

FALLS CREEK HIGH-ALTITUDE TRAINING WEEKEND

By Melissa Clarke

Falls Creek is quite a drive from Melbourne, and it's just as far from Canberra. I left the nation's capital early on Friday to wind my way up to the high country. I wasn't in a hurry, so I was able to stop for lunch in Albury and afternoon tea in Mt Beauty. It wasn't until after I had wolfed down a sugar and fat-laden slice of apple strudel at the Mt Beauty Bakery that it occurred to me that stuffing myself probably wasn't the best start to a weekend of serious training. I told myself the weekend didn't officially start until I was in Falls Creek, so I shrugged off the guilt and continued up the mountain.

Many twists and turns later, I arrived at the National Altitude Training Centre. The 'Frueauf Village', though unpronounceable, is a beautiful collection of apartments, well equipped with luxuries like in-floor heating, and (perhaps most importantly) hot tubs on every balcony. A welcome surprise. Well, not for David Lau, who arrived in his apartment only to find a couple entwined in the hot tub. Being the gentleman he is, he backed out immediately having seen only a glimpse. David and Helen quickly dismissed the staff's suggestion that their co-tenants, Greg and Caroline, might have arrived early.....

It was a startling way to find that their apartment had been double-booked. It was quite some time before alternative arrangements were made and new apartments found Helen and David and Caroline and Greg. I'm still not sure where the hapless chef ended up spending the night after being turfed out of one of the remaining rooms. They weren't the only ones finding themselves in unusual circumstances. John and Dan were expected to bond, having been given a cosy studio with one double bed. The Marr family expanded in an instant, adopting Jo, Lauren and me for the weekend.

The Harriers trickled in throughout the day and before long, Michelle, Chris, David and Tracey became the hosts of an impromptu buffet dinner – nothing like a range of pastas and pizzas the night before a good run. John's Milawa cheeses, however, fell into the same category as my strudel, but this time I had no excuses for indulging.

Saturday morning brought with it a beautiful sunrise and a crew raring to go. David Stones had assigned us a 20 minute warm-up run along the aqueduct trail to Rocky Valley Dam, a 20 minute fartlek session on the trail to Ropers Lookout and a cool down jog on the same path back home. There was plenty of huffing and puffing right from the start - whether that was due to the altitude or previous night's feast is matter of conjecture.

The surrounds and weather were a runner's dream and everyone was ready to get stuck into the hard work. It was just as well, because once the breathing was getting harder and the legs were needing a little more encouragement to respond to the fartlek bursts, the trail was interrupted by a hill. Quite a hill. The four-wheel-drive track narrowed into a goat trail, with rock steps winding upwards.

Ordinarily, this would mean a hard slog up the hill, a lot of effort with little reward. But at Falls Creek, nothing is ordinary. Looking down to watch my step, I could see the trail was bordered by purple and white wildflowers. The snowgums became more and more twisted as we got further up the hill. Then, a dash across a small plain before reaching the lookout over the Falls Creek village. A break in the session may not have been part of the coach's

instructions, but at this point it was necessary – both to admire the view and to catch one's breath!

But not for long. My group quickly gathered together and headed back down. Suddenly, the fartlek session turned into a skills session, trying to keep the pace up while not losing control on the steep, narrow path back down. By the end of the session, we'd run hard, varying surges, pushed ourselves uphill, run a (semi-)controlled downhill slope... a session I'm sure the coach would be proud of!

The weather called everyone outdoors again in the afternoon. Nearly everyone joined a scout-style expedition to Wallace's Hut and Cope Hut. The route linked up the with aqueduct trail, which gave us a taste of things to come the following day.

That night it was dinner at Cafe Milch. Perhaps it is best to simply say that we have been spoilt by the regular feasts produced by the club president and "chef"-de-mission, Paul Marr. Whilst the food may not have lived up to expectations, the liveliness far surpassed any expectations – thanks to a merry band of dragon boat rowers known as Dragons Abreast. While the Malvern Harriers were overcome by weariness and the lure of a good night's sleep, the breast cancer survivors were positively effervescent. They had commandeered the record player and were starting a dance floor as we trooped off to bed. We've got a few things to learn from them about how to make the most of a trip away!

Overnight, there was rain and even some lightning, but by morning, the sky was again clear and we set out in convoy to the starting point for our long Sunday run - Langford's Gap. It's a runners dream. Firm gravel and grass track, wide enough to accommodate running in a pack, but narrow enough to feel enclosed by the snowgums. Unfortunately for me, I only got to see a fraction of this beautiful track. I was only 20 minutes into the run, thinking I'd reached the height of running bliss, when my good ol' ITB starting twinging. While at the time I was highly frustrated by this persistent injury, I can say with hindsight that the 40 minute walk back to Langford's Gap probably gave me a better chance to appreciate the surrounds than everyone else! The aqueduct teeming with fish, the purple ridgelines in the distance and the array of birds were stunning. But I can't claim to have hurdled a snake, a la Greg. Maybe we should get him into steeplechase?

Although we'd run alongside the aqueduct all morning, that wasn't close enough for some. There was a small pool by the car park at Langford's Gap, the perfect location for a recovery dip. I have to confess, I was one of those who jumped in – and straight back out again, unable to stand the cold on the top of my feet. There was hardier stock than I amongst the group though, so some could take advantage of the pool – and make me look weak in the process!

A bacon-and-egg-and-everything-else brunch set everyone up for a busy afternoon.

Some Harriers braved the cold water yet again to swim in the Rocky Valley Dam. Some made sure the Australia Day long weekend tradition of backyard cricket was upheld. Another group, including me, did some more hiking and explored the back of ski slopes, bush-bashing our way to the Dam and back home.

Of course, no Malvern Harriers event would be complete without a Paul Marr BBQ extravaganza, so as the sun went down, the snags went on the barbie, tempting the drunken dragon boat racers and the other runners at the training centre alike.

For me, it was the end of the road. Well, actually, it was just the beginning. I had to be at work in Canberra by 1pm the next day so I had a lot of road and driving in front of me. I was up before dawn to sneak quietly out the apartment and head to work. It was frustrating to know that when I was passing through Wodonga, everyone else was enjoying another run in the hills (and I couldn't even console myself with another piece of strudel because I was too early even for the Mt Beauty Bakery to be open). By 1pm I was back at my desk, breathing recycled air-conditioned air and hunched over my computer. So, when's the next training weekend?