

California River Quest 160km non-stop on the Sacramento River

Winter 2018 – with the cold wet & windy 404km Massive Murray Marathon still fresh in our minds our thoughts turned to the next adventure.

After the disastrous weather which had followed us around all year (Portugal, Paris, Australia, Greece, Holland) the criteria were fairly simple – it had to be a longish event, it had to be something a little different & it most certainly had to be hot & sunny.

Half an hour on Google brought up a few options but none fitted with work then a link was spotted lurking at the bottom of the page “click here for the California River Quest”

Before we knew it 5 months had passed, it was 6am and the peace & tranquillity of the early morning dawn chorus was shattered by the start gun as we headed upstream to the first turning mark.



Our plan had been to take it easy at the start & gently build up the pace once we got comfortable – the Sacramento is a very different river to the Murray with lots of rapids, rough water, rocks & shallows to pick your way through – however a patch of clear water opened up in front of us & we took the opportunity to make a dash for the buoy & get round with a bit of space as the last thing we wanted was an early dunking into the freezing waters with another 160km left to paddle



After record snowfall through the winter the river temperature was a very refreshing 6-7degrees, the air temperature a bone chilling 11 – there was also rain & a headwind – our luck had struck again.

1.5km into it we hit our first set of rapids, a bit bumpy but nothing that our 17'x31" Loco tandem couldn't handle & we flew through with ease (remembering to stay left so as not to be sucked down the channel on the inside of the bend which was blocked by a pile of logs

Then came our first navigation decision of the race – follow the fast water of the river or take the shortcut through the still waters of Kutra Lake – confident in our board speed on flat water & welcoming a bit of hard paddling to keep ward we opted for the lake keeping a keen eye out for the exit back onto the river which we heard before we saw. Watching the Velocitec we saw our speed increase significantly as we were sucked into & spat out of the Kutra Chute, a 30meter stretch of huge standing waves as the lake empties through a narrow gap back into the river itself. Needless to say, about 10meters before we got to it we decided it was prudent to get to our knees & play it safe.

The river then settled into a pattern of a few kilometres of flat smooth water, fast bends with lots of turbulence followed by a set of rapids smoothing out into whirlpools then back into the flat water. Just to keep you on your toes there were numerous islands, gravel banks & channels to work your way around.

After about 8km we found ourselves alone on the river – the faster ski's & kayaks had disappeared off into the distance & we had pulled out a big enough gap on those behind so as to be out of sight and it stayed like this until after the halfway checkpoint at 85km when some of the elite paddlers (who started 30 minutes behind) caught up with us



China Rapids came & went without major incident – this is an awesome stretch of river – approx. 3km long, the river gets squeezed through a channel of jagged rocks. There are many big waves but you can see them coming & pick your line – it's the whirlpool that spring up at random that get you. 6' across & 18" deep in the middle they would either catch the middle of the board & spin it round (normally so you took the next wave going sideways down the river!!) or they would grab one end of the board, giving it a nasty twitch like a bucking bronco trying to tip you off.

The last 50km was on the whole a touch more sedate – the water was generally flatter, less rapids but more headwinds, swirlies & eddies and definitely a lot more navigation decisions to be made (we got at least 2 wrong & ended up losing a lot of time). Even in this flat water there was no time to relax & paddling the tandem in rougher water does test your balance somewhat!

Then right on cue – the finish line came into sight – the finish line was just up a little creek running into the main river – this was a detail I had read several times in the racing instructions but totally failed to sink in – as a result we cruised past the finish line not over it & had to paddle back upstream to hear the bell ring adding 3 minutes to our time.



Stepping off the board we were feeling fresh – we were here for the adventure so only paddled at around 50% but have set ourselves a benchmark for next time (and there will be a next time)

- Be prepared for the warmest of welcomes at every opportunity – from check in & registration to the checkpoints, finish, prize giving & in general when walking through the towns before & after the race – this is rural California & they are a very friendly bunch – especially Emily, Jeff & the organising team
- If the weather had been as expected (mid to high 30's) it would've been a very different race – in addition to the 2ltr we had each for each leg we also had 2ltr each on the board (10lts each total) we only drank about 5.5ltr each (liquid food & hydration combined)
- Take a shallow water fin – at least for the 1st half - there were lots of occasions where we were speeding over the shallows at 10km/hr+ preparing for impact (we were lucky & didn't hit the bottom but it was a very real possibility)
- We had detailed hand drawn maps with the distances of the known rough water sections marked out
- Leashes are absolutely forbidden in this race – not even QR waist ones. Having seen some of the obstructions in the river & the speed it flows in places this is wise. It did feel strange though not being connected to the board
- Keep your eyes open for the wildlife – we may see swans & seagulls here in the UK – on the Sacramento they are replaced by vulchers & bald eagles
- Take a good set of lights for the board – if you end up still on the river after dark (it happens) then they will help you pick out any obstructions (gravel banks, trees etc)
- The awards ceremony is held in a brewery – genius idea Emily – absolutely genius
- We will be entering the competitive class rather than the adventure next time – same course but you start 30 minutes later



Ready for boat inspection



Safety briefing



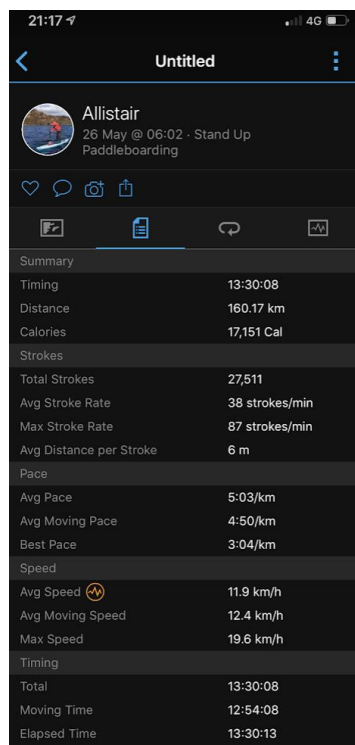
Our hand drawn maps keeping us on track



Cp2 at 85km – refill the bladders & shovel down a banana



One of the others paddlers finishing as the sun starts to set



Our Garmin stats for the day

Some photos from the event photographer Tom Gomes



Making the most of the flat water sections





Trying to work out the best line through the Kutra Chute



Arriving at checkpoint 2 (85km) to refill hydration bladders & have a banana

