

# The Verdon Canyon Challenge.

## Mandy's story: "Do you know it's 41 degrees?"

said Rhys as we trudged up the hill passing yet another "runner" sat under a tree. We were just over a third of the way round the Verdon Canyon Challenge and it was hot (I'm told 40°C is 104°F!) – all we could think was "just keep plodding" , just survive until the evening when it cooled down.

It was earlier in the year that we received a call from Dave Makin suggesting we do the Verdon Canyon Challenge. It's only 100km - should be easier than a Bob Graham - and you've got 25 hours to do it in – easy. It was only when we were out there that we realised we'd not accounted for the heat or the terrain; in fact we'd totally underestimated the event!



Our preparation was poor to say the least, starting on Friday with a 3.30am start to catch the plane. We arrived in Nice at midday to stifling temperatures in the high 30's. The morning of the race dawned and 9.30am saw us lined up on the start line of the 100km event, myself, my husband Phil, Christine Preston & Rhys Watkins from Todmorden Harriers and Andy Pooler, Dave Williamson & Jon Broome from Achille Ratti. Tod Harriers Richard Leonard and John Preston had spent the previous week cycling down through France and so were doing the 37k race with Heath Reilly from Halifax. We seemed to be the only Brits out of the 250 runners in the 100k and the 150 in the 37k.

We were off up through the village and then up, up, uphill onto a ridge on the edge of the canyon –the views were stunning. Then it was downhill all the way to the first checkpoint and food station – this was mayhem as they couldn't open up the packets of food fast enough. A diet of cubes of ham, TUC biscuits, crisps and cake was to be repeated at most checkpoints. The route headed down into the canyon down a rocky, scrambly path with the path along the gorge interesting to say the least. At times it was cut out of the rock with wires as a handrail. The walls of the gorge towered above us – "How do we get out of here?" I thought. My question was soon answered as we started to zig-zag upwards past lots of runners sat around having a rest! We soon hit the rock and ascended vertically upwards aided by more fixed wires, ladders and an extra rope (with knots in) here and there supervised by the local mountain rescue.

By now it was really hotting up, a young French lad tried to encourage me to run, but my head was spinning, the path was really narrow and overgrown with bilberry bushes and rocks sticking up everywhere; certainly not easy running territory. We were high above the gorge and as we rounded the corner we were met with an absolutely stunning view of the mouth of the gorge filled with bright blue water way below us. At the next checkpoint I encountered Rhys, who had decided to drop out and was waiting for John & Richard to accompany them to the end of the 37k. He isn't very good in the heat, in fact he must be the palest skinned person I know (hence his nickname the Pale Rider). My powers of persuasion worked and he agreed to accompany me around the 100. We departed as John & Richard appeared at the checkpoint and over the next few hours Rhys was to regret they had not appeared sooner.

It was now that it hit 41 degrees as we dropped down the hill to the lake and climbed up the ridge on the opposite side of the canyon past more runners taking a rest. We were hanging in there trudging onwards and upwards. A Belgian guy attached himself to us his T-shirt emblazoned with Forest Gump! He stuck with us for an hour or so then whizzed off into the distance. This turn of speed did him no good as we found him sat half way down a steep slope saying it was too dangerous. Finally night time arrived and, as the temperature cooled, we actually did a bit of running. We arrived at the main food station to be greeted by Phil sat there shivering. He was dropping out with heat stroke, and waiting for a lift back to the start.

From here it was pitch black and although we could see a few head torches in the distance we couldn't work out where they were going. Soon we were heading down into blackness - it was quite a bizarre experience as you couldn't really tell where you were going - and there were lots of toads on the path! I managed to misjudge the path and next thing I knew I was sliding down the hillside, but fortunately Rhys managed to rescue me –thank goodness I was not on my own. Across the bridge at the bottom and the mountain rescue man asks me if we're OK. Of course we are! Then it's off up the side of the gorge we first descended many hours ago. At the next checkpoint the two girls cheerfully inform us that we're 61<sup>st</sup> (where did the other 180 go?). Up the last big climb there are a few headtorches in front but none behind. The marks are hard to follow in the dark and we keep worrying that we've lost the path.

It's starting to come light as we head down a steep descent to the 80k mark, the worst is over and hopefully we'll be a bit faster on the last 20km of better paths, but it was not to be. "Finis" say the checkpoint marshal's, we look puzzled. It seems there was a cut-off time at 5am and we've missed it by just under 10 minutes- Rhys is relieved I think. We wander back to the start along with lots of others who've been timed out – one guy's giving the organiser a real bad time for not letting him continue.

