

RUN THE WHITSUNDAY GREAT WALK

So, your legs have slowly recovered from the agony and the ecstasy of the Six Foot Track footrace, and you're now wondering what other interesting races you can do to fill the void. Well, one day to mark in your calendar is September 23, as it features the second edition of the "Run the Whitsunday Great Walk". How many other events in Australia can claim to be so rugged and inaccessible that the drink stations need to be brought in by helicopter?

Written by DAVE OSMOND

While the Whitsunday Islands have no shortage of natural attractions to keep most outdoor enthusiasts happy, it was missing a famous multi-day hike to attract the hardy bushwalkers who might otherwise take on the Six Foot Track in the Blue Mountains or the Overland Track in Tasmania. That all changed in late 2004 with the opening of the Whitsunday Great Walk, a 28km trail carved into the lush surrounds of Conway State Forest, winding its way over dramatic peaks that overlook the Whitsunday Islands.

As the managers of many classic walks would know, no sooner do you build a spectacular multi-day bushwalk before some runners think that rather than spending a few days walking the track, it seems a lot easier to just run it in one day – something about not needing to carry a tent. And so it came to be that the Mackay Road Runners, together with the Whitsunday Shire Council and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, quickly seized the chance to organise a race for those runners. But first there was the small issue of the logistics of getting drink stations into the dense jungle, which is where the Whitsunday Helicopters and the Whitsunday Airport came in with some generous sponsorship.



The start of the Run the Whitsunday Great Walk is on a plush, wide fire trail, but this luxury changes only a few kilometres into the 28km race. IMAGE BY JOHN HIGHAM.



Mountain running champion Emma Murray arrives at the water station, where a helicopter is required to bring rations. IMAGE BY DAVE OSMOND.

So, how does this event compare with the Six Foot Track? Well, clearly it's considerably shorter at 28km (albeit a very 'long' 28km), and with a field size restricted to 150 runners, there's not quite the same bustling atmosphere on the start line. The hills aren't anywhere near as big, but there's a much higher proportion of narrow single track, with far more changes of direction and gradient. The start is certainly more relaxed, as the opening few kilometres feature a wide and smooth fire trail which gently descends through lush rainforest to Impulse Creek. So there's plenty of distance for the field to spread out before any narrowing of the track.

After splashing through a creek crossing, the trail continues for a few more kilometres without any significant hills before arriving at the Repulse Creek campsite. This is generally the first overnight camp of walkers. Soon after, the fun begins as the trail narrows to a windy single-track, and after crossing a couple of smaller creeks it starts to climb steeply to the summit of Mt Haywood. Along this section, chances are there will be some slippery mud, and tree roots encroaching across the path are matched by an increasing amount of leaf litter to hide them. Runners looking for a cruisy run where it's possible to settle into a



The leaders round the first bend. IMAGE BY JOHN HIGHAM.

nice rhythm will be rudely disappointed by the continuous changes of direction and gradient that pervade the remainder of the course. But those who enjoy the single track descent to the Cox's River in the Six Foot Track will be in their element, as there's no shortage of tight bends to practice your cornering technique.

Although there's a good chance that the day will be hot and humid, the dense forest canopy blocks nearly all of the sky, and shade is pretty much guaranteed for nearly the remainder of the course. Unfortunately that also means the spectacular views over the Whitsunday Islands are mostly hidden by trees, so make sure you take advantage

of the few lookout vantage points signposted along the ridge tops.

From the summit of Mt Haywood, the big climb of the day is now done, but the rest of the course is by no means flat, or even mostly downhill. The next 10 kilometres are a continuous chain of steepish downhills followed by steep uphills. At approxi-

mately the 25km mark, the final significant climb is reached, and it's a good one. Dubbed Airlie Hill, it 'only' has an altitude gain of a bit over 100m, but it is the steepest of the race. Most runners are forced to walk this one.

Like Six Foot, the closing kilometres feature a steep descent – probably not quite as rough, but if it is wet it could be very slippery. After the descent, there are a couple of flattish kilometres to bring you through the township of Airlie Beach. The final few hundred metres wind their way past the very popular Airlie Beach lagoon, favourite habitat of sunbathing tourists who are initially bemused but soon after enthusiastic supporters

of the runners that stream past.

Any strong female runner hoping to grab a soft race record in the early years of a new race will be disappointed to hear that Australia's two-time world long-distance mountain running champion Emma Murray ran the inaugural race. Having said that, she'd only just returned from overseas after a hectic schedule of racing both the long and short World Mountain Champs and was a little tired. So her record time of 2.17.38 might be considered a little 'soft' in comparison to her Six Foot Track effort of last year.

One aspect that this run shares with the Six Foot Track is the superb organisation. Will Higham, president of the Mackay Road Runners, leaves no stone unturned in putting on a fantastic race, even to the point of hunting down bananas for the post-race refreshments during the middle of the great Banana Famine of 2006!

And it almost goes without saying that once finished with this run, it is almost compulsory to reward yourself with a nice holiday on the Great Barrier Reef. I hear that snorkelling is great for sore and tired legs.

For more information and entry forms, see www.mackayroadrunners.com or phone Will Higham on 0437 640 186.