



Adventure Racing World Championships 2010 Bimbache Extreme, Spain

MERRELL Adventure Addicts

(Graham "Tweet" Bird, Tatum "Hobbit" Prins, Hanno "Smelly" Smit and Donovan "Tiny" Sims)
Various photo's from Carrick 'Pyro' Armer

From Sunday the 3rd October to Friday 8th October, The Merrell Adventure Addicts competed in the Adventure Racing World Championships that were held in conjunction with the Bimbache Extreme Adventure Race in the province of Castilla y Leon, in Spain. The Merrell Adventure Addicts were one of 61 teams from over 26 countries around the world. After 720km the Merrell Adventure Addicts finished in 14th position.

Graham "Tweet" Bird's report:

As usual the week after competing in a major expedition adventure race is spend recovering, eating, sleeping, unpacking, cleaning and most of all REFLECTING.

We returned to South Africa late on Sunday (10th October) afternoon after finishing at lunchtime on Friday. A quick trip home by any standards. This did not leave a lot of time to share experiences and thoughts with the other teams that competed in the race. I did get the sense that all were generally happy with the race and organisation. Emma Roca's Team Buff Coolmax raced a brilliant race from the front to win ahead of Mike Kloser's highly experienced, Team Black water (Nike).

The 722km race was broken down into 152km of trekking/running; 438km of mountain biking; 108km of paddling & 24km of skating. There were 22 sections with a total vertical ascension of 21,500m. The race essentially went from the town of Avila to Salamanca via the Mountain Bike legs with us stopping off to do loops of trekking and paddling along the way. Though this type of route is not always liked it is practical and allows minimal gear transfer for the organisers (i.e. bikes) and also more importantly makes the short course options for the slower teams a lot easier to manage. The race was unsupported with the organisers



transporting our gear from transition to transition. We saw our food box 6 times throughout the course, meaning on average we carried food for approximately 10-15 hours at a time. The race was characterized by a lot of fast legs with many transitions with the average predicted time per leg at around 4 hours and the longest predicted to take the leaders 14 hours. So not a traditional expedition race in the true sense of expedition racing where there are long legs that take many many hours, possibly days.



There has been some debate on the South African AR forum this past week about the format of the race and the suitability of this type of course for a World Championships. I can understand this debate due to the quality of the live coverage. Don't let the coverage influence your opinion of the route. From my point of view as a racer and navigator, the race route was great and challenging. The fact that there were loops and not a traditional A to B route was not an issue. We still had to complete 720km and it still felt like a journey. We worked off approximately 42 A4 maps and I actually did not know exactly where and what direction we were going in overall other than the piece of the route we could see on the current map. The navigation on the MTB legs was very technical with the small farm and mountain roads hard to see on the maps. Also some of the small farm roads were very overgrown which made route choices difficult in some parts. The trekking navigation was also tricky especially at night. The organisers had a very simple ruling in place regarding short course and this was made clear to all the teams in the route book and at the briefing. If you were more than 24 hours behind the leaders you would not be able to do a loop and would have to continue on the MTB legs. Some of the slower teams also chose to skip loops in order to beat the finishing cut off of Friday evening. So with teams having missed loops being mixed in with the other teams it did make it difficult to follow exactly what position you were in. However, for the teams still on the full course it was easy see where you were lying and how far behind. So trick is to stay on the full course!

We as the Merrell Adventure Addicts did not have one of our best races. It was one of those races where things always seemed to go the wrong way. We had a lot of bike mechanical issues, more than we have had in a race before. Suppose this is to



be expected after having three International races where things have seemed to always go the right way. For the first few days we were continually racing a few hours off the top five which is where we were comfortable being. We knew how we had planned to race but just seemed to battle to pull it off. Each time we tried to get going and execute the plan something would happen that would break the rhythm. We also made a very basic and fundamental mistake on the Wednesday afternoon. We had just started a 23km trekking leg that had some tricky navigation without paths. We were tired, tired in that we were moving slower than we should move, but not that tired that sleep was an absolute necessity. We stopped to sleep for two hours with only three hours of daylight



left. The navigation on the trek at night proved way more technical than we thought. We just missed seeing a CP looking down one ridge and ended up searching for a few hours for it. Something that probably would not have happened had we pushed on in the daylight and not slept. The vegetation on the trek was also tough and it was difficult to pick out the ideal and fast route at night.

