

WHAT I DID ON MY HOLIDAYS

Or There and Back Again and Again.....

DISCLAIMER

This was probably the best supporter setup I could have asked for, other trips to Privas should not be compared to it.

Background

I was contacted mid-February to be asked if I was willing to support Richard, Suzanne and Kathy during the 6 Jours de France. After the last two years of pandemic and not being able to personally participate in ridiculous events I couldn't say no. I had to arrange for Leon (my husband) to take time off from work to look after our three monster hounds.

I've completed and supported numerous 100 mile/24 hour races, a 48 hour and two Paris to Alsace races but never a static 6 day. Compared to other races I've supported I felt very laid back and decided to try and go with the flow (not easy for me).

Travel

I find travelling very stressful, even more so after the pandemic. Traffic was heavy travelling down to Heathrow so I was late meeting everyone and the anxiety levels started to rise. As I don't have a printer at home I was reliant on my phone for tickets and boarding passes, but everything happened relatively smoothly. We boarded the plane and sat on the tarmac for 3 hours whilst the computers were rebooted. After landing in Marseille we got a bus into the city centre and attempted to find food at 9pm, no luck, pizza it was at the hotel (pizza will figure highly in this report).

Next morning, after a surprisingly comfortable sleep on a sofa bed, off to catch a train north. A glitch with my phone meant I couldn't access the platform, but a nice French lady directed me to an intercom where another nice French lady looked at my phone and let me through. Once out of the city we travelled through amazing countryside, the houses felt like they could have been there since Roman times. Prickly pear lined part of the railway line. A 2 hour journey took us north to Montelimar and after a short wait we got the bus to Vallon-Pont-d'Arc. Once again through amazing countryside this time bearded irises lined the road.

Arrived in Vallon-Pont-d'Arc at lunchtime so we made our way into town and found somewhere to eat. I felt at home eating a huge lunch at Chez Leon.



After lunch we made our way to the other side of town to our hotel for the night. Once settled in we scoped out the campsite where the race was to be held – Camping Nature Parc l’Ardéchois. We found out the earliest registration time and which cabin we would be in. Had a look, veranda with loungers, table and chairs, microwave, kettle, hob, fridge/freezer, two bedrooms and bathrooms, absolutely everything (nearly) we could possibly want. Back to the hotel well satisfied. My suggestion of a swim as it was nice and sunny and warm went down well, until we got out to the pool, it was chilly, the sun went in, and the wind got up – typical. I was still very tired, stressed and anxious after the journey and began to wonder how I would possibly cope with it all.

Pre Race

Got ourselves set up in the campsite and had a look around. I felt at home once I saw recycling bins, a compost bin and the River Ardèche running along the perimeter of the site.

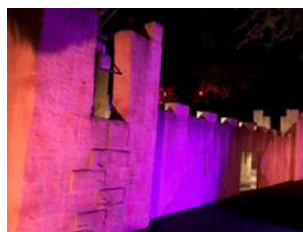


We wandered into town for basic supplies, I was still not functioning properly and couldn’t think what I would possibly want to eat so decided just to wing it. Felt like a sherpa on the way back with a rucksack full of supplies.

Arrived back expecting to see the course set up and registration taking place – nothing, a ghost town. Registration was put off until the following day and the pasta party was pushed back and back so we decided to eat in the campsite restaurant. Kathy had an amazing pizza, we asked if they did takeaways, yes, so that was dinner sorted. The race organisers did provide meals every day but after their experiences at Privas the three walkers didn’t want to risk any sickness bugs.

I went for a wander at dusk and realised the campsite wasn’t well lit. Headtorches were going to be needed.

I decided the course was made for hallucinations. There was a replica fort and gingerbread cabins lit up with multicoloured lights.



Day 1

The race didn’t start until 2pm so I wandered into town with Laura, the wife of another walker, to get supplies. An opportunity to stay out of the way of the three walkers while they registered and got themselves sorted.

Got back and tried to absorb their food preferences: salt/no salt, butter/olive spread, bread, no gluten bread, white/wholemeal/Nordic, milk/lactose free milk, separate

bottled water for cooking/tap water, sparkling/flat bottled water or tap water for drinking, vegetarian/meat eaters/ chicken eater, coffee/decaf/herbal tea/normal tea. Head buzzing.

The race started at 2pm.



I attempted to feed the three as I would on a 24 hour event, not going to work and I got sent to bed at 11pm

Day 2

Getting into a routine. Make 2/3 breakfasts for all of us and set up croissant, omelette, madeleine and pizza o'clock.

Kathy's leg was very red at the start of the day so she had the doctor check it out. It was an allergic reaction to the timing chip. An antihistamine and a new strap later (courtesy of Sébastien one of the timing chaps and in my mind the true organiser/trouble shooter) she was good to go.

Richard's back went into spasm. After a quick massage and ibuprofen gel application he was walking pain free again.

For the first time in a 6 day race Richard decided to have a shower and change his clothes. A problem as he only brought two sets of kit. To air the used kit I put it into his foot bowl, trod it down in warm water, like treading grapes, then hung it out to dry.

