

The Transcontinental Cycle Race

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The Transcontinental Cycle Race captured my imagination and wouldn't let go.

One way to describe the Transcontinental Race is to quote its founder, Mike Hall: "At the sharp end it is a beautifully hard bicycle race, simple in design but complex in execution. Factors of self reliance, logistics, navigation and judgement burden racers' minds as well as their physiques. The strongest excel and redefine what we think possible, while many experienced riders target only a finish." Those are words to manage your expectations about how easy something is going to be.

More specifically, the Transcontinental sees several hundred riders gather at a point in Europe – Geraardsbergen in Belgium, in the year I did it – and ride to a distant point on the other side of the continent as quickly as possible. In 2017, the fifth time the race had run, our goal was Meteora in Greece – a distance of just under 4000 kilometres for most people. If I sound vague about the length of the event, it is because riders in the Transcontinental are free to choose almost any route they please, as long as they hit four mountain-top checkpoints along the way. This makes the race so much more than just a simple test of who is the strongest. The rider with the best legs won't win unless they are also good at route planning. Each person has to make their own decision about how comfortable they feel taking quicker, busier roads or sticking to safer, but slower, back lanes. Almost everybody who has ridden the Transcontinental has an anecdote about a road that looked perfect on the map but which turned out in reality to be a broken dirt track that vanished in the night.

But even strength and planning are not enough. Success in the Transcontinental is above all determined by how you handle a clock that never stops. This is not a stage race, but a nonstop push. If you pause to rest or eat, the clock continues to tick. If you need to make a repair or fix a puncture, other riders might get ahead of you as you work. This unceasing timing throws up a hundred decisions about strategy, tactics and equipment. To take just one example, the risk of punctures forces you to ask whether you will fit tough tyres, which are less likely to get damaged but which roll more slowly, or instead fit lighter, faster tyres, which carry an increased risk of being damaged. Once you've decided on that trade-off, you have to decide if you will carry a spare tyre, or save the weight and accept a small risk of getting stranded should one of your tyres get torn irreparably.

The tactics of sleep become critical. How little do you think you can get away with? And how different will that be after ten days of hard physical work – something you might never have experienced before? Will you ride straight through the first night to try to get some kilometres in the bank, or will you put yourself onto a sensible overnight sleeping schedule from the start even if this means other riders pulling away from you as you snooze? Each evening, as the sun goes down, you have to decide whether to press on to the next town – perhaps several hours away – and hope to find a cheap hotel, or to bivouac by the roadside but risk being woken by rain or traffic in the night. Perhaps you do

something more imaginative and shift your rhythm around completely, riding through the night and sleeping in the afternoon to avoid the draining summer heat. But this in turn forces you to consider whether you have lights that are good enough for nocturnal travel and whether you are able to find enough portable food at the right time of day to get you through the hours of darkness... The permutations can soon become overwhelming.

Finally, and above all, success in such a race requires you to possess such personal qualities as willpower and toughness. Strength, planning and tactics all count for nothing if you are not able to dig down within yourself and find the ability to *just keep moving* through whatever setbacks emerge, day after day after day. Because there *will* be setbacks. There always are. Your ability to race the big miles is determined as much as anything by how you handle them when they appear.

As soon as I had the idea to enter the Transcontinental, after stumbling across an article about it, I hardly slept for the next two nights. I lay in bed picturing what it might be like to undertake something so *big*. I'd run in a race that lasted around three days – which was epic as far as running races go – but how would it be to put my life on hold and hand myself over entirely to an athletic endeavour that went on for two weeks or more? What would it be like to ride alone through distant and intimidating corners of Europe like Serbia and Macedonia – places I only knew from harrowing news reports in the 90s – in the middle of the night? To be entirely self-reliant in the face of enormous adversity? Learning the answers to those questions wasn't just something I wanted to do, it was something I was *compelled* to do. I pulled out of all my planned running races for the coming year, threw aside the years of training and development, and became a cyclist instead.

Since then I've learned to pay attention to ideas that grab me like this. When an idea takes root so easily and so firmly, it's probably the right one.

A happy coincidence around this time was that I moved from where I was living just outside Bath into my girlfriend's house on the edge of Bristol. For the last year, I had been running to and from work at the University of Bath most days, and this had been a great way to get training miles into my legs as part of my daily routine. Indeed, I was even briefly featured in *Running* magazine when they did a feature on commuting. This had all been a useful arrangement when my commute was around 11 kilometres each way, but was no longer an option now I was living at least a 72-kilometre round-trip from work. The shift to bicycle racing fit perfectly with this change of home, and I was able once again to use my regular commute as part of my training. Most mornings I would ride through Bristol city centre and out to Bath along the lumpy and overcrowded Bristol-Bath Railway Path before coming back the same way in the evening. My body responded by becoming more muscular: my weight rose by 3 kilogrammes and stayed steadily at this new level.

To get some experience with longer rides, I began to go out on Audax UK events. The term 'audax' refers to slightly different styles of cycling around the world, but in the UK it's a form of long-distance self-paced riding.¹ People get together at a pre-arranged time

¹ In some parts of the world, this would instead be called *randoneuring*, and the term audax would refer instead to long-distance guided group rides. It gets needlessly complicated quite quickly.

– usually slightly too early in the morning – and then ride a fixed route of 200 kilometres or more, each going at their own speed. Riders need to get round the course before a relatively generous cut-off time – typically 14 hours for a 200-kilometre ride – but audax is otherwise firmly non-competitive. No record is kept of the finishing order; riders either finished before the cut-off or they didn't. As such, nobody is racing and it is far more common to find yourself having a chat with other riders than it is trying to drop them on the climbs.

After a few months I realised that, although I had ridden over 200 kilometres on three or four occasions, I was still nowhere near the sorts of distances that would be required if I were to make a serious attempt at the Transcontinental. Moreover, not only would the race require me to go much further than I had ridden so far, I'd also need to get up the next day and do it all over again. I had not yet ridden two long days back to back, and so resolved to see what that would be like, at least once. I decided I would find somewhere 300 kilometres from home and ride there and back within a weekend.

Scanning a map revealed that Sheffield is almost exactly 300 kilometres from Bristol. That was the sort of journey that most people would think twice about driving, which was a daunting realisation, but I went to my favourite route-planning website and got to work.

The ride up the country was tough, and I had to dig into my *just keep moving* experience more than once, but I was elated as I eventually dropped down a hill into Sheffield and watched my odometer tick over from 299.9 to 300.0. Wow – three hundred kilometres, under my own steam. I felt a warm glow as I checked into a little hotel that I knew from some earlier work trips, walked stiffly down the road to inhale a big curry, then crashed out for a few hours of deep, restful sleep.

The next day, just as dawn was breaking through the frigid air, I was back on the road, puffing big clouds of vapour and trying to loosen my calves on a long climb out of the city. As I reached the top of this first big hill and emerged onto open moorland dotted with twisted black trees, the sun broke out behind me and spread soft light across the rolling grasslands. The sun then made a complete traverse of the sky and had disappeared behind the opposite horizon by the time I made it home that evening, broken but thrilled. Knowing I was capable of riding two big days back to back raised my confidence considerably.

Spring rolled into Summer, and I took every opportunity to slip in extra training miles. The build-up to the Transcontinental peaked with a brutal audax ride called the Pendle 600. Six hundred kilometres around the north of England taking in every 25% and 33% slope that the sadistic organiser could find. The total ascent was over 10,000 metres. At a petrol station, late in the first afternoon, I met a cyclist called Richard Coomer and we elected to ride together through the night as the route criss-crossed high passes in the lonely darkness of the north Pennines. Richard would later become a valued companion on several future long rides, but that day we went our separate ways at the 400-kilometre point, where the ride organiser had arranged a village hall in Cumbria where we could rest. I fell asleep for two hours on top of half a congealed pizza, while Richard took a shorter break and got back on the road while I still snored. We bumped

into each other again near the end of the route, and were among the first riders back to the starting point the next day. I counted myself ready to race.

Transcontinental Cycle Race number 5

I had to get moving.

I was enjoying the sunshine, slumped in a chair outside a German cafe with a large half-finished glass of Coke in my hand and a big contented smile plastered across my face. But I had to get moving. I couldn't stay here.