Halfway through this trek we realized our mistake and that we were going to fall 24 hours behind the leaders and hence not be allowed to do the following loop. This changed our mind set and disappointed us. I also made a huge mistake by not collecting a CP as we headed into the transition area. This meant a 3.5km trek back out to the CP and then back again!! Cost us two hours. (Well at least this time we got the opportunity to go and clip it unlike previous race). For the remainder of the race we chased to get back into the field having left after the hike a few hours behind all the other teams. We actually finally got into our rhythm and raced like we should have from the start. Go figure!! Unfortunately there were no boats available for us when we arrived for the final 78km paddle into the town of Salamanca, so we ended up cycling to the finish.

The race also turned out to be colder than we thought. We got caught out really badly on the first night when the rain came down. We had chosen to go with our lighter jackets and ended up freezing on the bike ride. We ended up in a Café for 40 mins trying to unfreeze only to have to get back out into the cold once we had warmed up! Needless to say we packed the heavier jackets in at the next transition. The days were hot and the nights, especially in the high mountains were cold.

Upon reflection, I felt that we had failed to take advantage of all the experience we have gained in the past few races and made basic errors that we should not have been making. However we again left this race realizing that we can race with the top teams but just need to concentrate to make it happen and maintain the consistency and drive.

My team mates were great and despite the disappointing result, we actually had an awesome time on the race. One of the best races I have ever had dynamically. To Hobbit, Tiny, Smelly – thanks for a great time! Next time!

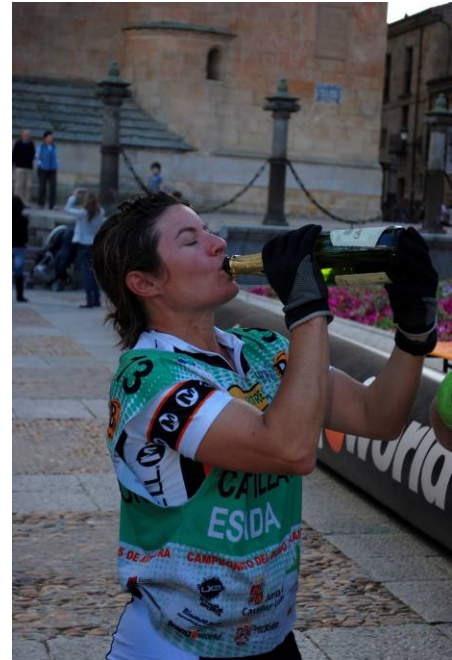
And finally to all our sponsors, particularly our new title sponsor MERRELL, for all your continued support and belief. And one final thank you to all the supporters out there who followed our progress on the race and sent through messages.

Tatum “Hobbit” Prins report:

So here we are again, reflecting on another race, another adventure but this time, “The Spanish Adventure.”

Our time in Spain started off relaxed and full of laughs. The team couldn’t have been closer and more together in terms of friendship and understanding. We all clicked well and were looking anxious and excited to start. We were a strong foursome and ready to sink our teeth into 720km’s of adventure racing.

As usual the race started with a bang and all the teams went legging it around the old town collecting cp’s, this is not our forte but hey it was just the start of the race and we had 5 days to do our thing. We soon hopped onto the bike and within minutes my wheels started falling off. I felt like I was sucking through a straw, had no power in my legs and quite frankly if I had ridden off the side of the mountain it would have been a relief. I struggled so much in the first 12 hours; my body just wouldn’t do what it was supposed to do. The boys were incredible. They towed and pulled and encouraged and really got me through what was my worst race start in my history of racing. I can tell you right now that if I was doing that alone I would have sat on the side of the track and stayed there. To be the weakest in a team is like putting a ton of bricks on your shoulders. You feel so panicked and responsible. For the loss of time and positions. It has to be one of the hardest and most humbling experiences in racing.



