

".....and to put it in perspective we were within a second of getting a medal in the sprint race and we had never, ever paddled together before Bosnia"

"Wait a minute Bosnia? Random"

"Yeah, I know"

"So what was it like?"

"Beautiful..."

"The rivers?"

"Yeah, those too..."

"Huh?"

"Put it this way, the World Rafting Championships was based in the city of Banja Luka, and the first thing we were told about the place was that the woman to man ratio was 7:1"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, and the first impression when we got there was that we just found the home of probably every single catwalk model there is....."

Ok, so this isn't meant to be a travel guide for men but in the words of those ones from the southern states, "I tell it like I see it".

The pathway to the world champs starts with our own national competition, and whoever wins that title takes home the magnificently carved James Moore Memorial Trophy. James was the longest serving member of the NZ raft team and unfortunately lost his life in a tragic and heartbreaking incident while training for his passion of waka ama near Mount Maunganui. The trophy is a "Hoe", or traditional Maori styled paddle which gives the holder the right to represent our nation at the World Rafting Championships.

So in early February, spurred on by the memory of our fallen brother, we drew swords and we competed. Based in the little Bay of Plenty town of Kawerau, with the backdrop of the grand Mt Edgecumbe surging its way out of the earth to stand proudly in the middle of the scenic Tarawera forest, the stage was set for two days of intense competition covering four disciplines. It was on this battle ground where we would find our next representatives for the world champs. The competition ended up coming down to two teams, both from Rotorua. With swords drawn the two teams dueled right through the event, and in true Hollywood fashion it would come down to the final race. Whoever won this race would be crowned the national champions.

That honour, however did not go to my team. That was bestowed upon the Okere Men of Rotorua, captained by Nick Chater. But as luck would have it, due to a number of reasons I was named in the team as a late addition to travel to Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) for the seventh world rafting champs competition. I thought I was a late addition, but with the withdrawal of yet another team member two weeks prior to the championships, it was time to bring in the serious re-enforcement. That would take shape in the form of our power house Troy Dolman, who was only confirmed a week before the competition. Luckily for us Nick, Troy and the brothers Lance and Paul Roozendaal are all seasoned paddlers and members of the renowned Waka Ama Team Goodyear. But in all honesty we were already at a disadvantage as we had never trained or even paddled together until the day before our first race in Bosnia. In fact, the final member of our team, Johann Roozenburg had only been in a raft a dozen times prior to the world champs. But don't be mistaken as Johann is a quality whitewater kayaker and later in 2009 he will compete

at the World Slalom Kayaking Championships in Europe. It's Johanns' slalom knowledge that makes him such an asset to this team.

In typical Kiwi fashion we set our sites to BiH and into the mindset of winning a gold medal. We paid for our tickets, ourselves may I add. We packed our bags, we hopped on a plane and we made our way, with 35 hours of transit ahead of us, to Banja Luka, host city for the World Rafting Championships 2009 (WRC2009).

Also in typical Kiwi style, we didn't do any homework prior to leaving NZ so we really had no idea where we were going. Even when we arrived in Croatia and met up with our hosts who drove us across the border and into BiH we were still asking questions like "are there restaurants close to where we are staying?" or "Can we use credit cards?". Seriously, the extent of my knowledge could have been measured with my pinky finger. There was a war in the 90's..... and there are a bunch of landmines there that the New Zealand Army has been removing for sometime now, like I said, pinky finger. Well, I was in for a very pleasant surprise.

Let me take a step back though because I left for Bosnia with the thought that this was a once in a lifetime deal. Let's face it, who really has this place on their list of 101 places to go before I die? Well, and this is being honest, I can't wait to go back. I never imagined it to be such a beautiful place. Our hotel in Banja Luka was based in the center of this late 19th century styled city. It was obvious that the history here was something as far as New Zealanders are concerned, hard to comprehend. Just the age of this place, with narrow streets, designed for no more than an ox-drawn cart and structures which are still looking like their 19th century best. Two blocks away from our hotel was another timeline again with a Roman built castle which was erected sometime in the first few centuries AD towering above the Vrbas river. But then there was this unusual mix of very modern, and very expensive local government buildings just two blocks in the opposite direction, complete with vanishing pools. So the history here is phenomenal, both recent and ancient.

The landscape is just as spectacular. That Vrbas river which ran through the middle of this city of 200,000-ish was believe it or not absolutely fine to swim in. That is unless you're like me and terrified of snakes!!!! Don't let the fact they were the size of over-fed worms and were non-poisonous fool you, they were still snakes....But as we twisted and turned our way up the Vrbas Canyon we were greeted with awe-inspiring views. The relatively flat city all of a sudden gave way to massive rock walls, luscious green forest, solid grade 3 whitewater rapids and a banner that read "Welcome to the World Rafting Championships 2009". We looked up at the banner as we meandered our way underneath and the emotions started to flow as I realized that I was here on behalf of not only my country, but more importantly my family and my friends. That feeling of pride was fuel for us as we began our story of WRC 2009.

