

## CAKE OR DEATH ULTRA 2019

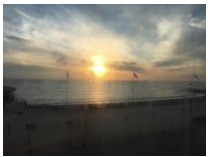
### RACE REPORT

by Fiona Davies



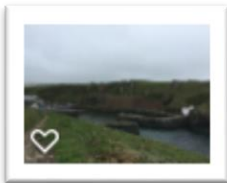
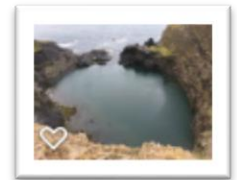
One of my favourite places, one of my favourite foods, and the chance to be part of a new event (having missed out on the first (2017) running of the South Wales 100 as I'd already entered for something else!). How could I not sign up for 271 miles (St Davids to Trefor, near Caernarfon) on the Wales Coast Path??

The start list was surprisingly(?) small – just 8 of us on the full distance and 2 on 'The Slice' – 109 miles finishing in Aberystwyth. My husband Gareth (aka support crew) and I drove to Aberystwyth in beautiful evening sunshine, checking out points where he could meet me and ensuring they had phone reception.



We woke to pouring rain – which thankfully had subsided to a drizzle by the time we'd registered, kit-checked, met Race Director Claire and the rest of the Brutal Events team, and been bussed to St Davids for a 1200 start. Had a lovely surprise to be met there by friends who were at the nearby campsite, so had some big hugs to send me on my way!

Started off in the middle of the pack, where I'd expected to be as I was aiming for around 3.5mph and at least one person on the FB group had said he was going for around 3mph. But half an hour in, what's happening? All the guys behind me are scampering past! Andy, the last to pass me, makes a comment about this not being a typical start for a race of this distance – well, it's my first multi-day race so what do I



know, but I'll just have to hope there's some truth in the 'Tortoise and the Hare' fable or I'll have a lonely few days! Still, the Pembrokeshire coastal views are spectacular (I even take a quick couple of photos) and the terrain more runnable than when I squelched through a muddy March recce, so I arrive at CP1 (20 miles) in good spirits, over 2 and a half hours before cut-off. Andy is just leaving as I arrive, everyone else is out of sight.

The next section goes around wild Strumble Head with its landmark lighthouse (*photo taken on recce, it was much darker by the time I reached it!*); looking forward to seeing Gareth in Goodwick where he meets me with noodles and coffee, and I head off into the twilight. The section from Fishguard to Newport was one I loved when I recce'd it, with easy paths and sections of lush, bouncy grass - in the dark it doesn't seem so runnable and it's midnight before I reach CP2 (38 miles). That's my carefully planned schedule wrecked already – the intention was to meet Gareth around midnight at 42 miles (just past Newport) for a few hours sleep in the car before moving on at daybreak. I eventually arrive at 0140; turning up that late is probably not the best start to our 32<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary! Less than 2 hours of broken sleep and I drag myself out into the misty dawn, resolving only to sleep at checkpoints from now on.

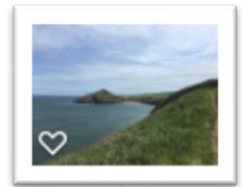


As we move from Pembrokeshire into Ceredigion the cliffs get steeper; my reward for the climbing is the view of beautiful Cardigan Bay as I descend to St Dogmaels. A couple of miles on the road here but my legs are too tired from the climbing to take much advantage. I recce'd this stage in torrential rain, so today is a definite improvement – nice not to be plodging through gloopy mud in the last fields before crossing into Cardigan! Totally forget to check what t-shirt the otter statue on the bridge is wearing today (*here he is when I recce'd the course*) – I did ask Claire to find him a Cake or Death one but have no idea if she did! Martin is manning CP3 (59 miles) and his tomato soup and pizza go down a treat! I'm still within deadline by 90 minutes or so, but over 3



hours behind the last arrival, although at least one person has had a couple of hours sleep before moving on. Does this mean everyone else has gone over 24 hours without sleep??

Up through the fields to Gwbert, and past the entrance to Cardigan Golf Club, which must have one of the most beautiful views of any UK golf course. Lovely section along the cliffs as the sun comes out, passing the little isolated church (still in use) at Mwnt and plenty of people enjoying their Bank Holiday week in a more relaxing fashion! Nice surprise as Gareth calls to say he's walking up from Aberporth to meet me – quick stop for change of



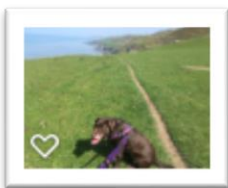
socks and an ice lolly in Aberporth, and on to the next set of cliffs with steep ascents and descents to beautiful little beaches. Legs are totally shot by this time and this has become a power walk, not a run! I take a photo of the Urdd Camp at Llangranog where my daughter used to go on school trips – hadn't realised how large it was! Reach CP4 between 7:30 and 8 – getting rather close to the 8:30 closing time, power walking is not good



enough, praying my legs will be better tomorrow! Decide to sleep at CP5 (hall with beds) rather than my original intention of getting to CP6 (the other hall option). Leave CP4 with pasta pot in hand and again it's great to see Gareth who has walked the 3 miles up from Newquay to the CP – our wedding anniversary ends with a sunset walk back along the cliffs before he leaves to drive to CP5.