Next up was the orienteering section which again is not our favorite. Tweet did a great job and soon we were off on yet another bike leg but this one was horrendous. The rain started and it got bitterly cold. We were unprepared for this cold weather, packing light and unaware of what the temperatures would drop too. At some point in the night we had to take refuge in a town for coffee and food. We were stressed and bitterly cold. Not a good situation to be in. Freezing cold, wet, and no extra warm gear. All we could hear were our teeth chattering. BRRRR – brought back memories from ARWC in Scotland 2007. “Please God don’t let this race be like that one.” It was so hard to get



back on our bike that night, yes you are racing but the thought of going out into pouring freezing rain isn’t something you want to do, but off we set and by the early hours of the morning the rain subsided and we hit the paddle/trek leg.

It’s always great to get onto a new leg, somehow it feels like a new start and anything that was “bad” in the leg before becomes a distant memory and you just move onto the next one. The paddle was straight forward except for the fact that when we got to a certain point one person had to stay behind with the boat and the other 3 team mates had

to head out to search for the cp's. Well, in most cases this would be awesome. You would get to rest, have a snooze, eat and recover while your team mates worked hard at finding the cp's. This was not the case! I stayed behind and had an horrendous time. Immediately my core temperature dropped and the shakes started. I jumped up and down a bit. I felt like such a fool. There I was standing in the middle of nowhere, in the dark, freezing with nothing but my own crazy thoughts. Eventually I thought "stuff this" and climbed into a plastic bag. One that only Hobbits could fit into. Here I lay in the bag shivering waiting for the boys to return. The only thing that kept me going was my happy place....hot Jacuzzi, friends and champagne. Boy did that keep me going... just 4 more days! What a hoot!

Next up another bike leg of which I can't really remember. At some point in the race it all blurs into one. This must have been it! All that stands out in all these bike legs is the fact that we climbed and climbed and climbed. It seemed relentless. There was just one hill after the next and one small quant town after the next with narrow cobbled streets and old people. Everyone in Spain seemed old. That or my eyesight was really playing tricks on me. Very likely!

From here on in I can't remember details, sleep monsters started to take over and things got blurry or you just can't seem to put them all together. It wasn't long after this that things starting to go pear shaped for us. It started with my drop out breaking and the replacement been rusted, then we came across Nathan from Orion who had fallen off his bike and was lying unconscious below us. I have never experienced this in a race before. I suppose one can say that we are really fortunate that this is not a common occurrence. At the time all I could think about was if he was going to be ok. Team Cyanosis and ourselves called for help and soon a helicopter arrived with the paramedics. I have to say that they were quick, professional and this great knowledge to take away but it was also then that it dawned on me just how fragile we are and the kind of situations we put ourselves in. I silently prayed grateful that my boys were safe and it wasn't one of us. I know it's selfish but I was so relieved they were all standing in front of me in one piece.



This was a weird time for us in the race, maybe just for me but suddenly the race wasn't the top priority anymore. In your tired state it is easy for your mind to shift focus and for a couple of hours mine did. Anyway, we carried on with our bike leg and soon after, Smelly's bike cables snapped. It just didn't seem to end. At the time it just felt like one thing after the other. We had to ride into the nearest town, get some Spanish man to show us where the bike shop was and get it sorted. Again the momentum of our race was being lost. It just didn't seem to get going. It felt like all we were doing was crisis management.

All these mishaps set us back a good few hours which in a race like this costs you many positions. It is just too competitive for so many things to go wrong...

We carried on; our spirits still high despite the mishaps. The next thing to not go in our favour was in one part a poor decision made by us to sleep and the other a navigational error. All in all this cost us many hours. Hours which at this stage took us out of the race. It was also on this trekking leg that Smelly's leg was taking strain. With the huge effort he put in with no cables on his bike, he had twisted his one knee and it was killing him on the descents. My heart broke for him. In a situation like that there is not much we can do but encourage. The walking still had to come from him and he was suffering in a big way. He dug so deep.



After this trek leg, we realized our fate as it were. There was nothing we could do to get our race back and I think we all silently accepted this.

However a good friend once said to me, "It's not all about the number!" A lesson well learnt. One I learnt and lived by when I first started racing and one now that I found myself doing again. If your goal is unattainable you just have to make the most of the reality and get on and ENJOY! Well that is exactly what we did! To tell the truth when there was that odd time when you couldn't see the little dot moving on the tracking page...well this was when we were begging for food at a bar in a tiny little Spanish town. They

thought we were mad and only when Tweet pulled the "I'm unwell" move with big glossy eyes did they buckle and bring out some horrendous looking pork! We literally lapped up these revolting pieces of meat, soaked the bread in the fatty sauce, licked our lips and headed out with a full tummy and smiles all round. It's amazing what the basics can do for your morale!

