

London to Paris the Hard Way

by Andy Mouncey



At 12.40am on Sept 18th Leicester-based Andy Mouncey set off from Marble Arch London to attempt to become only the second person to complete the Enduroman Arch to Arc Challenge. This continuous solo crossing from London to Paris, (which includes a Channel swim) was completed for the first time in 2001 by Dorset's Eddie Ette in a time of just over 80 hours. This is Andy's story:

Leg 1 Marble Arch to Dover: Run 87 miles

I bury my head into the massage couch and let the tears flow as the frustration of temporary failure overwhelms me. I'm at mile 73 on the first leg, it's baking hot and my running legs have finally given out: my quadriceps are shot and I am unable to lift my knees. The last few miles have been a grotesque parody of running – it would have been quicker to walk, but this is a run, dammit, and my goal was to run it!

My wife Charlotte squeezes my hand and without looking up I know she is crying with me. I've been trying to hold this back over the last few miles, but now surrounded by my support crew I've no chance. Everything else feels fine – I just can't run any more and that hurts more than anything.

It had been going well: I cruised through the first 20 miles at 7-7.5 mph enjoying the novelty of running through the capitol at night and out again chasing the dawn. Less than 3 hours in and a stop for massage, food and drink. On into the next 15 mile stretch - with the crew

looking increasingly groggy through the graveyard shift - the sun came up and my count of urban foxes reached 8. The next stop on the outskirts of Maidstone at 38 miles reached in 5 hours. Things are definitely sore now and it's taking me longer to get running again but still all in control.

50 miles is reached in just over 8 hours. This is the first benchmark for me and I take a longer than normal 45 min stop and a full change of kit along with the usual massage, food and drink. I'm sore and stiff but John my Massage Man is keeping it at bay and morale is high. Camped by the roadside we are definitely giving the commuters something to talk about!

The next 10 mile section is where the damage goes in. It takes me a longer than usual to get into my running, and though I have a brief fuel stop at 65 miles it is not enough. I stop short of 60 miles forcing the support van to back-track to me, dehydrated, tired and hungry and in real pain for the first time. As I try and climb into the van to get some shade I realise I've seen 80 year old's with more agility than me at this point! I'm down to 6mph...

60 to 65 miles is a bit of a blur. Eddie (Ette) walks with me for a while – he is leading my support crew – and we do a radio interview over the phone and talk about this silly thing I'm doing and he's done! I won't win any style points but I'm still running though it is very very slow...

The next 5 miles are done with John the Massage Man for company and although we pick the pace up it is now even more than a blur. My world had shrunk down to John's voice – something about picking my knees up? – and the 2-3 metres of road in front of me. This gets me to 70 miles at 2pm but I am paying for the increase in pace. The good news is that I'm still very coherent and am recovering quickly at the stops – it's just the moving which is now a problem...

I look up and Charlotte and I share a husband and wife moment as the rest of the folks give us some space. We knew there'd be some wobbles and we'd prepared for this: I just need to finish dumping the primary goal, (run the run) and get hold of the secondary one, (finish in one piece!).



So I reach Dover at 7pm by walking the rest of the way. It has taken 18 and a half hours. I can hardly move or stay awake – my last sleep was Monday night - but have been buoyed in the last few hours by the amount of goodwill messages we have received by text, phone and the passing traffic which has caught the news of our pending arrival on local radio. I know that with massage, shower, food and sleep I will be OK, and I slip into oblivion barely have I swallowed the last mouthful of pasta.

Leg 2 The English Channel: Swim 22 miles

In the morning I'm rested, stiff but moving, and ready for our midday swim window. Then half way through breakfast Eddie takes a call from Chris our pilot boat captain which stops the breakfast banter dead: 'No swim today – the Channel is too rough.' It's a shock as from where we're sitting it's a lovely day and it's easy to assume all is the same over the water. I know the crew will take a lead from me and so it is imperative I react quickly and positively. Once again I've rehearsed this and switch gears to how we can best use the time. It's all bonus recovery and even with this delay the World Record is still on...