To my side, the Rhine ran lazy and slow between a series of steep cliffs. Above, perched impossibly on the hilltops, fairytale castles looked down on the cargo barges that rippled the waters beneath. It was a jarring combination of the magnificent and the mundane. But I couldn't remain here and enjoy the contrast any longer. The clock was ticking.

This was the first full day of the Transcontinental Cycle Race. The previous evening we riders had gathered in Geraardsbergen where, once unleashed, we crashed like a wave up the cobbled flank of the Kapelmuur. The route out of the town was lined by cheering spectators, their faces sinister and mysterious in the flickering light of the burning torches they held as they roared their support. It had been exhilarating to be in that dense swarm of cyclists, each of us facing the same way, each riding too hard towards a common goal as if with one mind. Snatches of shouted conversation flashed past in half a dozen languages, all the time enveloped by the din of the onlookers.

Then, abruptly, the crowds had fallen behind and I was out in the stillness of the Belgian night. My hands rested comfortably on the bars and my feet glided around in endless perfect circles, the excitement of the event pushing my pace slightly higher than the measured and conservative effort I had planned. Finally underway after all the waiting, my doubts fell away as I settled into the familiar act of cycling. My body knew what it had to do. *It's like riding a bike*, I thought to myself, and laughed. Red tail-lights, some blinking and some steady, streamed away into the darkness ahead of me as the cool air rushed over my smiling face. I glanced back and saw a matching stream of white headlamps behind. For a few minutes I rode alone, and then fell into a pack of riders, only to lose them again when I turned left at a junction while they all pressed on ahead. Each of us had already worked out our own path, kept carefully secret from all other riders, and there was no reason to think I would see any of these people again. As I rolled through a silent suburb I plucked a can of Red Bull from my jersey pocket and drank it without even pausing in my pedal-stroke.

And so that first magical night passed. Giddy with disbelief at the unfamiliar experience of being in such an epic race, I slipped unsuspected through the sleeping town of Waterloo and then crouched low on the aerobars as I pushed down long, straight and deserted roads towards the Netherlands. Dawn broke, bright and filled with promise, as I crossed the border near Maastricht. It seemed as if hardly any time had passed before I was in Germany, where I dropped onto this smooth path by the Rhine — not the most direct route between Geraardsbergen and the first checkpoint in southern Germany but, I hoped, flatter and faster than the more obvious route through the hills of the Ardennes.

Through it all, I rested on my handlebars and pedalled, the smile still upon my face, until I reached this cafe and decided I could spare five minutes for a big cold drink.

But that time had passed. I had to get moving. This was a race, after all. I would have to reach the end before I would be freed from the awful tyranny of the clock.

oOo

I went into the Transcontinental Cycle Race with no real expectations. As the phrase has it, I was there to complete, not compete. If asked, I might have said I hoped to get to the end of the course in time for the finishers' party, but the Transcontinental is so big and tough that I would have been happy simply to finish and have that tale to tell. These expectations were sensible: in most years the Transcontinental sees around one-third of the riders finish in time for the party; one third finish, but after the party had ended; and one third drop out of the race somewhere along the way (or 'scratch', as it is known among riders).

So it was a surprise to roll into the first checkpoint in Germany, after about one-and-a-half days' riding and a brief roadside sleep, to learn I was in 24th place. There were around 250 riders at the start in Geraardsbergen, so somehow, without doing anything particularly special, I was inside the top 10% of the field already. This will sound like false modesty to you now, but I honestly did not expect this – this was my first bicycle race and I was only there to see if I was capable of finishing. I did not know I had the slightest chance of being competitive: this felt a world apart from the running that I knew and I had only started cycling properly a few months earlier. At the pre-race briefing, as I had surveyed all the gleaming bicycles and calf-muscles, it seemed clear I was going to be outclassed by pretty much everybody else there. So learning that I was in a reasonable position at this point was as surprising as it was gratifying. Fellow rider Josh Cunningham had rolled into the opulent hotel that hosted the checkpoint at the same time as me. I turned to him as we ate breakfast amongst the murmured conversations and tinkling china. 'Well,' I said, 'I guess I'd better start taking this race seriously.'

It was time to go to Italy. Checkpoint 2 was at the base of Monte Grappa, on the far side of the Alps. The temperature almost at once became oppressive, and over the course of the next day my thermometer climbed from 11 degrees all the way up to 40. None of us in the race realised it at the time, but this was the start of a Europe-wide heatwave so long and deadly that it became known as The Lucifer.



Yes, I made a special detour to visit this place. Note the ominous storm clouds in the background and the annoying sag of my saddlebag

I pushed through this heat to cross the southern half of Germany and then into Austria – a 300-kilometre day. As the night began to form off to my right, the Alps appeared on the horizon and inched towards me. I slept for a few hours in a small hotel in Lermoos and then headed back out before the sun rose. I had the roads to myself so early in the morning. The smooth Austrian tarmac slipped under my wheels as the moon dramatically backlit the peaks on the horizon. Wrapped in the cool pre-dawn air and surrounded by the hushed majesty of the Alps, that first hour was transcendental as I headed through a series of sleeping villages to reach the main road and the Fernpass.

At that time of day the traffic was light and I was soon over the pass and eating a three-course breakfast in the service area on the far side as the sun came up. I felt great. I was riding the biggest ultracycling race in the world, I was performing better than I had expected, and I was feeling great. Also, my omelette was marvellous. You can't ask for more than that. The smile I wore in Germany was still on my face. Thank goodness I had taken the plunge and exposed myself this way despite all the fear I had felt at the thought of such a huge undertaking. Imagine having missed this experience because I hadn't dared try.

Ride angry

Along the River Inn to Innsbruck, then a hard turn south to climb over the Brenner Pass. I smashed the climb because I had misremembered its altitude and so it proved to be far easier than I was expecting. Almost before I knew it, I was at the top of the pass thinking 'Was that it? That was easy.' Like how my first marathon had felt manageable because I

was focused on the ultramarathon that was coming next, anticipating a bigger climb on the Brenner made the reality seem trivial. It's all about expectation.

Then it was a long, hot push down a series of valleys as I moved across northern Italy. Motivated by my placing at Checkpoint 1, I got low on the aerobars and really put in some hard hours, pushing harder than I had for the last couple of days. I was rewarded by passing several other contestants. I was also briefly confused by seeing a scattered handful of riders coming in the opposite direction, each with a race number attached to their bike and each, like us, loaded with bikepacking kit. What was this other race we were overlapping? No time to think about that too much, though – I continued to press hard along a series of well-paved cycle tracks running through orchards, stopping regularly to fill my bottles from the water fountains that stood at convenient intervals. I overtook several more Transcontinental riders and started to congratulate myself. I couldn't wait to get to Checkpoint 2 and see how far up the rankings I had risen from these two days of hard racing effort.

And then it all went wrong. I did a thousand-metre Category 1 climb over the Passo della Fricca which, I soon discovered, was completely unnecessary. I even pushed my bike for a couple of kilometres on the old rocky footpath that flanked the mountain at the top of the climb, because riding through tunnels was forbidden by the race rules. It turned out that, while I went on this adventure, every other rider had taken a lovely flat cycle track around the base of the mountain that I had completely failed to notice during my route planning. I only discovered my mistake when I was in a small town on the other side of the pass, eating a takeaway pizza in the humid darkness that had followed the sunset. Each rider in the race carried a satellite tracker that updated their position on a website every few minutes, meaning people back home could follow the race – and meaning also that we riders could keep track of one another. This was how I discovered my route-planning error on that close, sweaty night in Italy. As I chewed my pizza I refreshed the race tracker on my phone and swore when I saw what a setback I had undergone. The pizza was disappointing too. I threw it into a bin and remounted the bike.

Three hours of angry pedalling later, I pulled into Checkpoint 2 to find that I was back in exactly the same position I had been at Checkpoint 1. Thanks to my bad route planning, two days of intense riding in blistering heat had gained me precisely nothing in the race. Shit. I had to press on. I had to get that time back.