Coast Path signs are a bit sparse around Newquay and I spend a little time looking for a path around the caravan site, until I have a light-bulb moment! Wasn't this where I ran along the beach looking for a sign to Llanina? Quick check – yes, Llanina is just a couple of miles away. Along the beach then, into the woods where I surprise a badger who snorts at me before scuffling away, no more problems with navigation but I'm moving too slowly – I arrive at CP5 around 0130. Paula is sleeping there, everyone else has gone on, presumably to sleep in Aberystwyth at CP6.

Paula's alarm goes off before I fall asleep and we exchange a few words of encouragement before she heads off into the darkness. Using my pack to elevate my aching feet dulls the pain somewhat and I sleep till 4:10 – after a quick breakfast of porridge and coffee I'm out by 4:45 and making good time. I praise God that my legs have recalled what they're supposed to do and maintain a steady jog for most of the 5 flat



miles into Llanrhystud. Another hilly section follows into Aberystwyth – happy memories flood back of reccing this with Gareth and our chocolate labrador Tilly, whom I hope is now enjoying her stay in kennels. Normally I'd have checked Facebook every night, scrolling through the hundreds of pictures of doggy boarders enjoying playtime together, to find pics of Tilly ... but that would take time I don't have!

Several of the Brutal Events team are at CP6 and make me scrambled eggs on toast.

One of the two competitors on The Slice made it to Aberystwyth in just over 35 hours and has earned his medal. I nap for 12 minutes – micro-sleeps will have to be the rule from now on. If it worked for Jasmin Paris on The Spine, it can work for me, right?

6 to 7 is a short section with two distinct halves – 5 final miles of Ceredigion cliffs, and 5 flat miles as the route starts to wind round the Dyfi estuary. I climb out of Aberystwyth to the top of the Cliff Railway, then descend into Clarach Bay. I thought I remembered using a public loo here when reccing, but can't see it – so I use one in a pub/café. The 'Toilets for Customer Use Only' notice gives me a stab of guilt, so I buy a banana milkshake to drink as I go up the next hill. Some encouragement from Gareth in Borth and the flat bit starts – a lovely run across part of the Dyfi National Nature Reserve to Cletwr (CP7) where Justin has cooked up a 'vegetable fusion' to give me



strength for the next leg – and do I need it! This is the infamous ‘Double Death’ section, so called because *“it has over 4,000 ft of climb and is a ninji to navigate”*. Agreed – I wasted an hour during my recce due to navigational errors – but think positive, that’s an hour of errors I won’t make now! It’s 3pm and my target is to be close to CP8 before dark, so I set off at a brisk pace through the woodlands – still beautiful though too late for the myriads of bluebells which brightened my recce in April. On target timewise at Machynlleth where a selfie under the sign proclaiming its Tanzanian links seem appropriate, given that I’m being sponsored for a charity, Heart for Africa ([www.heartforafrica.co.uk](http://www.heartforafrica.co.uk)), which works in Tanzania – Gareth has food, coffee and a change of socks for me before I head up the 15-20% climb into the forestry. I catch a glimpse of Andy ahead of me, climbing strongly. He and Pete are not too far ahead of me now so I run all the downhill into Pennal, hoping I can catch up, but no luck. As I head onto the last stretch over the mountain to Aberdyfi, night is falling and soon it’s pitch black with only yellow sheep’s eyes piercing the darkness. The path seems to fork, both ways equally wet and muddy – I pick the wrong one and have to return over marshy, tussocky ground to the right direction – now there is no path. There’s also no phone signal so I’m not getting my daughter’s calls and texts of *“Mam you’ve gone the wrong way x”*. OK, this is not the time for running around like a headless chicken, I’ve just over 2 hours before CP8 closes, and I am NOT going to be eliminated due to a navigational error! If I head downhill to a stream, I can follow it to the coast and run along to Aberdyfi. So down I go, and suddenly there’s someone ahead of me, with a headlamp and red tail-light! *“Andy!”* I shout at the top of my voice – no reply. I continue to follow for several hundred metres – then as suddenly as he appeared, the figure is gone. But what’s that ahead of me – a public road!! Well, I believe in angels, and I thank God for sending this one – maybe if I’d shouted *“Gabriel”* I’d have had a reply!



A car stops – police! They’re remarkably unfazed to see me and confirm the correct direction to Aberdyfi – down to the main road and turn left. How far? Oh a mile or so, maybe two. Joy! I can make CP8 and have time for a nap before the CP closes at 0130. The road is mostly downhill so I alternate jogging and walking until another car stops. Claire and Jon have been tracking me and come out to check I’m OK. Yes, I’m fine, sorry I went a bit wrong on the navigation, but I know where I am now, how far to CP8? *“6 miles this way”* says Jon. WHAT??? It’s nearly midnight and I’ve been ambling along thinking I had plenty of time. Will my race legs work? Thankfully they do, at least on the downhills, and eventually I reach the main road. The lights of Aberdyfi still seem so distant and I force myself to run 100 paces, walk 20, until I finally see the railway station and realise I can make it – I reach CP8 with 15 minutes to spare.

