

Engadin Skimarathon Adventure 2020

By Bruce Clulow

Inspired by the 2019 Merino Muster and our ongoing enthusiasm as first year skate skiers, Graeme Male and myself decided to sign up for one of the European WorldLoppet races. Considering which race was inevitably an easy decision for me, as my son is living in Lausanne, Switzerland and the Engadin Skimarathon being one of the easier 42K courses on the WorldLoppet circuit. As such, Engadin was the logical choice. All I needed to do now, was to persuade Graeme. It didn't take a lot of convincing; I think Graeme registered within a few days of us discussing it. Just like that, we were committed. I also registered for the 42k event and in addition convinced my son James to participate in the race with us.

The scene was set, now all we had to do was to work on our fitness and train for the event. With the southern hemisphere's ski season all but over, there was not a lot of opportunity for additional on the snow training in New Zealand. Graeme and I both decided we would need to go to Europe a few weeks ahead of the March 8th race for some hard out on the snow coaching and training. We decided on Livigno in Northern Italy due its proximity to the Engadin Valley, duty free tax policy (making it less expensive than Switzerland), reliable snow and a very similar elevation of around 1,800 meters.

Back in NZ, training for me started out with 3 to 4 runs up Mount Iron a week and plenty of long bike rides in between. I had heard Snap Fitness in Wanaka had a Ski Erg so decided to investigate and ended up signing up for a membership. There I was introduced to Personal Trainer Chuck Simpson. Chuck is a cross country skier, so he was able to put together an effective purpose-built program for both Graeme and myself to help build our core strength, stability and aerobic fitness. As the travel dates rapidly approached, the training intensity increased, with more frequent trips to the gym, Roy's Peak excursions and even riding the Snow Farm road from the Cardrona valley floor. When it came close to our travel date, I felt reasonably confident I had put in enough of the hard yards over the previous 3 months to get me across the finish line. What I needed now was actual on the skis training and most of all coaching to improve technique and efficiency.

In the meantime, two other WNSC members also registered for the Engadin Skimarathon, Mike Turner and Heather Clay. Mike, a World Loppet Masters, visits Europe regularly during their winter and ski's multiple events throughout the European winter season. So, this year he added Engadin to his list of planned races. Heather managed to get a late entry as the Merino Muster representative. Now two became four and with my son James added into the mix, five.

I was ticketed to leave New Zealand for Zurich on February 12th transiting through Hong Kong, however with COVID-19 infections starting ramp up in that part of the world we elected to make last minute changes and travel via Los Angeles and London. The plan was to fly into Zurich, catch a train to Lausanne and spend a week cross country ski training along with a bit of ski touring with son James. However, that plan went out the window when James called me a few days before I was due to arrive to tell me he had injured his knee while ski touring rendering him out of action. Regardless, I travelled to Lausanne and spent a relaxing week hanging out with James and his wife Irene. As it happened there was

very little snow in that part of Switzerland, so skiing was limited. Nevertheless, I did get out for a solo ski one afternoon in the small alpine village of Les Paccots about an hour's drive from Lausanne.

After six days in Lausanne, it was time to make our way to Livigno via Zurich Airport to meet up with my partner Josie (*who had to travel a week later than me due to work commitments*). The easiest way to get to Livigno was by train from Zurich airport to Zernez and then about a 40-minute bus ride across the Swiss-Italian border to Livigno. When we arrived at the Livigno bus stop Graeme and Donna were there to meet us and escort us to our B&B. They had departed New Zealand a day after me so had already been in Livigno for a week, allowing Graeme to gain some valuable ski time over me.

In that week, Graeme had already heavily immersed himself in the Livigno way of life and Italian culture, he not only looked the part with his new Audi Italia racing suit and Madshus ski boots, (*we think he may have even slept in these*) but already made valuable contacts in the local skiing community. We checked into the hotel which was conveniently only 50 meters from the ski trail, unpacked the ski's and Graeme took me for a quick 10k ski tour of the surrounding ski trails. I was surprised when we skied past a group of local kids taking ski lessons when they all yelled out "Ciao" Grae-meee, that is what he was affectionately known as from then on. Livigno is amazing, the conditions were fantastic and unlike many other places in Europe this season, there was heaps of snow.

The following day, Graeme and I skied from Livigno up the Valle Della Forcola, the highest point being Alpe Vago at 2,021 meters, an elevation gain of 387 meters and 27k round trip. The views were spectacular and the run home back down the valley to Livigno, partially on the Forcola pass road (closed during the winter months) was magnificent. This loop became our main training route over the next two weeks.

Now it was time for us novice skiers to get some expert advice and coaching to work on technique to be race ready. Local Sci di Fondo coach Martina Viviani took on the challenge and gave Graeme and I a series of six private lessons. There we worked on honing specific skills and techniques with a day or two to practice before the next lesson where we would move on to a different skill. Learning new and refining old techniques was only part of it, we also had to learn new terminology like *doppio*, *lungo* and *quattro*, the Italian lingo for the three different skating techniques. Martina worked us hard. However, by the end of the two weeks of coaching, we really could feel and notice the difference in our skiing. Martina had done her job and prepared us well for the race ahead.

