

HOW
WAS IT
FOR YOU?

DUTOR

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DARKNESS FALLS

No stranger to a mighty challenge, Claire Smith has spent the past decade racking up ultra triathlon feats. And for 2020? A DUTOR (Double Ultra Triathlon Off Road). In the depths of winter. Cue mud, hallucinations, two sunrises and even more mud

WORDS CLAIRE SMITH IMAGE KATHI HARMAN

I'm pretty sure it's Sunday, but I've no clue what time it is. All I know is that I still have over 150km left on the bike. I'm sat in the back of a van and my mum is trying to make me eat something. I can't look at her or Kathi, who is crewing for me, because if I do I will break. I desperately want to stop, to give up and go home.

My back is screaming at me and the pain in my hands is excruciating. My brain is coming up with clever excuses and brilliant reasons why ending this ordeal is the best idea right now. But I know this game, I've played it many times before. Without making any eye-contact, I get up slowly, trying not to let Mum see how much my back is hurting. I stuff a banana into my back pocket and walk over to my mud-covered mountain bike. "150km. I can do this," I say to myself. I have to do this.

After completing a Double Deca (20 continuous iron-distance races) in Mexico last year, you'd think that doing a Double Iron would be really easy. A few of my friends had even laughed when I told them what I'd planned this weekend. "That's like a Parkrun for you," one of them said. I laughed with them, but in the back of my mind a little voice had told me that this was going to really hurt. The main reason wasn't the distance, but the terrain. This Double Iron was off-road.



MEET CLAIRE

Claire Smith raced her first triathlon at Ironman 70.3 UK at Exmoor in 2006, and has since gone on to race Ironman UK, the Enduroman Double Iron, the SwissUltra Continuous Deca Iron and the Double Deca Iron in Mexico. She's also the founder and organiser of the Brutal Extreme Triathlons.

FROM JOGLE TO DUTOR

I started in ultra-triathlon back in 2009 when I completed my first Double Iron. From that, I really got the bug and went on to race many more ultras, including a Quin (five Iron distances) and Deca (x10) triathlon in Switzerland. And yet it's never come easy to me, as I struggle with my pace and also with a back condition called Hyperlordosis, which causes me huge amounts of pain on the bike sections. I've DNF'd many races over the years, but I'm incredibly stubborn and seem to 'enjoy' the pain that you get when you push yourself to your absolute limits. I keep coming back looking for longer and harder challenges.

For 2020, I was attempting my biggest challenge yet, the TransAM Triathlon. This monster event spans the United States, starting with a



50km lake swim, followed by a 3,200km self-supported bike ride from Florida to California. Finally, the 402km run goes through Death Valley and you finish with your feet in the Pacific Ocean. This was the first year it was to be held. And then Covid happened.

With all race plans on hold, I began to look for ways to get my endurance fix. After completing a self-supported JOGLE (running from John O'Groats to Land's End carrying all my own kit and no crew) in 23 days, I wanted something else. In stepped the DUTOR (Double Ultra Triathlon Off Road), the idea of ultra-triathlon legend Wayne Kurtz. The problem was I'd never ridden off road before and didn't own a mountain bike. But I'm not one to let small details like that stop me and, after a quick trip to Halfords and a £300 dent on my credit card, I was the proud owner of a Carrera Vengeance. The name seemed fitting.

My training consisted of one wobbly five-miler and a 37km lap of the DUTOR route in the New Forest that I'd have to complete 10 times to make up the 370km required. I loved it and afterwards asked myself why it'd taken me so long to discover off-road riding. I replaced the swim section of my solo triathlon with a 7.72km paddleboard leg in the River Stour at Christchurch, Dorset, due to the water temperature in late November being way too cold for such a long swim. Finally, I plotted the lap that'd make up the 84km

off-road run section. This would be the only familiar part of this event for me. With all plans in place, I was ready to take on the DUTOR...

THE EASY BIT?

A mountain of clothes, shoes, assorted kit and nutrition sits before me on my living room floor. Even though this is my own event and there are no cut-offs or other competitors, I'm feeling the pressure of taking on 450km off-road during the winter. Daylight hours feel minimal at the moment, and I pack all the lights and battery





Who needs a carbon bank-buster? Claire's Carrera Vengeance cost just £300

packs I own. I also need to plan for having a puncture or mechanical in the middle of nowhere. Not only will I have to carry food and water, but also all my bike tools, pump and a spare inner tube. And there are no arrows on the course, so I'll need to navigate using my phone. Finally, I pack all my warm and waterproof kit as it's late November and the cold is my Achilles heel.

I give my bike a check-over, add it to the rest of the kit and stand back to take a breath. I have everything. I'm ready. The alarm goes off at 6am and, after a strong coffee, Kathi (who is my crew and photographer for the weekend) and I make our way down to the river where I'll complete the paddleboard leg. Today I'm on the water, not in it, and I'm looking forward to this part.