So this is how our race went, we rode and we rode (Tour de Spain) and finally got to the paddle leg. The second last stage and a long one at that. 78km but we like paddling! Well that was what we thought until we woke up after an hour and a half snooze only to be told there were no boats for us. At this stage we had 1 option, back to the tent and start paddling when boats arrive. So off we went to our 2 man (but slept 4) Black Diamond tent. Now before I carry on let me describe what it is like sleeping in a tent with 3 guys who have sweated, burped, farted, worn the same smelly clothes for 5 days and now you have to lie so close to them you practically want to gag on the smell (of course I smelt of roses). Its awesome! Its times like that, that make me giggle and love the complete rawness of racing.

So to end our Spanish adventure we finally got told to do the last 85km's on the bike (again) and head to the finish. Yes, it was a pretty lame way to finish and an error of the organization but off we set only too happy in the knowledge that in a couple of hours we were going to eat ourselves silly and have a glorious shower. We did exactly that!

To be honest I didn't enjoy this race. I was expecting a lot from it as last year's Bimbache was amazing, if not my favorite race. It is hard to chew on the fact that the race just didn't go as well as we wanted but you take out of it what you can and you keep moving forward.

This sport is so incredible. It has this way of humbling you. You end up having this love hate relationship with it. One minute you are crying and ready to call it quits and the next you are laughing hysterically and loving every second. All this changes in a matter of seconds. Quite simply, it's a beautiful kind of crazy! Your highs and lows are amazing, so much so you can't understand them. In fact I can't even try. All I know is that AR sucks you in and keeps you there. It bares your soul. At times it rips it apart and just lays it open for all to see. It teaches you the



importance of living life. It puts life into perspective. It teaches you to never give up, to keep looking forward. It pushes your limits. Emotional, physically and spiritually. It shows you the importance of having 3 friends as team mates because without them in AR you are nothing. They are your world for those 5 days. It's you, them and the elements. Life becomes simple again.

Thank you to "my ever special boys" – what we have is something not many people have the privilege of. Thank you for looking after me. For making me laugh so many times, for giving me the hugs when I needed them, for feeding me when I didn't want to eat, for towing me when I just wanted to throw myself off the track. Thank you for our incredible Spanish Adventure. Maybe it wasn't our best race but we finished together, closer than ever before and that's all that counts.

Most importantly I want to thank my husband Lofty – time and time again I leave him to go gallivanting around the country doing what I love and time and time again he supports me and understands my need to do it. Thank you for understanding and giving me the freedom to live my ongoing dream. You really are one of a kind.

Then lastly thank you to all our sponsors for giving us the opportunity to do what we love...

Donovan "Tiny" Sims report:

My Spanish Adventure started with a phone call from captain Tweet offering me a spot in the team. So I need to start this off with thanks to the team for the opportunity. Thanks Guys!

The morning of the start of the race I remember Cappy saying, "WE ARE GOING TO START FAST, BUT NOT STUPID FAST." Well I don't know if that was what happened as the first couple of hours were a bit of a blur.

After a quick orienteering leg around this amazing Historical town, Avila, we were onto our bikes for a 75km cycle. This cycle went well with a bit of good team tactics coming through (e.g. reciting some inspirational passages from a book none of us bought.)

Next was an orienteering section with the first 12km been done as a team, then the team split into two pairs and each pair covered another 6km each. Again things were good.

Then back onto the bikes, not long into the ride we were hit by the rain and wind and really, really cold conditions. All this forced us into a small pub for hot coffee and muffins (absolutely saved us).

Then back into another orienteering section which again split the team, this time into boats and trekking. I must admit I was a bit nervous about the water navigation in the dark as Smelly and I started off in the kayaks first. Again all went well, team dynamics were good.

Then back into the bikes, this is where things started to get out of control. Firstly we broke a drop out and the spare we had was needing attention of its own. Then a little up the road we stumbled into Cyanosis and Orion where Nathan was lying motionless, we stayed with them for over an hour until EMS arrived. Back on the bikes but not for long, Smelly's gear cable snapped leaving him with only one gear, with him pushing with one gear obviously slowed things down, but worst of all it resulted in him sustaining a knee injury that he carried for the rest of the race.