I'll try and do the opening ceremony justice but I don't think words enough could do this. This is one of those "you had to be there" moments. It was amazing, with full live television coverage that was broadcast through Europe, and 40,000 people lining the streets as 55 teams from all over the world paraded themselves weaving through the core of the city of Banja Luka, representing their respective countries in this 2 hour spectacle displaying the different aspects of BiH's intriguing culture culminating into a magnificent concert and party in the central city square. Here we had the formalities of introductions and speeches before the competition was declared open. Then with lights blazing, fireworks erupting and 40,000 Bosnians cheering, the band sprung to life. The music exploded out

of the gigantic speakers and the local artists encapsulated the entire audience as the thousands of voices resonated through this majestic old city and carried on until the wee small hours of the morning. However, we made our way to a nice quiet café, sat down together and took in the atmosphere and readied ourselves for our mission ahead.

Running on Bosnia time (similar to island time but multiplied by 10) we eventually start the championships with the initial time trial Sprint Race, which is worth the least amount of points as far as the four disciplines are concerned. This race however determines the seedings for the next event and probably one of the most exciting of the competition, the Head to Head (H2H) race. In true medieval type jousting style, two teams start side by side and race the 600m, one minute long course battling all the way down to the finish line with the winner advancing to the next tier up and the loser being knocked out with no second chance. What makes the racing epic is that while you are not allowed to deliberately connect with another raft or competitor, you may "fight" for your line down the course and for the water you are paddling in which inevitably results in contact racing.

Our first race had us match up against the strong but young Czech Republic team, Our weakness was our start which would prove to be our eventual undoing, and even though we had lane choice with the faster qualifying time, the Czech team from the start block pulled away from us. What we lacked at the start though we definitely made up for with power and within 100m of the start line we were battling side by side. The Kiwi teams have an illustrious history for racing "aggressively", we call it mongrel. With this mongrel we powered away and got our noses in front as we entered the main rapid of the H2H course, but as we dropped out the other side the Czech team wasn't done yet and they managed to nudge us in to a slow patch of water. Again we were side by side, but the last 200m of the course is flat slow water and according to the British team, we were the fastest team over this last section and we easily powered away from the Czechs and advanced to the next round.

There is nothing like the physical battle of a H2H race, and to watch the spectacle is exciting enough, but the rush from taking part in this physical battle royal is one that has me hooked. The combination of a full blown sprint race with adrenalin pumping through you as paddles bash together and sly tactics of reaching ahead of your opponents stroke and controlling their rate as a stray fist here and there connects, it's a testosterone filled alpha males dream....

The team from USA has been paddling together longer than any other team at the world championships. Their experience showed as they finished the H2H competition second, by beating out the much favored Brazilians who were eventually crowned the 2009 World Rafting Champions. It turned out that we would be put up against this strong American team for our second H2H race

With our time off between races we would simply go walking through the town, and you couldn't help but notice the distinctive culture here which seems to be normal for this part of the world. There is a lot of socializing done, but it's all out on the streets. Nobody seems to invite a friend over to their house for a "cuppa" or brunch. Instead, people just wander up and down the main streets in town doing the coffee equivalent to a pub crawl, slowly making their way from café to café meeting new friends along the way who hitch on for the ride and migrate together for the next coffee stop. When I say coffee that could also mean beer which is a pretty common drink any time of day.

Seriously, I have never seen anything like it before, a beer in one hand, a glass of Rakija in the other, and an omelet on the table, this was breakfast. We had an older Bosnian gentleman staying in our hotel and this was his breakfast every morning for the week he was there. Just to clarify, Rakija is a local spirit that I liken to an un-flavoured, extremely potent schnapps that is usually homemade using plums. A side note, Rakija only causes pain.

We were lucky enough to travel across the country by bus (honestly, no sarcasm here), and although it was from the point of view of a tour bus we got a feeling of how much Bosnia is still struggling to get back to normality. Banja Luka was lucky during the last war, the advancing troops stopped literally just a few kilometers out before peace was made which meant that the war never really hit this beautiful city. However the rest of the country wasn't so lucky. As we drove through the country side we couldn't help but be awe-struck by the amazing cliffs, rivers and canyons that engulfed every sense and brought to mind how old this part of the world really is geologically, and how little old Aotearoa should really be little young Aotearoa.

We were brought right back to reality when we started driving through populated areas and, remembering this is more than ten years after the war, we came across buildings, not commercial but residential buildings, people homes, peoples houses which have bullet holes in the side. Some of these houses would have had families in them, innocent civilians and children. There were even houses that were missing entire sections from various explosives causing irreparable damage. It was a reality check that brought me personally back down to Earth and showed me how easy we have it in New Zealand.

