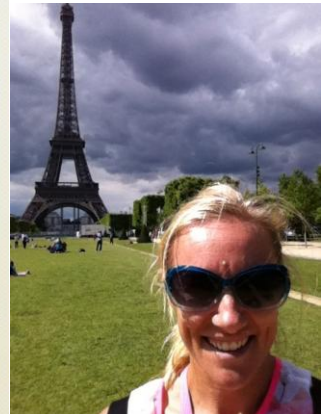


When I told people I was doing the Paris Triathlon, the concern on their faces didn't go unnoticed! I knew I would be tasting more Seine than Sauvignon Blanc but that was the whole point, wasn't it!

I had been organising a trip to London for my husband Jason and I to work at the Olympics and the dates of the Paris triathlon just happened to coincide with our travel dates and lets face it, who doesn't love a week in Paris! Jas would travel to London to start work a month earlier and would meet me in Paris in time for the triathlon.

As a solo parent travelling with a 2 and 4 year old my journey to Paris was monumental. We had a stopover in Korea, a slow crawl through French customs, lost baggage found on the tarmac and a 40 minute wait on the streets of Paris with a bus load of luggage and smelly armpits!

Our Paris apartment was small but functional. The girls had the double bedroom and I was relegated to the sofa bed. I didn't mind though, I loved sitting in the apartment with the window open listening to the hustle and bustle of Rue Du Commerce below



Getting acquainted with the 15th arrondissement over the first few days included testing which boulangerie had the best croissants, which playground had the best slide and seeing if we could beat our best time of 7 minutes walk to the Eiffel Tower.

As the triathlon approached I had to start thinking about the race. French triathlons have a few steps, the first of which was to collect my race kit 48 hours prior. With the girls in tow, I went to find race check in. I found it along the Seine and when there was a line forming even before check in opened, I was happy that I wasn't in a rush.

There is definitely an order of operations in France and they were very thorough in checking documentation. What should've have taken a few minutes for each person, took about 10 minutes, which accounted for the long line forming. They methodically checked passport, registration and medical certificate stating that I was fit to participate. I was slightly concerned when they also made me sign a waiver to swim in the Seine!!

Once I had collected my race number 2514 and chip, I had to find the triathlon village across the Seine to collect sponsors goodies and participation t-shirt. Interestingly there were a few extra goodies for "femmes" only, including a purple swim cap in case you wanted to start at the back of your wave. Finally I had everything collected, two children still in the pram and butterflies in my belly! Friday night saw the arrival of Jason and after 4 weeks of sole parenting, I was very happy to see him.

Saturday I was expecting to rack my bike and have a nice relaxing day by myself in Paris. Jas would look after the kids and I would drink coffee and wander around Paris. Simple enough but the day was to take a turn for the worse that would see my relaxing day evaporate before my eyes.

Instead of bringing my bike from Australia Jas had organised for me to borrow a bike from a girl in England. So after lugging the bike across the channel our morning started by Jas setting the bike up to

fit me. We did this over a coffee at the local brassiere (café). In Australia this wouldn't cause a false eyelash to be batted, after all, bike riding and coffee go hand in hand. Not so in France. I was met with quizzical looks and hushed conversations as I sat in my bike cleats sipping coffee. Every now and then, after a slight bike adjustment I would go for a test ride around the block.



Finally, the bike a perfect fit, we left the French espresso sippers to discuss that weird lady in funny shoes and headed for the transition. On the way we noticed one plug missing so I was more concerned with that than with taking in the amazing scenery and the wonderful transition area in the shadow of the Eiffel tower. I was trying to hide the missing plug as I went to enter the transition area but as it turns out this was the least of my worries.

Thankfully (or not) the lady at the transition entry spoke very good English. She was a sweet girl with a piece of white cardboard about to rip away my Paris triathlon dreams. She proceeded to place the piece of cardboard up against my tri bars and exclaimed "Non, non, non!!" She explained to me "French Tri rule #1" (my own numbering system). Basically your tri bars cannot be longer than the handle bars, although more heavily worded. Not a word about the missing plug, but there was no way I was racking my time trial bike as it was. So over to the triathlon village we walked in a daze, Jas's mind racing through solutions. One of the bike expos helped us manoeuvre the tri bars up and back and after careful measuring, we were pretty confident in the tri bars' new position although still slightly worried about the plug. I left Jas at this point, assuming all would be fine and my day in Paris was about to begin. Back to the same sweet girl I went only to be told about French tri rule #2....the tri bars must be in one continuous bar, not two separate bars as mine were. I'm not sure if I was more upset or she was for failing to tell me about this the first time I was there. But no amount of crying or begging or stories of distance travelled to compete would get me into transition. So off I sulked to find Jas and more solutions. Thankfully it didn't take long to find him under the Eiffel Tower and the minute I saw him, I broke down, as my dreams of the Paris triathlon faded with every tear!

Seeing me so distraught put Jas into overdrive and he hatched a plan that involved electrical tape! He took off the tri bars including the gears, laid them parallel against the handlebars and duct taped the crap out of them. By the end of two rolls you couldn't even tell it was 3 separate bars and he even covered up the missing plug as well. So with a pat on Jas's back and my heart in my mouth I rode back to the transition area to the same sweet girl to try for the 3rd time to rack my bike. The girl was so surprised to see me back with a bike that she actually thought I had given up and had hired one. But *alors* after half a day of trying I finally got to rack my bike.

I proceeded with my day of wandering around Paris, window-shopping, sightseeing and drinking coffee. In hindsight, it probably wasn't the best preparation because by the time I got home I was exhausted. But I was in Paris after all and I couldn't resist. After a traumatic day, I finished with a carbo-laden meal, a glass of wine, Paris bustling below our window and I drifted off to sleep.