Many of you will remember Martina. She worked as a ski coach at Snow Farm during the 2018 ski season. She is a fantastic coach, has an infectious personality, full of enthusiasm and constantly laughing and smiling. She really made us feel welcome in Livigno and went out of her way to introduce us to her extended family and friends which seemed to be around half of the village. With Livigno being Campbell Wright's winter training venue and home of his coach Luka, Wanaka and Snow Farm is well known amongst the local skiing community.

Livigno is located in the province of Lombardy in Northern Italy, which was rapidly becoming the epicentre of COVID-19 in Europe. Even though Livigno was 295Km from the closest confirmed case at the time and being only 12km from the Swiss border we were starting to get a little concerned with the rapid spread of the virus in Northern Italy. During our last week there, Livigno was gradually shutting down, schools closed, large gatherings were cancelled, and bars closed at night. On February 28th we received news from the race officials the 2020 Engadin Ski Marathon had been cancelled due to the concerns of large gatherings (14,200 entries) potentially accelerating the spread of COVID-19 as it was now spreading quite rapidly in Switzerland as well. This was disappointing news, given the effort we had put into preparing ourselves over the past 3 to 4 months. We quickly communicated to the other "Musters on Tour" through our "WhatsApp" group to inform them of the news and informed them Graeme and I had already decided we would continue as planned and travel to Pontresina to ski the course on race day. Heather was on her way, transiting through Singapore when she received the news and decided despite the race being cancelled, she would continue onto to Europe to spend a few days with her son in Austria before travelling to Switzerland to join Graeme, Donna and Josie and me. Mike decided he would stay safe in Scandinavia and ski some of the events that were still scheduled there.

We decided to stay in Livigno until our planned departure to Switzerland on March 6th, even though Livigno was shutting down and the ski tourists were rapidly departing. We registered with the government safe travel web site, so the New Zealand government were aware of our location in the event the borders closed in Italy. We also contacted Health Line to discuss our situation and register with them. We were told on returning to New Zealand we would have to self-isolate for 14 days from the time we departed Northern Italy. At around the same time we were advised by our travel agent return travel through Singapore was closed for anyone who had been in Northern Italy within 14 days of travel. That ruled us out and our two-day retreat in Singapore on the way home. It appeared the only way to get back to New Zealand now was through the USA, so our agent went about trying to get us reservations returning the long way around. At considerable cost and a day later than originally planned, she was able to get us a booking on NZ1 via London and LAX to Auckland.

Back in Livigno we spent the last few days practicing social distancing and sharing our bubble with Graeme and Donna. We still skied every day and for the last few days almost having the area to ourselves. Luckily the Livigno Latteria was still open so we were able to still sit in the sun on the deck enjoying their awesome locally made gelato, replacing burned calories from the days skiing.

We boarded the bus in Livigno for Zernez on the morning of March 6th and crossed the Italian Swiss border about 15 minutes later with very mixed emotions. Sad to be leaving Livigno and our newly made friends there, however relieved to be leaving Europe's COVID-19 epicentre. Livigno went into total lockdown only 48 hours after we departed, so we were lucky to get out when we did.

Arriving at the Zernez bus station we were soon on a train to our next destination (Punt Muragl) and ready for our next adventure. The train tracks paralleled the Engadin ski Marathon course from the finish at S-chanf all the way to our stop at Punt Muragl close to Pontresina. The excitement built as our train progressed south along the Engadin course

and as we saw a considerable number of skiers out on the racetrack. Arriving at Punt Muragl train station, we made our way to the funicular station for the steep ascent to our Hotel Muottas Muragl. Located high in the Alps at 2,456 meters and overlooking the Engadin valley it offers spectacular views of Pontresina and St. Moritz.

We messaged Heather to let her know we had arrived, replying she was out on the course skiing the from Zuoz to St. Moritz, we had more than likely passed her on our way on the train. There is a toboggan track from the hotel to the bottom funicular station offering a descent of some 720 meters. Nice new toboggans and free of charge for hotel guests, of course we couldn't pass that opportunity up. We quickly checked-in and changed into warm, waterproof clothing. Josie, Graeme and I selected the fastest looking sleds and took off to the racecourse start. The descent was steep and fast. It took us a while to master the technique to steer and brake, but it was a whole lot of fun. I don't think any of us had laughed so much or had such an adrenaline rush in a long time, definitely a type 2 experience. We managed the descent with only minor spills and no injuries. To quote Graeme *"the cost of the hotel was worth it just for that"*. We spent the rest of the day walking around St. Moritz and later caught up with Heather for a pizza in Pontresina.