The Transcontinental generally allows riders a free choice of route, but each year there are a few short mandatory sections, mostly near the checkpoints. Immediately from Checkpoint 2, we were forced to climb the full height of Monte Grappa – a mighty Alpine ascent so intimidating it earns an Hors Catégorie classification: it is 'beyond categorisation', or 'off the scale' for cycle races. Monte Grappa climbs 1500 metres up an average gradient of more than 8% on a road that threads through a series of tight hairpins to what was once a wartime killing field. It was also entirely the wrong direction for people trying to get from Checkpoint 2 to Checkpoint 3, included by the organisers purely to maintain the race's reputation for toughness.

Other riders were bedding down on the floor in quiet corners of the hotel that housed the checkpoint, waiting to tackle the climb in the morning. Still stinging from all the places my

routing error had lost me, I set out to get over the mountain in the darkness while this lot slept. The climb took two hours and forty-three minutes. I fell over twice after pausing and then trying to do hill-starts on the steep slope in total darkness. The climb was so overwhelming that I had to fall back on all my running experience, breaking down the enormity of the undertaking and keeping myself firmly in the moment. *Just keep turning the pedals and you'll get there eventually*, I thought. I focused only on the next switchback. There was nothing beyond it — to reach that next bend was all that mattered. And when I eventually got there, all that mattered was to reach the next. Like some serial philanderer, I pursued each corner as if it were all that mattered in my life, only to abandon it and lunge for the next as soon as I had what I wanted.

Eventually reaching the monument at the summit, slightly bloodied and very weary, I found a rider whom I had last seen near the first checkpoint. I later discovered this was world-champion time-trialist Stuart 'Hippy' Birnie, but then, in the darkness, all I knew was that he was some guy with very deep wheels and an Australian accent. For a moment, we both gazed across the startlingly clear lights of the valley far below us. It was like the twinkling view from an aeroplane at night. Then, scenting a chance to drop a competitor behind me, I left Hippy and bounced down a broken track towards lower ground. But my competitive urge was fighting with fatigue, and half-way down the mountain I was overcome with a sudden and irresistible need to sleep. It came upon me so suddenly: one moment I was weaving down a broken road in the darkness, the next I was hit with a deep certainty that I had to stop at once. I pulled over and looked for a spot where I could unfurl my bivvy bag, but at once a pack of feral dogs scented me and began to chase, barking furiously as they ran towards me through the darkness. I clipped back into the pedals and bounced further down the track, fighting the urge to close my eyes. It was only some time after three o'clock in the morning that I was finally able to bed down in a picnic site and grab a few hours' troubled sleep. At one point I was dimly aware of Hippy's brakes squealing as he rode past me, nudging me back a place in the rankings.



Luxury accommodation on the backside of Monte Grappa

Big city, little speed

Sleep is amazing.

This thought looped around my mind as I crossed the baked brown plains of northern Italy under the withering sun and then rode into Slovenia. I had slept on the ground for perhaps three hours, but this was all it took to act like hitting a reset switch. Now, on my fourth day of riding, I was back at a level of effort that I could not have imagined at the end of the previous night. The restorative power of even a brief nap was something I experienced over and over through the Transcontinental. The phenomenon still fascinates me today.

I passed through a town called Ajdovščina and then, as the road climbed up into the hills, I really started to fall for Slovenia. Green, idyllic, cheap and full of friendly people who speak good English – what's not to like? As evening approached I stopped for a pizza at a restaurant near Vrhnika and listened to a group of women on a neighbouring table sing together as I ate.

Big cities are the enemy of fast cycling, and I first started to realise just how bad they are for racing when I crossed Ljubljana. It was a hot sticky night and the city, while trim and attractive, had an air of overheated summer madness hanging over it. People spilled out of bars; young men drove too fast and aggressively up the boulevards. I was stopped over and over by traffic lights, and watched my average speed plummet. Earlier that evening, as I was eating, I had arranged a hotel in a small town a couple of hours past the capital. But all the Ljubljana delay threw me off schedule. I was still in the city and had only around 265 kilometres under my belt for the day when I got an email from my hotel saying their reception closed at 2200 and when was I due to arrive? I realised there was no chance I could get there in time. I cancelled the booking – reluctantly forfeiting the price of the room – and found an alternative hotel a few streets away. A warm welcome from the friendly manager. A large glass of cold beer that almost had me weeping with joy. A hot shower. Sleep. Sleep.

The next morning I was frustrated with my lack of progress. I had only managed 267 kilometres the previous day despite having flat roads almost the whole way. Today it was time to toughen up. I bashed across the rest of Slovenia with my head down and soon reached Hungary. After Slovenia, Hungary's countryside felt poor and rustic, its villages filled with unsmiling people sitting on the edges of potholed roads while drinking from hefty beer bottles. I pushed into the night, resolving to ride until I was too tired to continue. As the sun set, the cornfields that lined the road filled with the roar of a million crickets. The noise came from every direction at once, louder than I could have imagined. The throbbing wall of sound amidst the stifling humidity was almost overwhelming that first night, but as the race went on I started to look forward to the humid evening chorus as my sign that the heat of the day was finally over and I could pick up the pace as I rode alone into the cooler air of the night.

Eventually, in the small hours of the morning, I tried to sleep in a bus shelter on the outskirts of a town near Győr, but was driven away by the incessant barking of some dog

driven insane by its life locked in a back yard. If the dog was loud enough to disturb the sleep of an exhausted TCR rider, what must it have been like to live near that house? I crammed my air mattress back into my saddlebag and headed further up the road. I eventually fell asleep under a shrub in a park until I was woken far too soon by two early morning runners crunching past my bed. I had managed 362 kilometres, though – that was better.

You can eat well, or you can eat quickly, but you can't do both

It is easy to get the idea that nutrition is everything in sport. Companies compete to sell perfectly balanced foods and supplements; books, magazines and websites are filled with information about the right combination of macronutrients for every phase of training and racing. Amateurs take cues from the professionals, and nowhere is there greater professionalism than in the top tier of cycle racing. The big grand-tour teams travel the world with full-time nutritionalists and chefs, controlling every gramme of food that enters their riders' bodies to ensure optimum performance at all times. Carbohydrate and protein levels are adjusted on a meal-by-meal basis to respond to that day's training load and anticipate the physical demands of the next day.

This level of control in the professional peloton has filtered into public awareness. The comment I have heard more than any other by non-cyclists is something like 'I guess you must pay a lot of attention to nutrition when you're racing.'

Nothing could be further from the truth. In these unsupported races it is possible to eat well and it is possible to ride fast. I don't believe it is possible to do both.

Let's do the maths. Let's say you're riding in a 4000-kilometre race and let's say you're able to move at an average of 25 kilometres per hour (this is slightly faster than most people can ride long distances, but it makes the calculations easy). Let's also say you need 7 hours of downtime each evening to clean yourself and your kit, eat dinner, and sleep. This leaves 17 hours for all the day's activities – riding, bike maintenance, rest, buying and eating food... Now let's say that each day you stop for lunch at a cafe or diner (45 minutes) rather than grabbing cold food from a roadside petrol station, quickly gobbling as much as you can and then eating the rest of your meal on the bike (15 minutes). Each day, that extra half hour to eat a hot lunch is putting you half an hour's riding, or 12.5 kilometres, behind where you would have been had you done the smash-and-grab at a petrol station. After 14 days, your lunches have put you 175 kilometres behind where you might have been. By foregoing those hot meals, you could finish the race almost half a day earlier. That is a big difference.

And that's just one meal each day. Let's go further. Let's say your desire for comfort means you not only have a hot lunch, but also stop for coffee in the morning (an extra 20 minutes over just grabbing and going) and stop for a pizza once every second day (an extra 45 minutes each time). After 14 days riding, you're now 423 kilometres behind where you would have been – that's well over a full day wasted just through wanting a bit of hot food. The other competitors are gone home by the time you finish.

I fully realise, if you do not race long distances, that this might all sound ridiculous. But I have learned to think this way as I tried, over a period of years, to ride faster for longer. You're never going to get much faster by trying to improve an already fit body; but dealing with all the time spent stationary during a long ride offers huge, and relatively easy, gains. As we will see, I became more and more strict about saving time this way as my racing progressed.