I took the opportunity of a lull in activity to explore the children's fort and was impressed with the attention to detail. A gothic arch lead into it and in the base of the tower were cave paintings.



For Kathy I learnt how to make omelettes from the internet. I asked Richard if he wanted anything warm, toast! The one thing I couldn't make, we all now got cravings for toast.

Into the second night I got prepared early, my fully charged headtorch in a bag, Richard's in another with spare batteries, warm clothes, hat and gloves in a bin bag as it got damp overnight. Ensured the table was fully stocked with food to keep him going through the night.



Suzanne's 6 day race was over due to chronic pain and food intolerances.

Kathy struggled to see in the dark even with a headtorch so didn't continue walking for as long as she wanted to.

Day 3

I found my groove, after breakfasts I strolled into town with Suzanne and got yet more food and a toaster. Richard and Kathy got a mid morning treat of a magnum, a small thing to make two people very happy.

I prep the up and coming meals and for the first time had a moment to sit and cogitate.

Richard stopped at two for his afternoon sleep (along with the half hourly feeds, he was my toddler!) and while he dressed his feet I tried to feed him the weirdest combination of food I could to test the guts of steel. Unfortunately, he seemed to like his three course meal of apple slices, boiled potatoes and yoghurt.

Kathy was very self-contained and polite, always came in to sit down and eat. As she was so self-sufficient it was easy to over look her and allow the toddler take all the attention.

Suzanne decided to take a break away from the race village and went to stay in a local hotel.

With ample food provided I decided to go for a wild swim in the river. Called it the Ardèche swoosh, swimming upstream out of the current then allowing myself to be swept down to the start. This was great fun and I found myself giggling with pleasure. As the sun was strong and I wasn't used to it I only stayed out for an hour.



Kathy's leg looked worse by evening so I wandered off to find the doctor. There was only one doctor for the race, I couldn't find him so asked the other timing chap, Jean-Michel, for advice. He called the doctor for me and arranged a meeting. It was nothing to worry about we were just being cautious.

About 8pm I broke out the toaster and was in love, so with the other o'clocks we now added toast o'clock. Toast went down a treat.

Day 4

Routine; get up check the table for Richard overnight carnage. Air clothes worn at night, immediately put headtorch on charge, first breakfast of porridge or scrambled eggs and ham. Kathy up and fed, stock up and buy fresh croissants. Morning treat of a magnum, lunch pasta and chicken with vegetables wafted nearby for Richard, omelette with cheese for Kathy, salad for me. Afternoon sleep for Richard, clothes rinsed and aired, random food shovelled in, strawberries went down well with them both. Afternoon tea sorted for Kathy, rice pudding with tinned peaches. I had a swim for time to myself. Back to make sure Richard was up and functioning and Kathy had madeleines. 7pm time for pizza, I was longing for the day Richard could only eat two slices so I could have the rest, never happened. Toast at 9pm then made sure table was set up with sufficient food and drink, headtorch and warm clothes were out then bed. Washing up, cleaning surfaces, sweeping, and cleaning the bathrooms done as necessary.



Suzanne came back in the morning and was considering starting again but in the 48 hour race. I couldn't find the organiser to arrange this but Sébastien was a star and contacted him arranging for Suzanne to start again fresh in the 48 hours.



Chatting with Suzanne I decided to try and make Kathy feel special so for her afternoon tea made a swan out of a paper napkin.



I gave myself a halfway treat of a new washing up sponge and a fresh tea towel! Little things to make me happy.

Day 5

Absolutely loved today. Pottering round the cabin while my three children were out walking I realised how happy I was!

Suzanne's 48 hour race started at 9am and she was smashing out the laps, Kathy was walking better each day and giving the other walkers a masterclass in ultra race walking and despite a few zombie stages Richard was still walking well.

I went to pick up my regular order of croissants and the shopkeeper gave me a free bar of nougat, a local speciality. Michel in the adjacent cabin is a masseur for a cycling team and gave me a lesson in ice baths for feet and how to avoid getting the feet wet. Another walker, Philippe, called me over and gave me a taste of his own vineyard fortified wine, blew my head off before midday!

Richard came back for his afternoon rest and I say 'once I've put you down for your sleep I'll go for a swim'! It was all getting to me now. A sense of humour and an ability to talk about bowels are an essential part of being an ultra supporter.

Great swim in one of the campsite pools. It was an odd shape so I swam round the outside, one lap breaststroke one freestyle. I could cut out the world completely with my head underwater, see only blue pool and brief glimpses of the sky. This break allowed my mind to rest and not think of anything.



That evening I discovered there were lights in the showers that changed colour. My day was complete.

Day 6

Suzanne stopped at about 2am due to pain, I'm trying to talk to her from bed whilst not waking Richard and nearly overbalance and fall out. Her stomach was bad again, so we formulated a plan. Showered, changed into comfy clothes and back to bed for a while. I made scrambled eggs for Richard and she decided to give them a go. They went down well, especially eaten in bed.

By now I had sussed Kathy out and made sure she had her yoghurt and cereal for breakfast along with her pills, put ice in her lunchbox to ensure the food stayed cool, fresh potatoes and tuc biscuits were periodically renewed.