The following day, March 7th (the day before our planned ski of the Engadin course), would have typically been a rest day if we were in fact racing the event. However, given the pristine conditions and the allure of the snow, Josie, Heather, Graeme and I decided to have a leisurely ski from Pontresina to St. Moritz for a walk around the town, gift shopping and a coffee before the 9km ski back to Punt Muragl. That section of the course over rolling terrain and through the trees is spectacular with enough variation to make it a little challenging.

The next day (March 8th) was pseudo race day. We were up for an early breakfast and caught the first funicular down the mountain to hop on the bus to the race start at Maloja. Despite the event being cancelled, there was still a good turnout which was estimated to be several thousand skiers. The weather was fine, but cold at the start. The first 15k to St. Moritz is easy flat skiing mostly over frozen lakes. From there, the course climbs up into the trees through undulating terrain with 8km to run to Pontresina. We clocked in over the start line in Maloja around 9:30 am, the three of us, Heather, Graeme and I all started together at a reasonable, leisurely pace. However, it wasn't long before Graeme got the bit between his teeth and took off like a robber's dog, I never saw him again until the end of the course. I skied the first 22K to the halfway point in Pontresina with only a short aid station break to rehydrate and a wardrobe adjustment. Josie met me in Pontresina, and we skied together for the last half of the course. It was Josie's first half Marathon and an awesome effort. As we skied past Punt Muragl, we caught up with Heather having a lunch break and getting ready to catch the train to Zurich for her long journey back to Wanaka. She had skied the last part of the course several days earlier so decided not to do it again, but rather start making her way home. We bid our farewells and Josie and I headed for the finish at S-chanf, stopping for a hot chocolate in Bever along the way.

We ran into Graeme near Zuoz making his way back to the train station, having skied the course in very good time of 3 hours and 35 minutes. He was ecstatic. Well done Graeme.

We had a few celebratory drinks that evening and rested up for our long trip back home starting the following day. Before we caught the train back to Zurich, we went into the Engadin Ski Marathon headquarters in Pontresina and Celerina. There we met up with Menduri, one of the race organizers whom Mary Lee knows. We were given race completion medals and had the opportunity to pick up a few Engadin Ski Marathon mementos.

The train ride back to Zurich on the Bernina railway through the UNESCO world heritage area was amazing. Spectacular views and the most incredible feat of Swiss engineering. The Swiss sure know how to build railways and roads. We checked into our quaint boutique hotel in old town Zurich and went for an evening walk around the city. Graeme and Donna departed the next morning. After seeing them off at the train station, Josie and I spent the day exploring museums and Zurich old town.

Our journey home started the next day, the 11th March, the day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 an official pandemic. We started our journey travelling to London and then onto NZ1 to Auckland via LAX. As we were approaching LAX, we were told Trump was closing the US borders to all flights from Europe in an attempt to keep control of new imported cases of COVID-19. I think we were one of the last flights to make it through the US from Europe. We managed to get through the US immigration formalities without too much stress and were relieved to be back on the aircraft for our final leg to Auckland.

On arrival in Auckland we were advised we now had to self-isolate for 14 days from arrival, rather than 14 days from leaving Italy as we had previously been told. I guess this being the government's initial response to the declaration of a world-wide pandemic. Within a few hours of arriving in Auckland, we were on a domestic flight to Queenstown. Upon arrival in Queenstown, we collected our baggage and my vehicle to head straight home to Wanaka to self-isolate. Family had already stocked the refrigerator up with groceries, so we were all setup to hibernate. A quick call to the COVID-19 health line to advise them we were home and to fill in a few missing details regarding our registration. Josie was able to work from home, so she was straight back into it.

Over the next few days we both felt like we had mild flu like symptoms, convincing ourselves it was probably just the effects of jet lag. However, when the health line nurse called for their regular check-in with us, we told her the symptoms and were advised because we had just come from a COVID-19 hot spot to contact our local medical centre for a COVID swab test. An appointment was scheduled for the next day, with strict instructions where to park and to stay in the vehicle. Temperatures and vital signs checked and then the dreaded swab inserted far into the nasal cavity and another in the throat. We were off home again to anxiously await the results. Within 24 hours the results were back negative, so that was a relief, but we still had to see the full 14 days of self-isolation out.

On the day we completed our 14 days, the government's state of emergency and the 4-week level 4 lockdown started, so there was no reprieve for us. At the time of writing this, we have now been in isolation for 59 days. I setup the wind trainer and subscribed to an online workout course in an attempt to retain fitness but can't wait until level 2 and below to hopefully have the opportunity to get back on the snow in June.

It was a fantastic, but very eventful adventure with COVID-19 closing doors in front and behind us as we endeavoured to make the most out of what was a dynamic and challenging situation. The old cliché *“you have to take opportunities when presented”* was certainly true in this case. We have unfinished business in Europe, but who knows when we will get the opportunity to return again.