Things started getting a little hazy from here on in with yet another problem, at the start of the last paddle leg, we arrived there at about 01h30am only to find there were no boats for us. We had to wait till 08h30 am for instructions from the race director to proceed to the finish line on bikes.

Before I start with thanks to the sponsors I need to thank my team mates again and mention one or two things about them.

Hanno "Smelly" Smit IS as HARD as people say he is for him to have stuck it out and

finish the race with the injury he had as it was 'no walk in the park'. The hiking legs were treacherous and cycle to the finish, an 85km beast, had him cycling with only one leg. Thanks for digging so deep for us.

Tatum "The Hobbit" Prins, small in stature, but that's about where it stops. Yes, she does carry the boys packs, yes she does tow then up mountains when they can't anymore. Hobs, you are certainly not compulsory equipment, but more like the glue that holds the team together. Thanks for everything!

Graham "Tweet" Bird (aka Captain). Huge thanks for putting us all together and keeping us moving in the right direction. It was great to see how nothing is too much for you when it comes to taking care of YOUR team, before, during and after the race. Thanks Cappy.

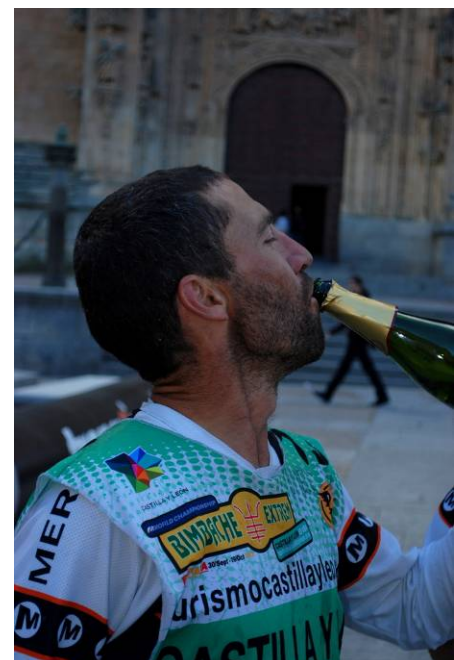
A HUGE thank you to MERRELL for being our title sponsor, from the amazing kit we raced in, from our clothing to our shoes. I don't think I could find anything I didn't enjoy about using the kit. Besides looking great it's tough enough to take on arguably one of the toughest sports in the world.

Hanno "Smelly" Smit's report:

The Bimbache Extrem was raced in the Province of Castilla and Leon, just west of Madrid, starting in the fortified old city of Avila, characterized by historical architecture and an almost mildew ambiance of age.

The start leg was an urban orienteering exercise and succeeded in popularizing the event with the local inhabitants and visitors to the town. The race then sped off on MTB towards the southern mountain ranges, where cold and rainy weather awaited us for a total of 22 legs, which covered a distance of around 700km of dry glacier mountains, lush forests and dry savannah veld to the finishing line in the city of Salamanca, west of Avila.

Team Merrell Adventure Addicts, consisting of Captain Graham Bird, Tatum Prins, our new member, Don Sims and myself arrived in Spain in good health and high spirits and with a firm belief of finishing in the top 5 rankings, but a series of relative small mishaps, systematically



following up on each other, eventually took the impetus out of our team and although we kept on racing, hard at times, it simply was not possible to race with the same intensity as it is when one races in the front bunch.

Like all adventure races, this was a very special race and a unique experience with facets that stood out, such as the extremely cold and windy nights, the inline skating legs taking you up on slopes of 12% and seen as easy legs to most Europeans, The Espanol factor: communicating with the locals and understanding the written language, the continuous passing through quaint little towns with history abound and the deafening silence of the glacier mountains with their mountain goats to protect any secrets and the extremely old age of the architecture en route.



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The Merrell Adventure Addicts wish to thank the following team sponsors who support our adventurous lifestyles:

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- PVM - For providing us with nutritional products to keep us going.
- Black Diamond - For Icon and Cosmo head torches that lit our way brilliantly
- Giant Bicycles - For providing the team with exceptional Anthem MTB's
- Island Tribe - For protecting us from the harsh African sun.
- Squirt - For keeping our Bikes lubed and operating smoothly!