So no nap, but a great selection of food to choose from as I’m obviously the last one in – Pete has called it a day at this point, the third to retire, so 5 of us left. The start of the next leg is so easy, 4 miles along the beach to Tywyn followed by a similar distance on road, so even in my sleep-deprived state I can cope. It all feels a bit surreal and I keep having to remind myself where I am and why! Gareth is due to meet me at Fairbourne and walk into CP9 (Barmouth) with me - I’m so focused on meeting him that it surprises me to get a call from one of the Brutal Events team to warn me I’ve taken a wrong turning. I quickly correct and try to remember this is NOT a day out at the beach, a visit to the Fairbourne Railway, or a chance to take the photos I missed here when my phone died during my recce! Gareth tells me he’s just had a chat with Andy and indeed can see him ahead of us – I am overjoyed that I’ll have some company at last on the next leg! We cross the Troll Bridge (for rail, cycle, and foot only – vehicles have a long detour!) – I’m too tired to appreciate the great views and just want to get to CP9 and sleep!

Andy announces at CP9 that he’s retiring. OK, no company then. It’s midday and baking hot, especially in the van. Great to lie down but I only manage to sleep for about 40 minutes, might as well get going then. My absolute favourite leg coming up and I’m hoping I can make up some time! Some road, some fields, then onto the wonderful wide expanse of Morfa Dyffryn – 2 miles of glorious beach running, toward the

peaks of Snowdonia emerging from the distant haze! When I reced this I imagined myself in the Chariots of Fire beach scene; today that's a stretch too far as I maintain an ungainly shuffle, but the wind, waves and sunshine lift my spirits immensely. Gareth meets me before CP10, giving me encouragement through the last big climb of the leg, another stretch across Harlech beach and we're there!

For the first time in ages, I see Paula, Steve and Thomas who are now running together – they've had a break and are ready to head off to CP11. All are still looking so strong! We have a few photographs and I feel quite honoured to be one of the 'last 4 standing' in such company. Again, I take less sleep than Gareth thinks I should – the next leg is 24 miles and I'm seriously worried about making the 0530 cut-off. Off I go around 6:30pm and think I need to average 2.something mph, but my tired brain can't work out the something, so settle on 2.5 and resolve to keep every mile under 24 minutes. This goes well until the more tussocky ground around the Afon Dyrwyd estuary, and I'm glad to reach the road section which follows. I see my shadow in the twilight – hunched, lopsided – come on woman, straighten up! It takes a massive effort to do so and I realise that every muscle around my core is tight and aching. Gareth passes and checks I'm OK – he's obviously noticed my dreadful posture as well. I have a little trouble finding the signs in Minffordd which take the route around Portmeirion, but eventually reach the bridge into Porthmadog and follow the signs through town onto the cliff path. Gareth will see me again at Criccieth – but Criccieth never seems to get any nearer! Forget 24 minute miles, they're probably nearer 40! I cannot continue walking in this pain, let's have a good stretch to see if I can ease it. Here's a nice patch of grass I can use .....

..... 20 minutes later I wake up, cold, disorientated, still in pain and with less than zero chance of reaching CP11 in time. The adventure is over. I call Claire, Justin comes out to collect me and take me to CP11 where Gareth is waiting. This time I have no trouble sleeping in the back of the car. I wake at 4:30 to wish Paula, Steve and Thomas the best of luck as they head out into the dawn rain. They are incredible athletes! I'm not envious, my body has reached its limits and there's not one part of me that wants to put on my waterproofs and continue. But what an awesome experience this has been! I feel incredibly privileged to have been part of this inaugural event in such beautiful surroundings with such amazing people (fellow competitors, supporters, and the Brutal Events team). It has shown me how much my body can do when I don't allow my mind to put a lid on my capabilities, and I hope I can continue to inspire others to push the boundaries of what they can achieve, in whatever sphere of life their passion lies. Thank you, Brutal Events!

*PS Paula, Steve and Thomas got to CP12 (227 miles) where they made the difficult decision to call it a day. Cake or Death will be running again next year (2020) – have you got what it takes to be the first finisher??*

***And just a final PPS ... (at the risk of sounding like a newspaper website!!)***

I'm passionate about running, inspiring other people, and also, where possible, using the events I do to help others. Through running the Cake or Death Ultra I have been raising funds for a Rhondda charity, Heart for Africa, of which I'm a Trustee. Heart for Africa works with orphans and other vulnerable children, schools and deprived communities in and around Arusha, Tanzania. You can find out more about it on [www.heartforafrica.co.uk](http://www.heartforafrica.co.uk). If you've enjoyed reading my race review, and are able to donate to Heart for Africa, I and many others would be ever so grateful. If you're reading this on my TotalGiving page, just click the 'DONATE NOW' button – otherwise, please go to <https://www.totalgiving.co.uk/mypage/fionadavies2019>

Thank you so much and hope to see you on the trails somewhere soon!

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