This brings us to the other side of the equation: by being disciplined and efficient you are now eating quickly, but you are no longer eating well. When the desire to save time means you are grabbing your meals from petrol stations and convenience stores, a typical day of ultracycling becomes fuelled almost exclusively by what my girlfriend dismissively calls 'brown food' – chocolate, pastries, potato snacks, muffins... anything fast, easy to cram into a jersey pocket and, above all, full of calories.

One convenience food, above all, has achieved almost talismanic status in the European endurance cycling world: the 7 Days croissant. Widely available from petrol stations all over eastern and southern Europe, these have as much in common with true French croissants as a teddy bear does to a Grizzly. Cheap, readily available, indestructible and packed with energy, 7 Days croissants have a level of convenience that tips the balance just enough for riders to endure their artificial flavour and alarming smell. The distinctive waft of sugary air that is released when the packet is opened is something I suspect I will still experience when all other senses have long abandoned me.



The 7 Days croissant – the perfect balance of convenience and nausea. The orange device is my satellite tracker, faithfully beaming my location and speed to the world every five minutes

The wheels begin to come off

It was the sixth day of the ride, and Slovakia greeted me with a puncture. I rolled into the country on a bridge across the Danube from Hungary and instantly hit a big pothole that burst my front tyre with a snakebite flat. I pulled over onto a grassy area and put in a new inner tube, but then found it would not inflate. Suspecting that my pump might be faulty, I dug out my spare pump – but this was no different. I unhooked the tyre again to find this new inner tube also had holes in it. I replaced it with yet another, but could not inflate this either. What was going on? These were brand new tubes, fresh from their packets. I tried to patch the tubes, but struggled to get a good seal. This was ridiculous – I had dealt with scores of punctures in the past without trouble. What was happening now? I pulled out my phone and found a bike shop nearby, where I was able to get some new tubes. This was a relief, and I was glad I had been within a short walk of a shop, but the whole thing lost me over an hour. I couldn't stop thinking how much more serious this would have been had I been somewhere more isolated.

Three hundred kilometres ahead of me was a pass in the Low Tatra mountains – the last real obstacle before the mandatory climb up to Checkpoint 3 further north in the High Tatras. I pushed as quickly as I could across Slovakia, my head down, stopping a couple of times for meals and once more to repair another puncture. My first couple of hours' riding that morning had involved a whole load of stress and extra kilometres when Hungary's bizarre and arbitrary use of No Cycling signs had forced me to re-route near the edge of Győr. Now, in Slovakia, I somehow took a wrong turn and had to backtrack several kilometres. Then I almost rode onto a motorway by mistake. The day felt like one setback after another and I started to feel out of control. I felt I was waiting for something to go wrong from which I could not recover.

In the end, of course, it was not all setbacks. I should have known this and felt less anxiety. I had forgotten that essential lesson of long-distance athletics: it never always gets worse.

Something that came to mind that day was how one of the best things about unsupported ultradistance racing is that there is more than one way to be good at it. You can be a good ultradistance rider simply by being fast. But you can also be good by being a smart route-planner, or through being efficient during your rides and wasting as little time as possible off the bike. Each of these skills can compensate for the others, so it is possible to be fast overall, even if you are not a terribly strong rider, by being great at these other essentials.

Another key skill for a good ultradistance rider is being a problem-solver.

My problem-solving skills were called upon that day when my shorts began to chafe my crotch in the most unacceptable way. I don't want to get too graphic here, but the salt of my sweat and the seams of the shorts had combined to produce a kind of cheese-grater effect right on the parts of the body where you don't want that sort of thing. There was no way I could go further like this. I stopped on a quiet roadside to have a think...

Five minutes later, I was riding through Slovakia in a tiny pair of running shorts that I had brought as evening wear. But as these were unpadded, I had lashed my cycle shorts inside-out onto the top of the saddle so I could still enjoy their comfort without any of the chafing. Genius.

This kind of roadside improvisation illustrates another reason why I choose to put myself through lengthy and difficult challenges. A long race – or even just a long training ride – provides one difficulty after another: a tough climb, a mechanical problem, a dip in energy or motivation... Each of these is its own challenge, nested within the bigger challenge of the event I have undertaken. Each is an opportunity to push myself, and so get to know myself better. Each adversity tests me in a different way so that, by the end of the event, various facets of my character have been proven. In this way, I achieve a deeper self-knowledge and confidence from knowing I have prevailed repeatedly, on a broad range of trials. I carry these little victories with me, and I use them. On a difficult day at work, I might think *I can run a hundred miles, or I can cycle across a continent*, and at once my mood brightens, my shoulders move back and my self-confidence returns.

And if there is pleasure to be gained from overcoming a physical challenge, like conquering a difficult climb, how much sweeter to overcome a challenge of the spirit? There is no satisfaction like taking part in an event that initially frightened you but which revealed you were capable of more than you thought. Or to sit slumped by the roadside, exhausted and overwhelmed, and somehow to find the strength within yourself to keep moving. This is why I make the choice to put myself in these difficult positions. To overcome a mountain is wonderful, but to overcome the mountains inside your mind is far greater.

I have never entered a race that did not, in some way, frighten me. Of course, the nature of the fear changed with the scale of the event. If I ran a 10-kilometre running race, the worry was only whether I might be a lot slower than I'd hoped. But when I stepped up to ultradistance racing, and especially when I moved into the extremes that come with ultracycling, I found whole new realms of fear to overcome. No matter how skilled or experienced you are, there is always a strong probability you will not finish an ultradistance race. Too much is outside your control: weather, the roads, dogs and, above all, motorists. The true challenge, then, is not trying to win, or even trying to ride fast; the real challenge is one of character, of how you respond to adversity when it inevitably arises. Even in a race where you do not finish, victory is still truly yours if you are able to say, without reservation, *I did all that could be done; I could not have given more*.

The Tatry

Night arrived. Amidst the humid darkness and the throbbing noise of crickets I pushed into the Tatra mountains and climbed straight up to 1200 metres altitude. On the descent down the other side I noted how easy night riding had become. At first, riding in the dark had felt intimidating, but with exposure I had grown comfortable with it. Indeed, I was probably at the point where being comfortable tipped over into being complacent. Descending at over 50 kph on poor roads with my headlamp on its lowest setting to preserve battery life, I realised that the murky pool of light that shone ahead of me was manifestly not up to the job and so scrubbed off a little speed before I crashed in one of

the potholes scattered so bountifully around this part of Slovakia. Equally pressing, I realised I did not have enough food for the night and that I was starting to feel weak. I tried a hotel but found it closed. Eventually, after 315 kilometres, I hit Highway 18 where, hungry and fatigued, I fell asleep on the floor of a bus shelter. I was woken every few minutes by heavy trucks whooshing by, but was stuck in the Catch-22 situation of being too tired to move to another place where I could get enough sleep to stop feeling too tired to move.

Eventually, at first light, I gave up on sleep. Thankfully, dawn always brings a fresh energy that cannot be found at four o'clock. I crammed my kit back into my saddlebag and began slowly to roll up the road where, to my relief, I found a village shop that was open surprisingly early. I sat outside and gorged myself on yoghurt, fruit and doughnuts.

Checkpoint 3 lay just up the road – in every sense of the word 'up'. Although only 6.6 kilometres long, the road to the hotel climbed the entire way with an average gradient of 10% – far steeper in places. Worst of all, the road was extremely narrow along its entire length. This meant there was no option to zig-zag from side to side and thereby smooth out the steepest sections. It was relentless. I met Josh Cunningham again at the bottom of the climb and we ascended together, bemoaning our lot and wishing we had lower gears. A professional cyclist in his youth, Josh later commented that this was one of the hardest climbs he could remember.