But it is not to be. The weather does not abate and we sit in Dover all Thursday and Friday. A shot at the World Record is gone so the focus

now shifts to completing and setting new fastest times for each of the 3 stages, and dealing with the waiting...

Dawn on Saturday morning and we're at the Marina readying the support boat. Chris and Eddie are looking again at the weather and the picture is not good. The forecast is for Force 4, 5 and even 6 later in the day. If I swim today and the weather behaves as predicted there is a very real chance I won't be able to complete – the sea will be too rough for me to continue. Chris thinks the forecast is pessimistic, Eddie is not so sure: the choice though, is mine. Do I go now and risk not being able to finish, or do I choose to wait again in the hope that the weather will settle over next few days?

The experience of the run, the tension of the delay, and the anticipation of the hardest open water swim in the world combine to momentarily defeat me: it's a choice I don't want to make. This thing is hard enough already - don't make it any harder please, I just want to have a shot at finishing! It's the hardest point of the whole trip and everyone is affected though they work hard to keep their opinions to themselves. There's more talk, listening, some tears and plenty of soul-searching.

But in the end of course, I decide to go. The weather decides that it won't behave as predicted and we experience nearly a perfect day in the English Channel. I have one low period between about 6 and 8 hours but apart from that it is a crossing that I never allowed myself to dream about. I swim from dawn till dusk, and with Eddie swimming alongside for the last few hundred yards we play silly buggers in the euphoria of the occasion as I reach the French coast after 12 hours 40 minutes.



Leg 3 Calais to L'Arc d'Triomphe: Cycle 180 miles

I'm on the bike at 5.30am after some food and a fitful few hours sleep in the motorhome. There is no doubt now that I will finish this – the only question is when. Once again I see the sun come up and revel in the peace and quiet of the dawn. I feel good and ride the rolling, unrelenting hills of the first part harder than I really should. It's going to be another scorching day, but I wobble into the first stop at 50 miles in around 3 hours in need of serious re-fueling. It's a timely reminder of my efforts of yesterday and of the 130 miles still to go! I fuel up, change strategy and gear down. Everything is working but I need to ride a little more with my head and not my heart!

The next 50 miles takes 15 mins longer than the first but I'm still OK. A nice headwind has got up and I'm having to gear right down on the climbs to keep the effort even (ish). It is the heat which is starting to get to me on these open rolling roads. The previous days' exertions mean I'm not dealing with it as well as usual and it is really sapping my strength. At 100 miles reached after 6 and three quarter hours I retreat into the shade of the van and cover myself with towels from the freezer. I know I've broken the back of it but now I really am tired...



The third 50 takes over 4 hours as I have a wobble at 120 miles and throw my toys out of the pram. The heat, effort and isolation get too much: I'm seriously pissed off and throw myself into the van for an unscheduled stop with far more drama than necessary. I'm still pushing and rationality has taken a back seat for a while...not clever with 50 miles still to go.

Picking yourself up is however all part of these little jaunts, and it is not too long before I am parking an increasingly sore rear once again onto a well-used saddle. But it is slow and painful and I really have got an urge to lie down and close my eyes, but I know I am really getting there now – just keep the pedals going round!

Then salvation! as we hit the fast roads on the outskirts of Paris. By some miracle, Charlotte has produced some different hot food which is just exactly what I need. I am able to raise the pace significantly as we join the dual carriage-way traffic for the last stage – much to the relief of the crew who can see that this is the most risky part of the whole trip: fast / heavy traffic into an unfamiliar city after 280 miles of effort.

It seems everyone heads into Paris on a Sunday evening, and my vision of hurtling through the city onto the Champs de L'Éysee straining to catch a glimpse of the Arc is very definitely not matching reality. We are stop-start through the traffic as the crew work hard on the navigation. This last part takes an age, so I relax and enjoy the sights as dusk settles.

Then suddenly, we turn a corner and 100yds up a hill is the outline of the Arc illuminated in floodlights. As the van parks I go on ahead, somehow avoid being killed on the Place de la Concorde, and then after just over 14 hours on the bike I'm there. Charlotte reaches me first as I'm grinning stupidly at the elegantly arranged collection of stone, and once more there are tears – but for all the right reasons this time.

