

Avon Descent 2018

5am Sunday, race day 2. Its been raining on and off all night. River height 2.1m. It hasn't been this high since who knows when. Michael Laloli, our host in WA, has finished the race three times before and run the rapids at many levels, but never this high. He decides to pull the pin and opt to stay safely ashore. Dave Hammond has already had his share of swims on the river at lower level on Day 1. His decision is also sealed to stay on land. My partner Chris Stanley has to decide whether the risks outweigh the thrills to continue our doubles run in our cacky green plastic 515 named Gangrene. Safety rules, and Chris too opts out.

To Plan B, and Michael is willing for me to press on solo in his Wavehopper downriver racer. A quick switch of gear, aided by Michael and I being similarly sized, and I'm off on a flood-fuelled dig-dipper ride of exhilaration. All goes just fine up to 40km, and the last rapid of the day, Bells, before the flat run into Perth. There is a long low footbridge across the river, and its full of hundreds of spectators. We've run it two days prior in practice, unlike most of the other rapids I've just run blind. The safe route was just to the left of the second yellow pole. Or was that just to the right? But now there seem to be 5 yellow poles. Which one? Indecision freezes my mind, and instead of making a rational choice, I run squarely straight into the closest yellow pole. If only Chris was still in the back being my memory. The bow of Wavehopper wedged into a gap between the pole and a bridge pylon, and then the rest of the kayak proceeded to be swept round at 180 degrees to its bow. Things were looking grim. I was able to step out of the cockpit and onto the cross-bracing of the bridge, underneath the crowd, and rest my paddle on the underside of the bridge. From there I wrestled the kayak upstream to unjamb the bow, restraighten it and then empty some of the water out of the cockpit. With cold hands I held onto the kayak with one and fumbled for my paddle with the other. I gave up on trying to refit my spraydeck. I knocked the paddle off its safe perch, then watched it bob out of reach and disappear downstream. That left only my hands to help negotiate the second half of the rapid in a submersible craft. Luck played a hand, and we washed down a few drops then safely into the far bank. With a lot of duct tape, I was able to wrap the bow of the kayak sufficiently to plug a 70mm crack in the hull. At that point, Dave, who'd been watching the drama, popped up with a spare paddle. After eating a slab of fruit cake, I was on my way again to the finish with no further dramas.

Some of you will remember Michael Laloli from last year's Hawkesbury Classic. As part of his quest to complete Very Big Year, he flew over to Sydney, and LCRK took him under our wing and landcrewed him to his first Classic finish. He was so encouraging for LCRK members to fly over and join him in WA's big race. It was only with his help and encouragement that Dave, Chris and I were able to enter. Michael arranged a fabulous plastic double for Chris and me to paddle. Gangrene had been paddled by its owner John Hayes in previous Descents, so it was a proven reliable finisher. Gangrene is also lighter, faster and more manoeuvrable than our usual Wednesday night racer Kermit. Mike and his partner Christie arranged all our weekend accommodation, food and transport.

Dave and his family Maria, Tommy and Areti took two weeks holiday and drove across the Nullabor to get an Epic V7 to the start line. Dave's parents were to drive the rig and caravan home, whilst they flew back to school and work.

There was plenty of excitement for all on Day 1 of the Descent. The motorboats screamed off first from the start at Northam, and had to cope with the worst of the morning rain. By the time we started, the powerboats were almost at the finish 52km downstream.

Kayaks are started in grids of around half a dozen craft. It makes the pile-ups on the concrete ramp of Northam weir 300m from the start slightly less hectic. By chance Dave and Gangrene were in the

same start. Dave won that initial flatwater duel, and successfully led us down the ramp. Dave's Epic had legs on Gangrene on the flats, whilst swims on the rapids turned the tables. Next meetup was a picnic break on the bank for morning tea. Dave stopped only briefly; then sped off not to be headed before the day's finish.

Michael also caught us from his late grid start at morning tea. We were to spend the rest of the day in close proximity. This was to be particularly advantageous at Extracts Weir. We'd surveyed this signature trouble spot prior to the race. Chris was in control of deciding whether Gangrene would run or portage the 5m drop. At race start the verdict was to portage, as around 50% of the field opted to do. Yet with Michael alongside, and confirming he was a runner, Chris made a last minute decision to give it a go. It turned out to be the highlight of the day. Memory has a way of blotting out big fear, like on a bungy jump, and Chris doesn't remember the middle section of the run. He knows our approach was according to plan, and the elation of still being upright in the ripples and foam at the bottom of the drop. There was also a huge smile to accompany still being alive. We had avoided being part of the reported 40% swimmers who tried Extracts. Chris was even able to share the moment of triumph with his wife Judy back in Sydney whilst paddling on from Extracts via the whiz-bang technology of a wristwatch mobile.

Ti-trees are a unique feature of the last 10km of Day 1. Alien to eastern state paddlers, the paddling experience is like following the edges of a jigsaw piece. Twist and turn to wind through tree vegetation that chokes the whole river. Throw in high level flow, and this game is played on a swiftly moving baseboard under the tree canopy. We had Michael part time as a guide. There was the need for some swift coordinated manoeuvring, and a fair bit of ducking and weaving. Gangrene took on a fair bit of barky debris and displaced spiders in the closer calls. But we didn't tangle with any other kayaks, or any solid trees. We didn't get scooped out of the cockpit by any ultra-low limbo branches. And we didn't run out of water on a dead-end eddy. We felt like apprentice jigsaw masters by Day 1 finish line. Who knows how the powerboats get through ti-trees?

Our thanks in bucketloads to Michael Laloli, Christie and John for their hospitality and support. We'd highly recommend other LCRK head west August 2019.



Pre-race practice run for Dave Hammond on Waylunga Rapid



Chris Stanley in heaven after safely descending Extracts Weir



Exemplary host and guide, Michael Laloli shares lunch break Day 1



Riverside repairs below Bells Rapid to Richard's borrowed Wavehopper