Finally, eventually, the slope ended and there was the hotel that held Checkpoint 3. Round-the-world rider Juliana Buhring was helping run things, and nodded approvingly at my saddle-padding solution. More importantly, I learned that I was now up to sixteenth place in the race. This was amazing news. I said how surprised I was to have climbed up the field like this given all my punctures, pizzas and general faffing around. One of the checkpoint staff replied with what proved to be a very wise statement: 'A big part of these races is just keeping moving'. I was delighted to have jumped so far forward in the race. If it was true that keeping going was half the battle, and I had gone from 24th place to 16th place between the last two checkpoints... could I possibly be in the top ten riders at the finish? This immediately became my ambition for the Transcontinental, and there was a lot of race left in which to achieve it. What a story that would be for a novice rider in their first race! I left Josh, who was slumped in a chair looking exhausted, and headed back down the slope and pushed back towards Hungary.

oOo

The following day I had my sights set on the Romanian border. I had the roads to myself as I rolled silently through the crisp pale sunlight of the early morning, watching birds flap over the wheat and cornfields. Once or twice a deer glanced up in the distance, alerted by my motion, and glared at me warily until I was gone. The pedals turned easily, and as they did I found myself slipping into a deep and true sense of awe at what I was achieving: the previous night I had crawled into a remote Hungarian hotel feeling tired and broken, and yet here I was, riding fast again, eating up the kilometres on a stunning day. *My body is*

² Now I've mentioned him twice, I should point out that Josh Cunningham is also an award-winning travel writer. If you're new to adventure cycling or long-distance bikepacking and want some guidance, I would definitely recommend his book *Escape by Bike*, which is both informative and beautiful.

amazing, I thought. *I can do anything*. My eyes brimmed with tears of wonder and gratitude as I realised that here I was, doing things I would never have imagined myself capable of.



Of course, endurance sport always has its ups and down. And so, after experiencing such a high, it was only natural that a couple of hours later I crashed hard when my front wheel slipped off the sharp lip at the edge of some Romanian tarmac and I was thrown sprawling across the road. Luckily there were no motorists around at the time, but I was left with a series of painful, oozing grazes down my left arm and leg that covered my clothes, and later my camping mattress, in sticky blood. Years later, I've still not managed to get the blood off that mattress.

Food fixes everything

The Lucifer heatwave continued to smother the continent. I crossed Romania, beaten down by its heat and the appalling driving standards of the locals.

Riding a bike when it is 46 degrees Celsius is awful. It is not quite so bad when you are moving – it is surprising how much the flow of air over your body masks the worst of the heat – but the moment you pause, the full weight of the day lands upon you again, all the more shocking after a period of not noticing it. You come to loathe traffic lights for the pain they inflict. Perhaps the most dispiriting effect of these temperatures is that, within minutes of filling your bottles, your water rises to a temperature that is quite literally the same as bath-water. Drinking water that is hotter than your own body provides no refreshment at all, and nor does pouring it over yourself. I am from the north of England. These conditions are not something I am built for.

Eventually, the heat began to enrage nature itself. Late that ninth morning, 120 kilometres after waking up in a field, I looked up from the handlebars and saw the Carpathian mountains appear on the horizon. Towering above them, dwarfing the peaks, were stormclouds that rose until they disappeared from sight. It was like riding towards an apocalyptic black wall of infinite height and width. I felt miniscule, like an ant crawling towards the edge of the world across a dusty brown plain. I fished out my rain jacket as the first drops started to fall, and within moments was being stung by the weight of the downpour. I took shelter in a roadside cafe where I found fellow rider Tim Maundrell, who had taken an unorthodox route through the edge of Ukraine to get to the Carpathians but who would still go on to finish the race in 13th place. Together we sipped coffee and watched an ocean fall outside the window. It felt as though neither of us was in a hurry to leave our sanctuary, and not just because of the pounding rain – we knew what lay ahead.

The Transfăgărășan Highway was forced defiantly over a 2000-metre mountain pass by President Ceaușescu, showing all of his usual disregard for practicality and human life. It climbs up to a ridge that looks as though it should not be crossable, rising up a steep valley in an arresting series of bends and curves. Seen from above, the twisting, curling road resembles a rope flung across the landscape by a giant. Nobody even remembers how many soldiers were killed to build this marvel. As one of Europe's most dramatic stretches of tarmac, the Transcontinental race manual had said that it was not a matter of *if* the race would one day take its riders over the Transfăgărășan, but *when*. Our year was to be the one.

I learned that day just how much energy is required to ascend a long mountain climb. It took over two and a half hours to reach the highest point of the Transfăgărășan and I entirely underestimated how much food I needed to power that sort of effort. *After all, it's only climbing up a hill*, I thought, not appreciating that the difference between hills and mountains is more complicated than that. It was as though I still couldn't quite comprehend of any climb lasting more than an hour. In my defence, they don't where I come from. The longest climb within a day's ride of my home takes little more than 20 minutes.

I started out too hard and did not eat enough, so was bonking badly by the time I reached the final race checkpoint, part-way down the other side of the pass. The checkpoint was in another hotel, so I ordered two meals from the menu to try and fix my blood-sugar deficit. But I was in another Catch-22 situation: I was too weak to stomach the food I needed to stop me feeling weak. I pushed the plates away with their contents mostly uneaten and enquired about a room for the night – it was still early evening, but I felt that a few hours' sleep and an early start the next day might sort me out. But there was no room at the inn. Reluctantly, I remounted my bike and made slow, wobbly progress down the wooded valley until I found another hotel where I could get a room, but no food.

This all meant that the next morning, as I headed down the road on the south side of the mountains, I still had nothing in the tank. The route should have been one to lift the heart – a wide gorge lined with towering pines, cut through by a road that hugged the edge of a still, black lake – but I was past caring about scenery. I was so weak that, after two hours on a road that essentially ran downhill all the way, I had covered only 40 kilometres. Eventually, I found a hotel at the far end of the lake and bribed the receptionist to let me

attack the breakfast buffet. He palmed my Euros and pointed me towards the dining room where I slumped at a table and called Louise. 'I just don't have anything left,' I babbled. 'I'm only doing 20 kilometres an hour even though I'm riding down a mountain – I can hardly turn the pedals. And there are signs everywhere warning about bears! How am I supposed to outrun a bear like this?!' Her response was entirely correct: 'Eat. Just eat. Stay there for however long it takes and eat.'

I ate everything. Later that morning, I was not only back to normal but managed to clinch a top-10 performance on a long Strava segment along the Olt river.

This recovery proves that my only problem that day was lack of food. But, critically, the *experience* of not having enough energy was not the feeling that I needed to eat, it was the feeling that I was hopelessly out of my depth. Looking back now, in a more rational state, I can probably explain this...

Self-perception theory tells us that feeling an emotion is not a straightforward chain of events that always unfolds the same way. The emotion we feel in a given moment depends as much as anything on the label we attach to the feelings we are experiencing. So, for example, churning in the belly before a big event might be experienced as nervousness or excitement, depending on how you decide to label it to yourself. Clearly, one of these is a much more positive interpretation than the other.

In other words, we don't simply feel our emotions. Rather, a lot of the time, we are effectively watching ourselves and working out what we are feeling from the clues we observe. There in Romania, finding myself weak and ineffectual, I made a bad judgement about what this meant. Rather than reaching the right explanation for my state, which was that I had just not eaten enough for all the riding I was doing, I made an *internal attribution*: I decided that all the problems I was suffering came from who I was, rather than my circumstances. I became convinced that I lacked the character, training and skills for the ride I had undertaken. I started to think I was an idiot for ever believing I could undertake this race. I doubted myself. But food – and a good talking-to from Louise – can fix everything. It should be obvious you can't run an engine without fuel but the irony is that, the moment your energy supplies get low, the last thing you can do is remember this simple fact or deal with it properly. And, if you are anything like me, you might start explaining away the feelings that arise with a totally maladaptive interpretation.

Those days in the Făgăraş taught me how important it is to anticipate these situations, and to be prepared and disciplined enough to get food into me before it is needed when hard riding lies ahead. Failure to fuel leads to failure to believe. Never again do I want to stare into that particular abyss.

Pffft

Towards the end of my tenth day of riding, I passed through the Romanian city of Craiova without giving it a second thought. It was just another concrete impediment, as far as I was concerned. Dusty Romanian cities were just background to me by now. Fifteen kilometres later I was cresting the top of a hill on the DN56 road when I heard the sudden and dispiriting *pffft* of a puncture from my back wheel. What should have been a simple

roadside repair became a race-destroying disaster. As the sun set ahead of me, I spent the best part of two hours fitting one inner tube after another and failing to get any inflated. Holes appeared in all of them, and I could not get these holes to patch up. A series of further frustrations began to pile up on top of this. The road was busy with noisy traffic, so that I had to wait for minutes at a time for occasional breaks when I could listen for where the air was escaping from the tubes. My pump then stopped connecting onto the valves properly, making my attempts to get air into the wheels fiddly as well as futile.

