom again I was feeling tired and completely empty of drink. The route descended just a bit more to the lake before returning to Aiguines on the same route from this morning, I took another five people on this section and finally finished in 4 hours and 36 minutes. I was tired, it was the longest run I had done since before my injury in February, my longest run since returning to running had been just 2 hours 15 minutes so had now doubled this – the good news though, the Achilles was fine. It was an exhilarating route and rested a bit before showering and meeting the others. The first lady finished in 4 hours 10 minutes and first man in 3 hours. I was sixth overall.

It was a social evening as well all got to know each other a bit better, there was a group of around 15 British people staying in the hotel with a few of the campers that

came to join us. It was around 11am by the time I got to bed and was up again at 5am.

Friday was to be a big day. The start was at 7am for the 45km stage. There were also some one day races going on today that started with us – there was a choice of 20km, 40km, 60km or 80km. The 20km was yesterday's 25km and the 40km was today's 45km, couldn't quite work this out but knew it would be a long day. After yesterday's run of nearly 5km an hour I guessed by this reckoning I would be out for 9 hours ( $5\text{km} \times 9 = 45\text{km}$ ), but was assured (by Jason who had run this last year) that today was a lot more contouring and not so much climbing so would not be out much longer than yesterday. The route started identical to yesterday, down to the lake and up the massive climb, I found the route this time and avoided the steep scree climb. At the top of the steep climb the 25km route returned and we turned left for the long route. I felt much more comfortable than yesterday, probably because I wasn't racing as hard and trying to pace myself, I was second lady and just enjoying the course. The route descended steeply and contoured for bits and pieces and was extremely hot. I knew the route was to cross the Canyon today so was constantly looking to see the bridge and felt like I was going forever, Jason had got this wrong, it was going to be a very long day. Eventually after a checkpoint the route was descending very rapidly and felt this was it, we were going to cross the bridge and return. I had in my mind that the bridge would be quite high up but got this wrong as well, down and down the route went until I heard water, we were right at the bottom and there was the bridge, nearly 6 hours of running, this was going to be over nine hours for sure.

At the water's edge I stopped for a cool wash in the water before climbing the steep rocks and steps out again, the big difference between last years Transalpine run and this challenge was the lack of water, I had not crossed a single stream where I could refill my bottle, you had to rely totally on drinks supplied and what you could carry. On to the last checkpoint and there was now just one really big climb and drop – the run I had done the first day and so knew what to expect. I had been out for 7 hours now and the heat was unrelenting, I knew I would need a full litre to get through the next two hours. The climb out was good, continuously overtaking people, many I guess who were just out for the day's run and not the 4 days. Finally the last summit was reached and just the very steep downhill to go, I picked my way very slowly as the quads were very tired now and had difficulty in bending down the big steps. It was great to jog into the village some 9 hours and 12 minutes later. It had been a long hot day and would be very surprised if everyone finished today. After a shower I guessed dinner may be a lot later tonight waiting for all the athletes to finish. There were a few runners at the table and on seeing Ben eating a big plate of chips I just knew I had to have some, I shared a plate with Luke and was amazed to see the boxer Cathy finishing, and still as chirpy as ever. It was great to hear the stories of the day, not so good to hear that about 15 people ended up on drips, it had been 37 degrees today. I got to bed about 11pm again and was up at 4:30 am as the final day was a little earlier start.

Saturday was the final day of 35km. The start time was 6:30am and was under no illusions as to how long this would take me today, I was stiff and tired from yesterday and had no idea how I was even going to run today, based on an average of 5km an hour this meant some 7 hours, but that was not including the fact that I was tired and stiff from yesterday's efforts. Bill came to the start with me and then went back to bed

for a couple of hours, he was to go up the big hill I had run up the first day so he could get an idea of what we were dealing with to stop him getting too bored sitting around. The field of runners looked very small today, there were certainly a lot of non-starters and didn't blame them, I didn't feel much like running myself today, but the first lady was out. She was very nice and spoke good English; she had a sore knee and was telling me she comes from Paris but was training for the Tour du Mont Blanc in August. The gun went and somehow I managed to run, walked up the steps and then ran out to the start of the big hill I had run down yesterday. The first part of the route retraced our steps over the big hill and down to the bridge at the bottom of the Canyon. I felt as though I was going quite well and reached the bridge after 3 hours of running, it was now just the same distance back to Aiguines, but a different route. The path continued along the bottom of the Canyon, very bitty over boulders, up and down and paths cut into the rock face with ropes. It was just not runnable and was tripping and stumbling, although I hated this part of the route the views were amazing looking at the rock formations and were well worth a quick breather to have a look. Finally the route started to climb out – and I mean CLIMB OUT. The path climbed the cliff face with ropes, I dared not look down, I was climbing a sheer cliff face and hated it. At one section I was on a ledge and couldn't find the tape for the path, then I looked up and saw a vertical section with rope. The footholds were very good but the rope ran out before the top. It stopped level with a ledge and really needed to go beyond the ledge to get on it. The marshals were here and held out a hand, I hardly dare take my hand of the rope, but when I did this very strong hand yanked me to the top as if I were a small child, what a relief, it was just 2 minutes to get away from here now. I walked for a bit to regain composure, my legs were shaking. At the feed station I said I could not have gone down that route and glad it was a climb out, I was told you were not allowed to go down the route as it was too dangerous, I can believe it!!

The final part was to contour around the Canyon and was told it was very hot and to take plenty to drink. I topped up and proceeded. I initially hated the next section as well, it was up and down, tripping and stumbling, rocks, boulders, scree, tree routes. I was getting very annoyed at myself and just wanted to climb out onto a nice even surface and run. The views were great though and certainly made up for my frustrations. The path suddenly opened up on a large rocky bit with ropes again. I sat and admired the views, I could see the paddleboats at the bottom of the Canyon and could not see the route out, I had had enough and just wanted to get out. I looked around and could see tape well in the distance and thought maybe the climb out was there as the hills above were lower, I was right as the route started to hairpin up again. All of a sudden I could not see the tape again, I took a few steps forward and was amazed to see the checkpoint under my nose, fantastic, just 3km to the finish, I was on a high again and as I hit the road realised it was the route I had trained on when I saw the lay by that had been selling cherries. It was not long before I returned to Aiguines for the finishing medal and t-shirt, and only 6 hours 18 minutes. There were a few British at the hotel, those who had not started today, but no Bill. He had climbed the big hill, what had taken me an hour took him two and had only just got back, he was sweating worse than me!!

The party went on well into the early hours and the champagne flowed. A good tough challenge that had taken far longer than I had expected, but the Achilles had held up and I was back, LEJOG is back on the cards for 3<sup>rd</sup> September.