Richard was now very tired and asked where his sunglasses were 'on your face' was my weary reply.

Another trip into town for more supplies, it was now very hot and I decided to treat the kids with real fruit sorbets, no they wanted magnums.

The race atmosphere and bubble (you become insulated from the outside world and your world shrinks) started to get to myself and Suzanne. Richard was trying to keep his head cool by folding his buff in two, putting it on his head and having ice cubes placed in the folds. Sounded reasonable until you saw the effect, haggard face, hair standing straight up, looked a little like Beaker from the muppets. This was such a great invention he was going to market it. We laughed so much my belly hurt and we start crying.

I picked a couple of roses for Kathy's afternoon tea table.



Suzanne went out again but came back with her shoulders in spasm. I massaged them until a little movement returned. She went out again for a final 10km wobble to complete a marathon.

Kathy was on a mission and even though it was getting dark she stayed out to get the miles in. She also chatted to Sébastien about how the event could be improved. She eventually came in for toast and I packed her lunchbox ready for the final day as I know everyone will be focussed and want to get out as quickly as possible.

Suzanne came in and couldn't move, not even to sit or lie down. I'd struggle to massage her shoulders properly in a standing position so decided to try and free them a little with hot towels. Boiling water in a bowl, soaked the towel, air cooled it then placed it on her shoulders for about a minute, repeated several times. Eventually they were freed sufficiently for her to lie down. Conversation as follows.

Can I cause you pain?

Ooooo yes please! Awwwww

Hoped there was no one around to hear that. Her neck was released sufficiently so she could lie down to sleep.

Checked Richard was set for the night and discussed strategies, he thought he'd break the 6 day New Zealand record at 3am, briefly thought about getting up to see him do it, nah I need my sleep. Said I would get up early to make sure he had two warm breakfasts.

Day 7

Final day. Woke up earlier than planned and decided to get up. Kettle put on for porridge then went out to check food supplies. As I sorted the table Richard comes up with a 'perfect timing, I'm about to break the New Zealand record'. I grabbed my phone and porridge pot and got to the timing mat to see him break the record. Got quite emotional as I knew how hard he



had worked and how much he wanted this. Took some photos at the arch and outside the cabin with him holding the New Zealand flag. After his victory lap we sat down while he ate porridge and he told me his strategy for keeping focussed through the next 8 hours.

I ate my first breakfast and Suzanne got up after having some sleep and felt good enough to wobble around some more. Made scrambled eggs for her then another lot for Richard and off she went. Kathy was up by now and I made sure she was fed and handed her her lunchbox and water bottle. All my children were now out on their French walking holiday and I had to take some photos of them.



Kathy let Suzanne know about the finishing procedure and when her presentation would be, I was under orders to make sure she turned up. Suzanne had a storming finish and stopped just past our cabin. Again, I got emotional knowing how much pain and discomfort she had been in yet still pushed through.

Croissant time and young Miss Kathleen dropped crumbs on my newly swept floor!

Accompanied Suzanne to her presentation and saw her get third place, only beaten by two runners.



Last few hours of the race. I made my lunch early so I could finish it before Richard and Kathy finished. Didn't feel guilty at all for sitting there eating a huge salad with slices of fresh baguette and an olive oil dip. Suzanne joined me and we sat there cheering all the competitors on.

We gave Sylvie Tortey a standing ovation as she broke the ladies French 6 day record. She walked amazingly well, well paced and judged for her first ever 6 day race. She had a guard of honour on her victory lap of her male team mates.

Kathy just improved daily and we discussed her majestic wiggle. Richard stopped at the table with an 'oh man this is tough' yes, it is, get back on it. At the end Suzanne followed Kathy and I followed Richard and cheered them in. Just felt so proud of all my children. Kathy walked an ultra every day for 6 days, not many 74 year olds could do that.



Photos were taken with the cabin opposite, two new record holders!

I wandered off for a swim while the children got themselves sorted and rested.

Lots of self congratulation at the presentation for the official organisers (I think, it was all in French) and applause for the volunteers.

Richard won the walking race with 667km and got a magnificent Eye of Sauron trophy, just three runners went further than him.



After the presentation we made a point of thanking Sébastien and Jean-Michel. They received no official thanks at the presentation and were the ones who ensured the smooth running of the event and were the problem solvers.

We decided not to have the paella provided and I had a delicious Thai curry.

Homeward Bound

I decided to celebrate the nuttiness of the event by getting up just before dawn to go for a final sunrise Ardèche swoosh. Beautiful, mist rising on the water, clear skies, heron feeding just upstream and flew directly over my head. This really is a special place and I'd love to explore it more.



We took a taxi back to Marseille airport. The drive across the mountains was quite spectacular. Easy flight back with no delays and I found Leon for the drive home quickly and easily.

As we prepared to go our separate ways, we had a group hug. Four people spent 10 days living in the same set of rooms, sleep deprived, in pain and discomfort with not a single cross word, moan or gripe about the others. They really are a special group and my own ultra family.