This drive took us to Foca, a couple of hours out of the capital Sarajevo. This is where the down river long course discipline would take place for the Championships. The setting probably couldn't have been anymore amazing. The boarder between Montenegro is separated by the Tara River, which is also the second largest canyon in the world only to the Grand Canyon in North America. With its glacial coloured waters, and luscious green forests, this place was starting to rival home for being naturally stunning. The accommodation only added to the ambience, with the 32 men's and 23 women's teams being given an awesome little log bungalow each and 5 separate facilities for eating and drinking with wonderful bonfires to warm the toes at this riverside camp. Bosnia was starting to show off.

The 16km course took about an hour for the men's teams and in a ridiculously close finish, the top 15 teams, which included us, were within a minute of each other. This just went to show how tight the racing really was, unlike any other world rafting competition before.

After the race a delicious meal of stunning mutton along with a host of vegetables and breads was put on by the people of the Tara River Camp and once filled, we started our long and arduous trek back to Banja Luka. An uneventful but still visually stunning drive home saw many hands of "Presidents and Scums" dealt and with a number of comfort stops we eventually arrive back to our temporary home.

The kind people of the International Raft Federation were awesome enough to give us a day off with our hosts at our side, we went on a tiki-tour of the city checking out the sights, sounds and smells hopping from café to café, testing the baristas as we became connoisseurs of the caffeine world one sip at a time. The Kastle walls were fun to climb on and the market areas were fascinating to see people hocking off what ever they could, from Panasony mp3 players to Neke t-shirts, while the cigarettes hoarders did get a little

tiresome. The museum would have been great, if it didn't close at lunch time which was a classic example of Bosnia time. This night though would see us return to the Rafting Klub and have an opportunity to practice under lights on the Slalom course for tomorrow nights final event in the WRC 2009.

It was spectacular to see a complex and set up like this. Permanent grandstands had been carved and built into the cliffs on the side of the river as well as a judge's room and a headquarters at the start of the course and of course like the sprint course there were also raft elevators at either end of course to ease the pain of the teams hauling the rafts up and down from the waters edge to the truck and trailers that were shuttling them back and forth along the 600m course. The lights were another outstanding feature turning night into day and making for a unique experience that would be difficult to ever see happening back home.

Race day couldn't have been anymore exciting, with live television coverage being broadcast all over Europe to millions of viewers and over 20,000 spectators riverside at the slalom course itself this was the experience of a lifetime. I was awestruck by the grand nature of the event and this sport. Trying not to sound big headed, we were treated like rock stars. Literally every few steps was another photo opportunity for one of the thousands of the spectators at the event. The few hundred meters to walk back up the course took almost half an hour as the "paparazzi" clicked away as we were grabbed from every direction to be dragged into another photo that will no doubt end up on Facebook.

Our first run down the river was a shocker, as a team we may a simple mistake that cost a lot of time, but with slalom you have two shots and the best of those two is your final time. Knowing this we cruised the rest of the course using it as a practice and to conserve energy for one last race in Bosnia. Emotions were high as we came off the river, we were disappointed and angry at ourselves for making such a silly mistake. This was almost the lift we needed as a different team turned up for our final run. Off the start line we were more powerful than ever, in unison we drove deep with our blades using every muscle we had to pull the boat through the water. With the experience of Johaan calling every turn on every gate we were styling down the river. The race is based on time and for every gate you touch, with boat, paddle or body you received a five second penalty, and for every gate you missed it was 50 seconds. The eventual winners Japan, who are fully professional, were the only team to go through with no penalties. On our final run we only had one 5 second penalty and the difference between us getting a medal and our final position was that penalty.

I was lucky enough to attend the 2009 World Rafting Championships in Bosnia. It was an amazing experience with an outstanding team of kiwi athletes. As a team we were so close to not going if not for some key support from a few organizations. The New Zealand Rafting federation with only one part time paid employee is what keeps our country on the map for racing, and with the addition of Nick Chater on to the Executive Committee as a raft racing co-ordinator this is sure to move forward. The International Raft Federation was kind enough to help us out financially and wave the entry fee costs as we were more or less a self-funded team. Destination Rotorua, the Governing body of tourism in Rotorua also contributed financially, and being frank and honest, we couldn't have raced without them as their assistance in purchasing tickets is what made up for our lack of personal funds to travel to Bosnia.

Setting our sights forward we are now in the process of looking for sponsors and funding. With invitations from Argentina, China, India and the Netherlands the New Zealand Rafting team is stepping up a notch. With a group of dedicated guys who can train together pre-competition and make it to a few races before racing the next world-championships, I would be so bold as to say that you could expect a medal if the results in Bosnia are anything to go by.

Tu Maea, Tu Kaha, Kia Toa.
Stand Brave, Stand Strong to be victorious.