These punctures are still a mystery to this day. I know I nicked one tube with a tyre lever as I installed it, but I have no idea where all the rest of the holes came from. The tubes were mostly fresh from their packets; there was definitely nothing poking through the tyre, and no sharp spots on the wheel rim. I checked these with meticulous care at least a million times as I tried to get my tyre inflated. But every tube I fitted somehow turned into a colander as soon as I attempted to blow it up. None of the patches would stick properly, not helped by their glue struggling with the heat, humidity and dust. Eventually, slowly and reluctantly, I realised I was all out of tricks. I was forced to accept that I wasn't going to fix this.

There, on that dusty Romanian roadside, my dreams of a top-ten finish died.

It was fully dark by the time I slipped cleat covers onto my shoes and began the long trudge back towards Craiova, pushing the bike and phoning Louise to tell her what had happened. I clopped slowly for seven kilometres to a town called Podari, where I found a young man working in a cafe who spoke German. He helped me find a taxi that could carry a bike, and this took me the rest of the way back to the city. I slunk into a hotel and discovered that no bike shops would be open until 1000 the following day. Being forced to stop for so long was agonising.

The next morning found me camped outside Top Sport Bike, ready to pounce on the owner as soon as he arrived. I bought a fresh batch of inner tubes, and I watched jealously as he inflated one of them for me in two seconds using his compressed-air hose. I re-mounted, ready to cover the fifteen kilometres out of Craiova for the second time, but before setting off I took a moment to send out a message on Twitter. The finish line lay 855 kilometres away, through five countries. Stinging from all the lost hours, I decided I was going to ride the entire rest of the race non-stop. Such a crazy undertaking needed a suitably vainglorious name. I tweeted:

Right, I've finally got inner tubes but have lost a huge amount of time in the race. It's time for Operation Kickass.

Operation Kickass

Eight-hundred and fifty-five kilometres, in one big push. Let's do this! I rode out of Romania, across the northwestern tip of Bulgaria on some truly shocking roads, and then into Serbia. Here I started to bump into other racers for the first time in days. I found German long-distance expert Michael Wacker riding with Melissa Pritchard, who would go

on to be the fastest woman in the race that year. The three of us rode together for a short while, shooting the breeze and comparing notes about our adventures, until I slowly pulled away along a long, quiet road amidst the pale brown fields.



With Michael and Melissa in Serbia

Operation Kickass sitrep: 200k and feeling okay. Serbia

Then I found Swede Daniel Johansson standing by the side of the road sifting through one of his bags. I pulled over and we chatted for a few minutes. As I remounted and prepared to leave, I looked at my map and said, 'Hey look, it's only a short distance to Niš. There's a McDonalds in Niš.' Daniel's face lit up with a wide beam. 'Fuck yeah!' he yelled. 'I haven't had proper food in three days.'

Operation Kickass sitrep. Nearly 300k. Slowed pace as Serbian roads are ropey in the dark. But feeling good. Onwards!

I had just made a scary 10-kilometre U-turn on the A1 main road near Grdelice when I dropped off the tarmac onto a dirt track and found myself alongside Stuart "Hippy" Birnie once again. We caught up with each other's news briefly before my front wheel hit a big pothole and punctured. Hippy rode away as I pulled the wheel out of the forks. I got this puncture repaired pretty quickly, but it was a foretaste of what was to come as I went into the most frustrating night of my life.

The dirt road – already barely visible on my map – headed through the middle of a vast and confusing construction site where a new motorway was being built down the valley. In the darkness, with the ground churned and smashed by heavy vehicles, the true path at

once became impossible to see. The surface of the road was indistinguishable from all the other dirt and spoil amidst the tyre tracks. I was forced to backtrack over and over as promising routes proved to be false, moving slowly over the broken surface and slithering in patches of mud and soft sand.

Part of the problem was that I could see nothing of my surroundings other than the little circle lit by my headlamp. In the daylight I would at least be able to see my surroundings and aim for a landmark, but at night I had no way to know where I was in relation to the other features in the valley. In a flash of inspiration I pulled up Google Maps on my phone and activated satellite view to see where I was standing relative to the real road, but the imagery in this area was far too crude and grainy to be useful.³ Eventually I found what I thought was the right path and followed the track as it climbed uphill, only to find myself at the edge of a half-constructed motorway bridge surrounded on all sides by a fifty-metre drop to the ground below. And there, as I turned around atop a towering concrete platform that invited me to fall to a messy death, I heard a familiar sound in the darkness: *pffft*.

For the next two-and-a-half hours it was that dusty Romanian roadside all over again: one tube after another failing to inflate, one patch after another failing to stick. Except this time it was 3 o'clock in the morning and I was tired and dirty and hours away from the nearest town. One of my tyre levers snapped – hardly surprising, given I had used it to take my tyres off and on a billion times. On my knees, surrounded by the artifacts of my ineffectual repairs, I just wanted to cry. I dropped my hands into the soil and released a roar of rage and frustration into the darkness. Never, ever, have I wanted more for somebody just to come and make it all go away. If it had been possible to press a button and make it stop I would have done it. Had somebody appeared in a helicopter offering rescue, I would have thrown my bike down in the dirt and dropped out of the race without a second thought.

(That moment, kneeling in Serbian mud and unable to move forward, has become a touchstone for my life. Since then, any time I have found myself feeling frustration or despair, I have always managed to pull myself out of it by asking myself 'Is this as bad as that night on the construction site in Serbia?' The answer, so far, has always been no, and this has been a very successful method for giving myself a sense of perspective. What a wonderful reminder of how these extreme sporting events provide a test-bed for suffering, a place to prove yourself and come away stronger than before.)

It took all my willpower not just to lie down and sleep in the dirt, but eventually I managed to get a repair patch to hold. I almost couldn't believe it when the tyre started to inflate. By that point I had been through the motions of mounting the tyre and connecting the pump so often that I had given up expecting anything to happen. But, wondrously, the tyre inflated and I was able to move again, hardly daring to breathe in case this somehow ruptured the patch. And then I managed to find the right track and get out of the construction site. I grinned with delight that I had overcome this whole string of challenges, one after another. I was so thrilled to have got myself moving again that I

³ Checking again, as I wrote this a couple of years later, I saw that Google's imagery in this area has now been updated. Looking today, I can see every detail of the the new motorway that curves sinuously down the valley. Damn its gleaming carriageways and all who use it.

almost didn't care when I got chased by a pair of dogs and crashed my bike trying to escape them. Almost.

oOo

The next day saw me pass through the rest of Serbia. A backstreet tyre mechanic in a small village mended my inner tubes with heavy-duty patches, a pneumat, ic press, and glue so strong that it made the hairs in my nose shrivel and die. There was no way those patches were ever coming loose. He even waved away my offer of money once the work was complete. What a guy.

Serbian tyre guy mended two tubes, booted my tyre and then refused payment. I LOVE him. Operation Kickass not dead yet

Tucked away in the Balkans and further isolated by war, Serbia had spent a long time cut off from the rest of Europe and as a result is its own fascinating world. Rather than the global mega-brands that make the rest of the continent so homogeneous, I found local varieties of everything, often with badly chosen English names. The ubiquitous Magnum ice cream couldn't be found in Serbia, but was replaced with the 'Macho'. I saw a shop selling a perfume called 'Economic Eau de Parfum' then roared with laughter after passing a restaurant called simply *Alas*. The temperature rose to 46 degrees as I climbed to the Macedonian border and demanded water from the guard who checked my passport.

Operation Kickass sitrep. 455 km done, 397 km to the finish. Last night I hit new lows but that's past now. It's sweltering. #TCRNo5

Macedonia saw yet another mighty blunder, although at least this time I was not the only person to make it. Every map of Macedonia shows a nice big road – the R1312 – over the central mountains on the way to Prilep. Unfortunately, the R1312 is nothing more than a cruel cartographical fiction. The road is, in reality, a rocky goat-track that rises to over 1000 metres elevation. I climbed it in the depths of night, forced to push and carry my bike almost the entire way. It took hours. The rocks and sand destroyed my cleat covers, then my cleats, and then my shoes, and for the remainder of the race I could no longer clip into my pedals and had to make do with resting my feet on top of them. After many hours of bad-tempered pushing I found Daniel Johansson sleeping by the side of the track; a little while later I lay down myself and snatched three hours of troubled sleep amidst the scrubby bushes and coarse grass at the foot of a rocky outcrop.

