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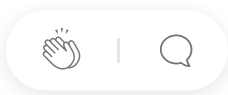
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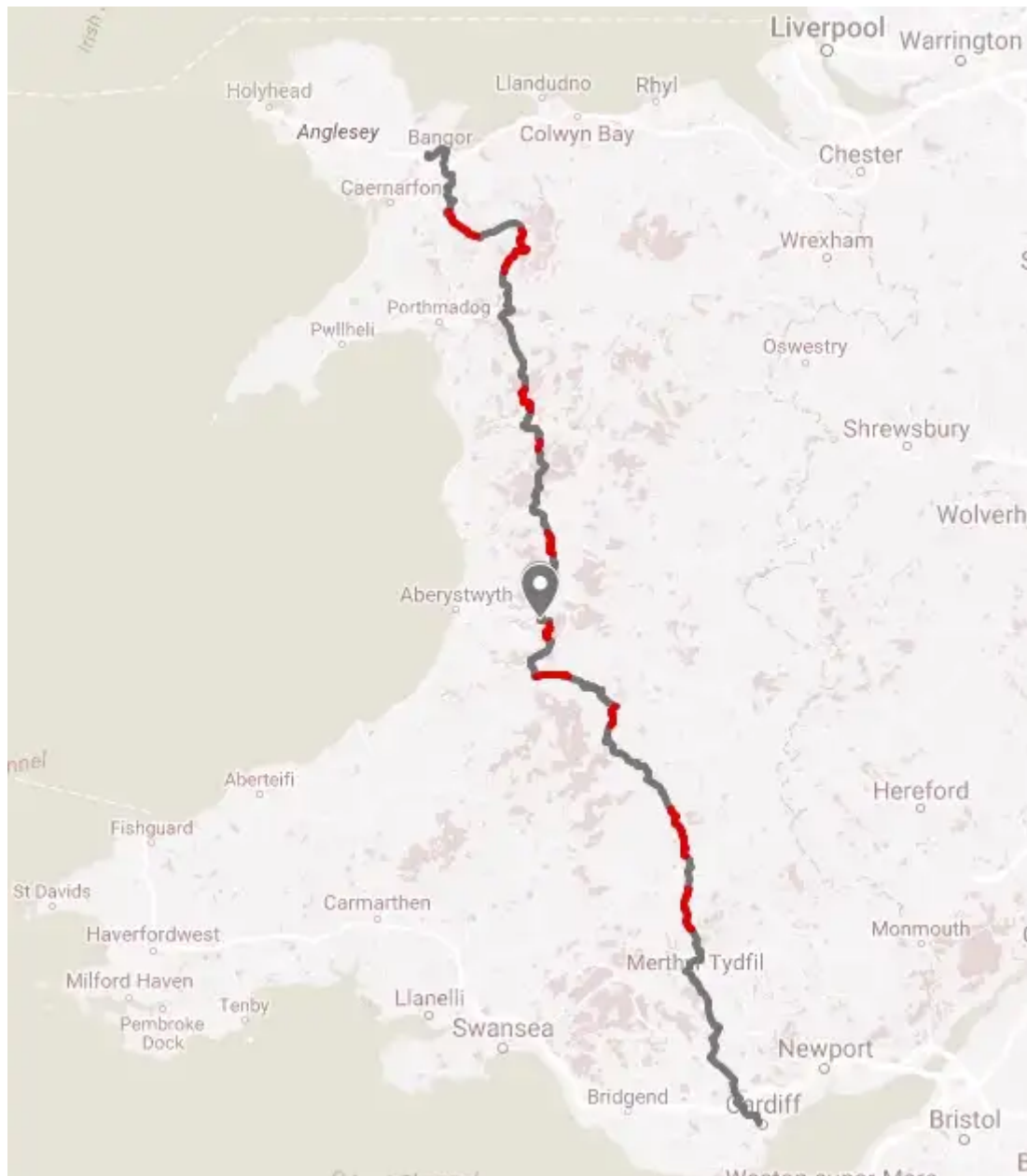
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WalesDURO 2022

If you've seen some of my other trip reports you may have picked up on three things: firstly that I've spent more and more time enjoying off-road riding again, secondly that I enjoy riding in Wales and thirdly that I enjoy long rides. With all these in mind, it was pretty much inevitable that I was going to end up riding The Racing Collective's WalesDURO event.