It's windy and the water is moving fast. I make it down to the turn point quickly and, although I'm aware that going back will be harder, I wasn't expecting it to be so hard. It seems that I'm not even moving and I get pushed into the bank. I lower myself to my knees to get more power and stability. After what seems like hours, I can finally see the van and prepare myself for the last push. But try as I might, I can't get into the bank. The swirling water current and the wind are just too strong. After 15mins of continuous paddling, sweating and

swearing, I have to admit defeat. The minute I stop paddling, I lose all the ground I made up in seconds. I look around for a suitable place to get out. Rather shakily, I pull myself and the board out of the water. That was supposed to be the easy bit.

We make our way to the New Forest to start the bike section. The first lap is fun, and I return to the car park grinning and covered in mud. Towards the end of second lap, it starts to get dark and I switch on all my lights and make sure I've my spares and battery packs. But I'm only 8km in when the light on my helmet flashes, warning me that it's about to run out even though I'd charged it before the event. I stop and pull out the second light. This one doesn't even switch on. It's flat. What the hell is going on?

DARKEST BEFORE DAWN

I'm in the middle of nowhere and it's pitch black, so we decide that the only way to get through the next 13hrs of darkness without my decent bike lights is to change the bike course to something more manageable. We also have to try and fit my running head torch to my bike helmet.

The forest is an incredible place to be at night and all I see are bright green eyes looking at me, which are quickly followed by white, heart-shaped rear ends of the panicked

CLAIRE'S DIY ULTRA TIPS

1 Don't just plan your route online, get your feet (or wheels) on the ground. The last thing you need is any surprises on the day. It's even worth considering a back-up course in case any issues arise.

2 Recruit a great crew. Whether they're making you a cuppa or running some miles with you, having some company is a real morale booster.

3 Get social media involved. Yes, it's a solo event, but you can still get lots of support.

4 Consider a tracker. There are a few companies (like www.geotracks.co.uk) that offer GPS tracker hire for personal challenges. And everybody loves dot watching!

5 Pack well. Unless the DIY challenge is based at your house, you need to ensure you've enough clothing, spare shoes, lights, battery packs and plenty of food!



“The forest is an incredible place to be at night and all I see are bright green eyes looking at me”



Is that really a Terrier? Claire experienced hallucinations on the run

deer racing away. The night seems to last forever but, as the sun rises, so do my spirits. I still have many miles left to go and I'm frustrated as the heavy mountain bike and the rocky, muddy paths make for slow progress. My back is painful and I'm having to tell myself that I'm not giving up. But all I have is a negative record playing over in my head. One lap at a time, Kathi reminds me.

The day passes and goes into another night. I'm broken, but at least I can see the end of the bike leg now. Once I'm finished, I say to Kathi that I'm done with long-distance cycling and I'm never doing it again. "Yes, of course," she says with a wry smile. I may have said this once or twice before...

After a short sleep in the front of my van, wrapped in a DryRobe and two sleeping bags, I start the run. The back pain disappears. I feel good again. It's pitch black and the course is covered in roots. Within the first hour I've already tripped over half a dozen times and I need to be careful. Just before dawn, the temperature plummets and I start shivering, violently. I also begin to fall asleep whilst running. I down some tepid coffee to try and wake myself up.

THE SUN RISES AGAIN

The sun rises for the second time during my challenge and the dog walkers start to fill the quiet forest that I've had to myself all night. I'm not eating enough and my energy levels are dropping. I stop at the van for some cereal and sugary tea. That hits the spot and I'm also able to take off clothing, as the day gets a little warmer. My daughter arrives at lunchtime to run with me. This picks me up, although I need to tell her to slow down as her pace almost kills me. When she has to return to work, I plug in my music and try and get into the zone, but it's hard. I've



Claire's near-60hr adventure concluded with a 'gentle' 84km trail run around the New Forest

now been on the move for 55hrs. It wasn't supposed to take this long!

The last 15km are torture. My feet throb and all I can do is painfully shuffle my way to the finish. Lap after lap, hour after hour. Will it ever end? As it gets dark again, I start to hallucinate. Trees become people, sticks become snakes... At one point I jump and cry out, as there's a man hiding behind a tree. Except there isn't. I try to focus only on the path ahead of me and ignore all of the strange things apparently going on around me. Eventually and after nearly 60hrs of cold, wet, muddy trails, I finish the first-ever DUTOR in the UK. I'm exhausted

DUTOR DETAILS

First leg
7.72km
paddleboard

Second leg
370km
off-road bike

Third leg
84km trail run

Total time
59:12hrs

Bike cleaning time
90mins

More info
brutalclaire.co.uk

and lean against the van with my hands on my knees. "Good god, that was hard." Kathi looks at me and laughs, "Let's get you home."

The next day I can barely walk. My knees are swollen from the hours spent on the mountain bike, and my hands and fingers are numb from the pressure of the handlebars. Other than that, I'm happy. There were a few moments when I'd thought that I couldn't possibly go on. But, somehow, I managed to keep moving forwards. And I also learnt a lot of new things about off-road riding. Oh, and I'm definitely getting a gravel bike for the next time I do it... **220**