And so it was a weary Ian who was sitting outside a petrol station the next morning when Melissa Pritchard rolled along. She was all smiles after a good sleep and an easy ride along some lovely smooth highway. She took a photo of me from below, emphasizing my chewed-up shoes. I later learned that a whole bunch of us fell for this R1312 trap. One French rider ran out of water during the long climb and got so thirsty that he spent half an hour on his knees licking a wet slick of moisture from the ground before walking around the next bend and discovering that the source of this wet slick was a bountiful natural spring that bubbled through the rocks at the side of the path. So I guess my experience

wasn't quite as bad as his. But for me, yet another night of huge time-eating setbacks was a mighty blow to Operation Kickass and morale was in the toilet. *I just have to keep moving*, I told myself. *It never always gets worse*. But at times it was hard to believe this as I pictured all the other competitors who had passed me over the previous two nights.

oOo

The heat continued to sear the world as I crossed the border into Greece and turned to head southeast. The landscape here in northern Greece was extraordinary. Up on a plateau, and largely empty, the country had an epic sense of scale that verged on feeling eery. It was impossible to judge the true size of anything. I rode past a power station that seemed like a toy amidst this vast, featureless landscape. This was not how I pictured Greece.

Here in the final country, I at last started to scent the finish line which had, until then, seemed too distant even to contemplate. The kilometres slipped beneath my wheels as I pushed hard through the astonishing heat, stopping only when the need for water forced me. Eventually, after ten hours of hard riding, I reached the final slope. This was it – after this climb it was downhill all the way to the finish. I resolved to hit the ascent with my last gramme of strength and leave everything I had out on the course. I emptied out one of my two water bottles to save weight and fired up the hill, little realising that the climb would take 47 minutes and leave me desperate for the water I had so rashly thrown. It was worth it though – I managed to get the fourth-fastest Strava time on that hill and then, as the sun set, I swooped down the other side of the pass, the astonishing hilltop monasteries of Meteora flashing by as I rolled into the town. I cruised down the main street, past bustling bars and restaurants, in a dizzy state of disbelief. I felt disconnected amidst the normality of the town; people went about their evenings as though some extraordinary feat of athletic endeavour were not taking place in their midst. The lights and noise were overwhelming to me after the stillness of the vast Greek interior. A couple of other TCR riders spotted me from outside a cafe and cheered my passage. I barely glanced over: at the end of this road was the hotel where the race would end. I swung off the road, deeply engrained habit causing my right hand automatically to click down two gears as I slowed...

It was a deeply anticlimactic finish to a life-changing ride over thousands of kilometres. There was no hype, no cheering, no cameras. There was not even anything to mark the location of the finish line. But in the circumstances, in this old-fashioned race where amateurs thrashed themselves to the ragged edge for no more reward than the recognition of their peers, this seemed entirely appropriate. I leaned my bike against a wall and walked up a few steps to where the race organisers and some of the previous finishers were sitting quietly around a table. Somebody handed me a cold can of beer. There were handshakes and quiet congratulations. I spotted the race winner, James Hayden, who had finished his ride in an astonishing time of just over 9 days. I shook his hand with a heartfelt 'Chapeau'. *I doff my hat*: the highest praise one cyclist can give to another.

I sat down, my ride complete.

After all my travails, after all that suffering, the heat, the crashes and the saddle sores, I had finished in 27th place out of around 250 riders. It had taken 12 days, 23 hours and 4 minutes.



The next day at the finish line in Meteora. Michael Wacker sits far left.

oOo

A short while later, I sat slumped in my chair by the finish-line, sipping from another can of beer. I had been to a nearby shop, and the can in my hand had five siblings – one empty and crushed on the table, four more sitting in a plastic bag on the floor next to my chair. I was hoping to hand one to the next rider when they arrived which, according to the tracker, would not be long. I wanted to see whether their look of relief at being told the race was over would match mine.

It was dark, and the other finishers and race organisers were still sat around in twos and threes outside the front of the hotel, talking quietly in the warm night. As I savoured the crisp beer I was drinking and enjoyed the unaccustomed pleasure of having no urgent need to move, a dangerous thought started to form in my mind. As I looked back at the ride I had just completed – the heat, the punctures, the bivvys, the roads, the pizzas – I found myself fixing on a clear and startling realisation:

I could have done that faster.

Some lessons from the Transcontinental Cycle Race

Looking back on my effort in the Transcontinental, as I write this, I am struck by how I was both accomplished and naive. There were aspects of the ride that went really well, given that I wasn't even riding a bike a few months earlier. Enough time has passed that I am

now largely happy with my finishing position, all things considered. I am especially pleased with how I was rising steadily in the placings until those grim nights of suffering across Romania, Serbia and Macedonia.

But at the same time, looking back with more experience, I am frustrated at all the mistakes I made. Writing this section of this book forced me to reflect on my Transcontinental ride in more depth than at any time since I did it, and there is a sense in which I now want to grab my past self and shake him. 'Why didn't you take that obviously better road, you idiot?' I want to shout. 'It's right there on the map, parallel to the shitty strip of potholes you decided to ride down! And while we're at it, what were you thinking when you took that stupid pump you bought off eBay? I don't care if it worked when you tested it in the shed! Why would you take something that hasn't been tried again and again in the field?'

There are some lessons I took from this race that were quite specific to me, and might not be all that useful to other riders. For example, I felt my daily distances were too erratic. Even if we ignore Operation Kickass, I did days ranging from 224 kilometres up to 566 kilometres. That, I felt afterwards, came from inventing my race strategy as I went along. I decided I would be happier next time if I had a more consistent plan for how I would ride. I was also annoyed at how often I had let myself get into a deficit with eating. Those bonks in Slovakia and Romania shouldn't have happened, and I resolved to be a lot more disciplined about this in the future.

There were also a lot of lessons I learned from that first big race that were more practical. In the interests of trying to help others who might come after me, here are some of them. Most of these lessons I would still agree with although, as we will see later, there are one or two where I decided to take a more nuanced approach when tackling my world record attempt.

1. Fast riders use fast roads

Choosing a route for a race like this is a balancing act, and each rider must consider their own ideal mix of speed, safety and access to facilities. I can't tell you what is the right balance for you. What I can tell you is that the people right up at the sharp end of a race like the Transcontinental are probably taking the bigger, faster roads. They are, to a first approximation, taking the roads you would drive along if you planned the quickest route that avoided motorways.

The benefits of taking main roads are that you are likely to have better surfaces, flatter gradients and regular petrol stations and shops. Major roads are expensive to build and maintain, and so they aren't placed randomly – they pass close to where people live, work and shop; the engineering costs mean these roads do not climb up hills unless it is unavoidable.

Of course, the downside is that the places people live, work and shop are also full of commuters and deliveries, and so traffic is faster, heavier and more voluminous. And a big road that goes a long distance might be a corridor for freight trucks, which are the most intimidating of all.

2. 'Can I do this on the bike?'

This was an approach I brought with me from ultrarunning, where one of the things I was quite good at was not losing too much time in aid stations. There is a lot to do when you reach these checkpoints in a race – filling water bottles, eating food, dressing blisters, putting on or taking off layers of clothing... The temptation is to sit down and hit all these jobs one after the other. However, I quickly learned that I could pull ahead of other competitors by always asking myself 'Could I do this while moving?' Some tasks, like filling water bottles or dressing blisters on my feet, clearly had to be done then and there. But taking off a jacket and stuffing it in my backpack? Eating some of the food I'd just picked up? Tasks like these could be done on the move. It didn't matter if I was only going at walking pace: as long as my speed was greater than zero, it was more efficient to do the task while moving than it was to do it in a chair.