 The Racing Collective

WalesDURO is a two-day fixed route event across Wales from Bangor in the north to Cardiff in the south. It takes in ten timed sections, five on each day, and an overnight camp on the Saturday night. Part of the beauty of the event is that it's so low-key: the only involvement of The Racing Collective is to provide a route, set a date, arrange a camping field with some food, and amalgamate the timing numbers from Strava. The only people at the start and finish are your fellow racers and, as they state on the website, there are no prizes and no support.

Day One

Most riders camp in Bangor overnight but as I live relatively close it made more sense to trade a later alarm for a warm dry bed. So, one Saturday morning at 5am, I set off from home with my friend Olly to ride to Chester station and get the first

train to Bangor. It was a 33km ride into a headwind to get there, and just after we got halfway it started to rain quite heavily! Thankfully the rain didn't last and before too long we were picking up a quick espresso and rolling onto the platform to wait for our train.



While we were waiting another rider appeared on the platform and seeing our heavily-laden bikes immediately asked “WalesDURO?”. I was pleased that Andy had also decided to try the ‘first train’ option but I was a bit worried to see how light he had packed in comparison! We all boarded the train and racked our bikes to enjoy the calm hour of pleasant conversation before the coming storm. The sun had finally made an appearance by the time we arrived in Bangor and we rolled down to the road under the Menai Bridge just a couple of minutes after 8am, the latest recommended start time. We set off again straight away and as the clouds parted we had barely made it more than a couple of miles before we had to stop and swap rain jackets for gilets.

 Olly Webb

The route very quickly goes onto a nice cycleway through the woods and we made a good start through the quiet of the morning, sharing the path with a few dog walkers and climbing our way gently but swiftly out of Bangor. It wasn't that long though

before the path started to ramp up a little and then spat us out at the foot of a steep road climb that wound it's way up towards the peaks of Snowdonia above us. This first climb of the day is actually the longest of the entire route, going from the sea at Bangor up to 575m in the first 22km. The reward is a stunning but slightly sketchy descent through the old slate quarries above Llanberis, trying to get the balance between enjoying the descent, not losing the front wheel in the looser bits and not getting a sliced tyre from the sharp knife-like bits!



📷 Olly Webb

After the first half of the descent there is a viewpoint over the quarries below and then the first timed section starts. Olly and I had agreed that completing the route would be a goal enough and that racing the timed segments was not on the priority

list. However, no sooner had we got to the start, Olly shot off announcing that we was going to go for it. He quickly lost me as I descended a little more cautiously on the slate; having had a puncture on a slate descent at the Gravel Rally a few weeks ago I was keen to avoid another. A couple of corners further on I found Olly beside the trail with his rear wheel already out fixing a flat. Knowing that he is more than capable of looking after himself and that if I punctured behind him he would never have known until the end of the segment I opted to make a joke about tubes vs tubeless and keep rolling. I knew that Olly was far fitter than me and if we were racing and I wanted to stand any chance of getting near his overall time I would need to grab every chance I had. So I pressed on all the way to the top of Pen-y-Pass at the best pace I could muster.



After about 20 minutes at the top of Pen-y-Pass on my own I started to ponder my wisdom... I was chatting to another rider who was also waiting for his friend. Having no phone signal at the top of the pass meant we had no way of knowing what was going on. After a little longer I realised Olly was clearly not just quickly swapping tubes and following me up the pass; something else must have gone wrong. After a fair bit of faffing I was able to join the wifi from the YHA and get onto WhatsApp to

find messages from Olly. His spare inner-tube had a hole in and he wasn't having any luck sorting things out; he was headed into Llanberis to find tubes. I called him and he was clearly unimpressed that I hadn't stopped; we agreed I would press on and he would get himself sorted and catch up. By now feeling pretty cold and with a long descent ahead I put on all my layers and set off rapidly towards Capel Curig. It was a long descent and I spent long periods of time spinning out my 38-11 highest gear. All good things must come to an end and before long I was approaching the next off-road section. I knew this one having done it on the Gravel Rally; note that I use the term "done it" not "ridden it"...



As I got to the bottom I met another rider called Michael and we took on the segment together as we hiked up the rocky path which periodically also served as a stream-bed but just about managed to keep our feet dry. Even once we reached the top the route is rutted with big muddy puddles. The smaller ones you can ride through but the deeper ones you have no idea what lies beneath and so I generally opted to bypass them which involved a lot of getting on and off the bike. Before too long the open moorland track gave way to a wide forested fireroad descent. Michael and I bumped into another group of three riders who were just finishing fixing a

puncture and we continued as a group of five down to join the main A470. The second timed segment had started at the beginning of the rocky hike-a-bike and didn't finish until the top of the 375m Crimea Pass so we kept on moving. Unfortunately we had a headwind the whole way up the pass and it was a big struggle, churning away in my smallest gear for what felt like an eternity. I was third to the top from our group of five and by the time the fifth rider arrived I could see the familiar orange jacket of Olly on the horizon powering up the hill.



