

**Catharine Nicol** gets a head start in adventure racing, throwing herself into a weekend workshop run by two of the biggest names in the sport

# Racing smart



**I**f you haven't done an adventure race, put your hands up," said Ian. About a quarter of the people in the room did so. "Keep them up if you don't want to do one." All the hands went down. "Yup," he said, "As dumb as I thought!"

So began the Salomon X Adventure Skills Workshop weekend held recently on Hong Kong's Lamma Island. Organised by Paradigm Consultants, the stars of the show were John Howard and Ian Adamson, between them winners of a hatful of the world's biggest adventure races, including several Raid Gauloises, Eco-Challenges and Southern Traverses. As a novice

making the step up from triathlons, I couldn't have asked for better qualified instructors, but as more experienced racers swapped gear tips and race stories around me, I felt out of my depth.

Asked to introduce themselves to the group, their reasons for coming on the course ranged from race tactics: "I'm Patty and I want to learn how not to get our asses kicked on the next race", to



personal health issues: "I'm Tabitha and I hope we cover chaffing". Others cited navigation or rope skills, but everyone was also curious to know what made Ian and John tick. Why *had* they been so successful in the sport?



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The opening Q&A session on the first morning was a much-needed introduction for me, then suddenly it was time to shroud my camera in plastic bags as we headed out into the rain to the navigation workshop on Power Station Beach. I tried to be positive. This is good practice for being cold, wet and miserable in the middle of nowhere on a race, I told myself.

“The first thing with difficult navigation is to slow down and keep in contact with what’s on the map,” said John. Ian cited the “Lost World” on the Fiji Eco-Challenge saying, “Four of the top six teams immediately got lost. They didn’t trust their compasses. To get out we went up a peak – a ‘handrail’, a known feature. If you didn’t go there you were in a labyrinth of gullies. We went there, took a compass reading and got out.”

Talking about navigation led Team Bird and Bird Hong Kong to ask about sleep strategy. Having gone for no sleep for two days in Fiji they then made a 13hr navigation mistake. “They could have slept 6-7 hours and been fresh as a daisy,” suggested John, trading out-and-out speed for greater mental acuity. “Instead they went backwards.”

Going backwards was a concern in the session on kayaking too. Standing on the beach in the rain, Keith Noyes, himself a race organiser, looked at the



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inflatable canoes in front of us and said, “I’ve got 60 of these canoes and I have yet to find a good reason to use them. They’re just pure frustration!”

“It’s all about technique,” said Ian. He demonstrated how not to do it – the “windmill” – and then the correct technique, keeping his arms straight, using them as guides only, with his back, shoulders and torso doing all the hard work. Many of the racers had bitter experience of these clumsy-looking inflatables from the Action Asia series

races and were now eager to try out Ian’s technique, wobbling into the grey surf and zigzagging out to sea.

Just five minutes later there was a capsized, giving Ian the perfect opportunity to demonstrate how to get someone back on board again. From the shore David Greig shook his head. “I’ve got a background in biking and running, but this stuff . . . I come from a working-class family. We never had kayaks in Bradford. I can make a good curry halfway round a race though.”

Nutrition was another of the day’s topics, with many racers finding they lose their appetite on longer races. “I lost my bum on a mountain somewhere,” John laughed. He solves the problem by adding salt to powdered milkshakes – easy to eat, high in calories and lightweight. In humid conditions, he suggested drinking isotonic and mineral/salt balance drinks as they are more readily absorbed than water and unlike water won’t dilute essential body fluids.

Our attention turned to food, we all suddenly felt famished. Calling it a day, we headed for the Bookworm Café, our “base camp” for the weekend. Despite the wet weather the enthusiasm was tangible – everyone was itching to put all their new-found knowledge into practice in their next race. “I learnt a







Lamma Youth Hostel, though the uphill route had me panting like an asthmatic. Needless to say, the favourite topic was punctures. Ian smiled smugly. "I've been riding tubeless for 18 months and I haven't had a puncture in 18 months," he said, demonstrating how to change a tyre with your bare hands to a rapt audience. "I haven't even pumped my tyres in six months, and you can ride them with less pressure. If you are serious about your riding, have lots of money and like cool stuff, then they are your thing."