We meet up with John, Richard and Heath, who had had a much nicer day out on the 37k race and rouse Phil who's been asleep in the car. We're at the finish early Sunday morning to welcome Chris Preston as she finishes 2<sup>nd</sup> lady and in 20th position overall. Only 51 runners finished the 100km race and the winners time of nearly 18 hours gives a good indication of just how tough it was. Jon Broome was in 10<sup>th</sup>

position at 90km but got lost in the woods and after wandering in the wrong direction for hours got a lift back to the finish. He probably did 115km despite not finishing! Andy Pooler & Dave Williamson finished in an impressive 35<sup>th</sup> position.

**Phil's story:** “Do you know who you are?” said the paramedic. I opened my eyes, peering over the oxygen mask at the concerned young lady looking down at me. I pondered her question groggily before nodding. “Do you know where you are?” she asked in a soothing French accent gesturing at nothing in particular. I surveyed the scene, head buzzing. I was in a large tent, lying on a campbed. Why were my legs up resting up there? I could see grass and banners through the door. The young lady was holding something that looked like a camelback in the air? It was attached to my arm. I felt hot, and I remembered.

Having decided that sub 18 hours sounded like a reasonable target I set off like I would in the Fellsman - working hard up the big first climb and then hammering down the rough descent. I'd expected wide, well-graded tracks so the narrow paths through thick scrub and forest, often on rough rocky ground, were a welcome surprise; and the forest seemed to be providing reasonable shade most of the time. But, despite taking on plenty of water at each checkpoint I soon started to feel the heat. A white cap, dipped in water at every opportunity was helping but I was definitely starting to slow. The shade and cooler air of the canyon was a welcome change and seemed to restore some strength and I emerged back onto the tracks and paths above the canyon feeling strong. It didn't last long. Longer stretches were now exposed to direct sun and, as the temperature hit 41 degrees, my sweat drenched body started to rebel. I felt that feeling of disorientation I'd occasionally encountered on other ultras. However, gels and water failed to have their usual reviving effect. I was sorely tempted to follow the short course arrows where it split from the 100km route but, with pride overruling survival instinct, I staggered on. After about 40km we ran briefly past the edge of the Lac Saint Croix. This was too tempting a chance to miss. Dropping my small rucksack by the shore I jumped into the welcoming cool blue water. Heaven! A five minute immersion seemed to do the trick and I climbed up the track to the next checkpoint with renewed purpose. However, the route now climbed to the outer rim of the gorge exposing us to the unfaltering glare of the afternoon sun.

As the wobbles kicked in again I did something I've never done in a race; I stopped and sat down on a rock, sheltering behind a boulder. Was it five or fifteen minutes before I dredged up the motivation to continue? A few miles further on the rare shadow of a tree again proved too alluring. This was where ChrisP cruised past my prostrate body. The stop-start pattern was repeated as the afternoon blazed past, but not the miles. You reach a point where you don't really care anymore but somehow manage to keep your body moving forwards, but at a painfully slow pace. I think I realised how bad a shape I was in when I tripped on a root and described a slow motion arc off the path and somersaulted into a bush. Looking down I saw that there was little between the bush and a 500m plummet down the canyon. Back on the path I brushed myself off and staggered on. Darkness snuck up on me before I knew it but the cooler air had little effect. Reaching a checkpoint at 58km I slumped into a chair. “Ca va?” a marshall asked, looking at me with concern. “Je finis”, I replied in weary French, giving him the thumbs down.

Having sat shivering in a space blanket for a couple of hours I was eventually ferried back to the start. Following a couple of hours fitful sleep in the back of our hire car I hobbled up to the finish area. I decided it was worth getting my blisters sorted in the medical tent. A Frenchman bursting your blisters and injecting them with a sinister pink fluid with more sting than a jellyfish is an experience not to be undertaken lightly. Little did I know the effect it might have on me. “Voilà, finis” my tormentor said. I sat up on the camp bed. I feel a bit strange I thought. The next thing I remember was coming to, 10 minutes later, with oxygen mask and drip attached. Apparently I'd had a couple of fits while out cold and now looked paler than the Pale Rider himself. Heat exhaustion and dehydration were the likely cause and, eventually letting me get off the campbed, the paramedic stressed the need for me to rest for a few days. “Oui, oui, of course”, I reassured her, deciding I'd better not tell her about the epic lilo race across the lake we'd planned for tomorrow!

After the usual “never again” we've both decided to go back and try again next year...and to give this awesome event a little more respect.....anyone got a sauna we can acclimatise in?

## Mandy & Phil