I brought a very similar approach to my Transcontinental ride. Eating? Looking at maps? As long as the road was quiet, these could be done on the bike. Who cares if opening a packet or checking my phone meant I was moving at only 10 kph? I'd still be further down the road than if I had stopped. Pretty much every task was subjected to this question of 'Can I do this on the bike?' Eating, drinking, checking maps, finding hotels... As long as the road was not too steep or busy these were probably fair game.

(2a Something you might start to think you can do on a bike but really cannot: inserting contact lenses.)

(2b Things you can technically do on the bike but probably shouldn't DON'T ASK ME HOW I KNOW: Cleaning your teeth, taking a piss.)

3. Plan each break in advance

As I rode, whenever I thought of a task that needed to be done when next I stopped, I would add it to a running mnemonic so that I would not forget. My internal monologue went something like this:

'When I get to the next shop I need food. And while I'm stopped, I need to oil my chain and check what's making that noise coming from my rear brake. Food, Oil, Brake... FOB. Like a fob-watch. I hope I don't get FOB-bed off in the shop...' And once I had that sort of mental image, I was unlikely to forget my task list.

It was then easy to add extra items into the list by expanding and rearranging the mnemonic. Let's say that my knees started hurting and I decided needed to add painkillers to my shopping list. In this case, I could just add a P into my list of initials and shuffle them around to make, say, PFOB – Planes Fly Over Brussels, or perhaps BPFO – Bored Penguins Fall Over. By creating a mental image of such scenes, I made it easy to remember the list.

(Finally, all those psychology qualifications paid off. Incidentally, if you want to get really good at this sort of memory trick, look up 'method of loci' and 'interactive imagery'. There are ways to make your mnemonics even more memorable than the brief guide I have outlined here.)

4. Hot food is a luxury

When you're tired and hungry it's so nice to sit down and eat a pizza in some unexpected restaurant in the middle of an unfamiliar country. But it takes a long time, and you'll probably ride faster if you can resist the temptation and stick to cold food.

If you absolutely have to stop, can you maximise your use of the time? Can you find a socket in the restaurant where you can charge any electronic appliances? Can you check your route or search for accommodation as you eat?

5. Cities are awful

They are so slow, largely because of all the intersections and traffic lights. I've still not worked out a hard-and-fast rule for this, but if I had to put a figure on it, I reckon the route through a city would have to be something like 50 kilometres shorter before I would go through the urban area rather than go around it.

One nuance here is whether you think you might be able to anticipate what time you will hit the city. If you can be confident you will be there at midnight then it might be a slightly easier crossing than if you hit it during rush hour. Although whatever time you get there, you will likely find you hit the same number of red lights. Indeed, there can be times when crossing a city at night is slower because often traffic lights have sensors that are not triggered by bicycles. This means they will stay red indefinitely if no other traffic comes along.

6. Skipping sleep rapidly becomes a false economy

Daniel Johansson, Michael Wacker, Patrick Miette... These are just some of the Transcontinental riders whom I overtook during my ridiculous Operation Kickass stint – sometimes more than once – but who nevertheless finished the race ahead of me *and* got more sleep along the way. You remember the fable of the tortoise and the hare? This was the real-life version, played out across Serbia and Greece.

I should preface this by saying that cycling or running at night is one of life's great delights – you feel like the most important person in the world as you cruise past sleeping streets and houses, a lone traveller whose secret passage will never be suspected and who has free rein to do whatever they please. And I am the first to admit that pushing right through the night in a multi-day race feels totally badass and hardcore. But you can have too much of a good thing. Eventually, you always slow down during the night. There is a lot of physiology behind this – hormone levels and body temperature change before dawn as part of our circadian rhythms, meaning that, fundamentally, we are built to be asleep during the small hours of the night and your body does not forget this no matter how much you want it to. On long, multi-day rides, there are rare occasions when the all-night push might be the right tactical choice, but more often there comes a time when discretion is the better part of valour.

The simple truth is this: at four in the morning you will be going slower than your usual pace, you will be feeling wretched, and you will be setting yourself up to be slow the following day because you are not rested. It is almost certainly better to grab a bit of sleep and thereby hit your body's reset switch. You will ride a whole lot faster after sunrise and

so will make back all the time you spent sleeping, plus a bit extra. Just ask Daniel Johansson, Michael Wacker, Patrick Miette...

The *true* lessons from the Transcontinental Race

So those were my practical lessons, presented here in the hope you might find them useful if you ever undertake long-distance riding yourself. But what were the real lessons? What did I take away from the experience of such a long, tough race?

Perhaps most importantly, I learned something valuable about how I was able to handle difficulty. Several times during the Transcontinental my plans underwent serious setbacks. All that lost progress in Italy after I took a bad route, the night I had to backtrack in Romania, that period of despair in the Serbian construction site... Looking back as I write this, several years later, I am really pleased with how I coped with these situations. As a way to make up for lost time, Operation Kickass was silly and — I now realise — a counterproductive racing strategy. But more importantly, it was a healthy, humorous reaction to a difficult situation. I had been planning and training for this race for over six months and it had all gone wrong. My strong position in the race had been so unexpected, yet so welcome when it appeared. As I watched it fall away, I might have become angry, or overwhelmed. I might have quit the race and been left forever wondering whether I could have finished. Yet rather than do any of these things, my response when I found myself under pressure was to laugh at the situation and get on with it anyway.

Looking back, I have to tell you that I am very proud of myself for that.

Racing TCR also left me with a deep awe and respect for the human body. Our bodies have been shaped over hundreds of thousands of years so that we are masters of endurance. If all you have done with your body is ask it to engage in a modern Western lifestyle, you have barely begun to explore what it can do. I was regularly stirred into deep emotions at seeing, first hand, what I had been capable of all this time without realising it — how my body could climb mountains, drive itself into deep pits of exhaustion and then, with the briefest of sleeps, begin the whole process again. *I can do anything*, I would think as I rode, magically renewed, into each morning sunrise.

I also gained a new appreciation for the vastness of Europe, and was struck by just how much of the continent is used for growing crops. I had not fully realised how, outside the mountains, most of the countries on this continent are basically a few cities and towns scattered among an otherwise endless patchwork of corn, wheat and sunflowers. I have seen the statistics about how the world continues to become increasingly urban, but it is hard to believe them when you undertake a journey like this. So much of our continent is a vast and largely traditional rural space. It is easy to forget this — both geographically and politically.

There was one other thing that I learned too: something very interesting about the process of dedicating yourself to a difficult task for a long time. It is possible that this was the most profound lesson of all.

'What do you think about when you're riding?'

When you ride big distances, you spend a lot of time with only your own thoughts for company. Yet it is notable how many people talk about these periods of solitude being when their minds most readily find peace. An interesting truth about ultradistance cyclists seems to be that many ride the big miles, in part, because it is the only time they are totally at ease. This is not simply introversion; there is something deeper at play here, linked to the physical act of riding.

The experience is most profound when you race a big distance, as opposed merely to riding it. A race requires you to be fast, and this need for speed is what forces you to ride without reservation or distraction, handing your whole self over to the venture you have chosen. The requirement to be efficient demands that you strip your existence back to its most elemental components: movement, water, food, shelter. This is no hardship: you discover it is a relief to have the complexity of everyday existence lifted from you and replaced by these simple concerns. And are they even truly concerns? There is a sense in which all the important decisions were made in advance when you chose to undertake the journey. Eventually you realise that your deep commitment to the cause of moving quickly offers the chance to pass through into a new state of being in which your waking mind can finally become free from questions. *Where will I go today?* Further along the route, the same as yesterday. *What will I eat?* Whatever I find, just like yesterday. *Where will I sleep?* Let's see where I end up. Hush now. Hush.

All this creates a strange paradoxical state of being. When I ride, my mind is crowded and empty. The practical part of me churns, thinking all the time about navigation, shops, food, weather and lodging, seeking information about those raw essentials of life and planning dozens of contingencies. But when I look back on any given ride, even one lasting many days, I would struggle to tell you a single thought that passed through my head, because the rest of my mind has been liberated. All of life's needs have been simplified, and then delegated to the fretting part of my mind. This part of me works like the legs on a swan; it has to be there, thrashing unseen beneath the surface, so that the main part of me can glide peaceful and still among its surroundings. And this sense of profound peace would never happen without the need to ride fast. So hush, and enjoy the silence.