After trying out some downhill runs, we swapped our wheels for slings and jumars. There was just time before lunch for some ascending and abseiling. The question of safety inevitably came up: "In the States I've refused to do an abseil section," admitted John. "The

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lot, and it reinforced stuff I knew," experienced racer Kim Ames had said during the kayaking. "In adventure racing you need to be good at a bunch of things. Here they are focusing on things people aren't good at. Not so many people are good at kayaking. Navigation, kayaking, tomorrow climbing – areas where people are out of their comfort level. In training you should do what you are weak at and here they picked what people are weak at."

Sunday morning. Very early. I cycled down to catch the ferry back over to Lamma, waving at my friends emerging dazed from a nightclub. The pier looked like the venue for a Lycra convention and the ferry was instantly transformed into a bike garage. Keith's

bike was on its handlebars and Chris Fjelddahl was changing his tyres. I quietly wheeled my Chinese no-name bike onto the boat, embarrassed to have to lean it against the sexy Cannondale on the outside of the pack of superbikes.

Despite its appearance, it nevertheless got me safely to the day's first stop: a bike maintenance workshop at the

first thing I do is look at the anchor and set-up. Look at everything with a critical eye. You don't have to do anything, and on a lot of these races it is your responsibility to stay safe."

"You don't just look after yourself, you look after your team-mates," course organiser Stuart Sharpless added. "If you are in a race and you are knackered

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you do things wrong – even people with experience put on their harness back-to-front. It's important we all double-check everyone else." Taking this advice on board, we broke for lunch. In the afternoon, there would be the chance to put two days' worth of knowledge to the test in a mini-race.

"As far as pace is concerned, people do go off too fast and suffer because of it," Ian cautioned. "It is hard not to when you see 300 people in front. You think, 'I'm coming last!' But remember it's not the first person across the start line, it's the first person across the finish line. Start at the speed you can finish at



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“If you have one person who can't do the race at that pace then you slow down,” John went on. “The slowest member of the team is always the most important person. Help him to go at his max: carry his gear, tow him . . . someone will always be strong and someone will be weak.”

Not exactly the weak type, Ian had earlier said: “I've got a size eleven foot, and ten years ago it was a nine and a half. I've spent so much time on my feet they've got bigger and tougher. I had a blister in Fiji like an egg. I didn't lance it because I didn't want it to get infected.” To an awed silence, he

continued: “Pain? You can't see it, can't smell it, can't touch it, can't taste it. By all normal criteria you can't measure it . . . Pain doesn't exist.”

Conscious of my lack of race experience, I was happy to be taking photographs, thereby avoiding the first running section of the race. Instead, I had to cycle to the north of the island with Ian and John. As grateful as I was to be on two wheels rather than two feet, this was no chatty bonding experience and flying round corners and hurtling down hills, I struggled to keep up.

Next came a rock scramble and then a Tyrolean traverse across a small bay. With another girl, I followed the red

ribbon trail markers that led up the hill on the other side. We were on course, but not for long. Minutes later, we were fighting through the undergrowth. “Keep to the map and go back if lost,” John had said, but his words were forgotten in our haste to keep up with the others. We hacked our way through near-impenetrable jungle and finally, in pitch black, emerged at a swampy bog with the concrete path temptingly close. We plunged in, wading our way across.

Another insane bike ride, this time with the added excitement of speeding along in the dark, and we had made it. I sank gratefully onto the bench around the sparking fire and gulped down a beer. I had had my own little expedition, with the barest idea of what everyone else had been up to, but ended up in the right place at the end of the day. Happy and tired, I reflected on all I'd heard in a packed weekend with two of adventure racing's greats – years of invaluable race experience distilled and passed on. I'd learned an awful lot. But I still don't buy that line about pain.  $\Delta\Delta$

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