📷 Olly Webb

By now the time was rapidly getting away from us; it was nearly 2pm and we still had a long way to go. Olly and I pressed on into Blaenau Ffestiniog for a very quick resupply before heading south for Dolgellau via the next off-road section through Coed-y-Brenin. Along the way we bumped back into the group I'd ridden with earlier; two of them had decided to bail on the ride and Michael and one of the other guys called Toby were going to press on. Through Coed-y-Brenin we formed a group of four and would continue to ride together almost all the way to camp. I was

struggling, partly with dehydration, partly poorly-executed fuelling strategy and partly because I'd gone too hard up Pen-y-Pass at the start of the day! We stopped at Dolgellau for another resupply and a slightly longer break but all too quickly we were back on the road, pushing on up the next climb. This climb came in two parts: firstly the Fron Serth road out of the town that I have ridden before, a relentlessly steep lane with no shade from the now scorching sunshine, and secondly the next timed section, the NCN8 climb that went up and over through the Dyfi forest to Corris. This latter climb was 1.6km of 10%+ tarmac and a real test. I made it to the top but some resorted to walking on the steeper sections. Olly of course made it up first; he proved without doubt to be the fittest of our group and was extremely patient waiting for us all the time!



📷 Olly Webb

From here it was a rapid road descent followed by a rolling lane all the way down to Machynlleth. It was milestone in our day as we finally left Snowdonia but there was no time to stop and enjoy it. Another quick resupply and we moved on, knowing that some of the best terrain lay ahead but with a big climb involved. The lane out of

Machynlleth got steeper and steeper, leaving some walking the 20%+ kicker at the end. I just managed to keep rolling; more like alternate single-leg weight-lifts than cycling really! From here the road ended and we started a long but steady gravel climb up through the forest. By now all but Olly were struggling at one point or another; one of us would have a resurgence of energy and another would have a massive low. Our efforts were rewarded when we finally left the final gate out of the forest and out into the most expansive and beautiful wilderness.



There's something particularly enjoyable about riding through such remote wilderness. The only evidence of human activity is the track we were riding on. It was rocky in places but almost entirely rideable on our heavily-laden gravel bikes with tired bodies and slowing reflexes. The sun was starting to get low in the sky and the temperature was dropping as we eventually reached the river crossing. I was acutely aware that anybody taking an impromptu bath would rapidly be at risk of hypothermia but thankfully we all opted for a careful wade rather than charging through by bike; I know it can be ridden but now was definitely not the time to test it! I had brought lightweight beach shoes for the river crossings and for a change of footwear at camp tonight so I quickly put them on and strapped my shoes to my bike

to wade across. We all made it without getting too wet although Olly nearly ended up with a shoe floating down the river.



 Oly Webb

By this time the tiredness was definitely upon us; we all pushed on silently at our own pace, pausing occasionally to regroup. It was now after 8pm and we knew that food at camp officially finished at 9. As we neared Nant-y-Moch reservoir Olly suggested he press on to get to camp and make sure enough food was kept back for us and we all agreed. I knew the route from here was simple and mostly downhill, and we'd mostly stopped chatting through fatigue anyway! Olly disappeared over the horizon and I struggled up the last of the climbs round the reservoir before pulling my armwarmers and other layers back on ready for the long descent. Finally back on the tarmac the speed increased again and we pushed on with the end in sight. We were treated to amazing golden-hour views as we hurtled down towards the valley.



It wasn't too long before I found myself finally rolling into the campsite after a long 13 hours since we had left Bangor. We needn't have worried about timing of food; there was plenty left and they would still be there serving much later into the evening. The Welsh cawl, bread, cheddar and sponge pudding really hit the spot; I collapsed into a chair in the food marquee and devoured it quickly. We had to get a move on to get tents pitched before darkness fell but we made a quick job of it, had a

quick (cold by now) shower and quickly went to sleep. We were going to need plenty of rest: day two was definitely going to be another big one!

Big thanks to Olly for a lot of the photos. More to follow in Day Two including another river crossing and going over The Gap in the Brecon Beacons!

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