Unlike most triathlons the Paris one starts at a civilized hour and because we were so close to the Eiffel Tower, we rose at a normal hour and had a leisurely breakfast. I was slightly concerned about the miserable weather. Overcast, drizzling, untested bike, novice rider and cobblestones didn't bode well, but it was out of my control so I had my usual race day breakfast and we walked leisurely to the transition area. Despite the miserable weather, I was still surprised by the beauty of the transition

area. The weather continued to deteriorate and it started to get cold. Then the realisation hit me that every single person had a full-length wet suit. I was literally the only one without a wetsuit!



It always happens at the start of a race and more so if you've never done that race before. I started sizing up the competition but this proved really difficult. There were 3 waves of 1500 participants each and this was based on nothing else but date of entry not as is the norm, age or gender. All sorts of things were going through my mind. Was I going to come out of the water without hyperthermia, would I vomit from Seine water, would I crash on the bike, I can't wait for moules and frites and wine for lunch!

Finally having placed everything in transition I started walking with Jas and the girls up the Seine to the starting zone. The course was simple, 1.5km from Pont Alexandre III to the Eiffel Tower. Each wave left 20 minutes apart and I was still taking photographs of the first wave when the 2nd wave was minutes from starting.

SWIM 25:35

It actually started 5 minutes early and I was making my way to the start line where a crowd of triathletes were politely waiting to enter the water via some makeshift stairs. I didn't want to waste any more time so I made the snap decision to jump into the Seine from the bank. It's by far the coolest start to a triathlon I've had. A 3 metre leap into the Seine, into fast running water without any of the kicking and head butting that usually accompanies wave starts. I'd almost call it civilised and the warm temperature of the water surprised me. The fact that everybody was wearing wetsuits confirmed to me that European triathletes are slightly "soft".

I started swimming and realised that the water was actually quite clean. The Seine is a lot wider than you'd expect and 1500 swimmers fit nicely across. Thankfully, the current was in our favour and so strong that I could've floated on my back and still done a PB. Jas and the girls even had trouble keeping up walking along the bank. On my part, I just had to watch out for the odd pylon here and canal boat there. The only incident occurred at about 750m when an older man with a panicked look on his face swam over me in his desperation to get to the side. I didn't think much of it other than hoping that there was someone there to help him out.

Unbeknownst to me at that time, which I later found out in the news an unnamed 56 year old man had suffered a fatal heart attack. The man that swam over me was about that age, in the second wave and certainly looked in trouble. Whoever it was, it's a scary reminder, especially since all athletes not belonging to a club had to present a medical certificate less than 3 months old.

Before I knew it, I was scrambling for the makeshift stairs that signified the end of the swim. In case any little creepy crawlies lingered there were showers set up to run through on the way to transition. I realised how warm the river actually was when I ran through these because the showers were freezing and probably the reason people were wearing their wetsuits!

T1 4:40

The transition area was typically French and very ordered with 3 rows for each of the 3 waves. The road to transition was a blue carpeted one. It lead out of the Seine across the road, around the

perimeter of the Eiffel Tower and back towards the centre of the Champs De Mars into the appropriate wave's transition area. Each competitor was in number order so it was really easy to find your bike. From swim to transition was about a km barefoot run so I was happy to finally get to my bike. I was cracking up at the gaggle of sheep following each other, just hoping the person in front was going to the same place!

RIDE 1:16:51

The bike is always my scary leg, so the first few kms I spent getting used to my bike, not only the different height but the fact that the tri bars ran across the handle bars so the gears were behind the brakes! More importantly is the fact that drafting is VERY legal, hence all the rules about the tri bars. I have never ridden in a pack before, in fact I've never ridden with more than two people so to have a peloton pass me at the speed it did was almost enough to send me into death wobbles. I spent lots of time implementing my own drafting rules to keep me upright and manoeuvring myself across the peloton and out of harms way.

Then finally I came across what I had been dreading...wet cobblestones. I did get over the cobblestones although I slowed down so much, spectators must have thought a tourist had accidentally stumbled in! The sun started peaking through not long after as we made our way to a massive park in the 16th arrondissement. The course was technical but quite easy if that makes sense. There were a lot of switchbacks and tight turns but very flat and fast and by about 10km I had settled into the ride.

As always happens a lot of people pass me in the ride so that was nothing unusual. But the amount of see-through, white tri suits passing me was truly disturbing and the amount of butt hair I have seen will last me a lifetime. In fact, I think French tri rule #4 states that you must have white tri suit (remember, my numbering system)!

The 5th French tri rule is that anyone can do a French triathlon. I can accept the fact that I have people passing me on the bike and some I'm OK with, like Jean-Jacques in his aerodynamic helmet and bike. Some I was not OK with like Gilles in his baggy board shorts and rusty one-speed racer or Paulette, 100 kg heavier than me but way more comfortable on a bike. After navigating lots of sharp left hand switchbacks which is only slightly below wet cobblestones on my fear radar, I was getting used to the bike, the speed and the close distance with which racers were passing me.

Finally on the last stretch back towards the Eiffel Tower, I started thinking about using drafting to my advantage. It started with me telling the large guy sitting behind me that I really had no idea what I was doing and ended with me sitting behind another rider assuming that I was now drafting. It felt easier but maybe it was the Eiffel Tower coming back into view and the end of the ride that helped.

Despite that fact that I was getting mobbed by a peloton and I was surround by white, French arse cracks, the weather had improved and I did have a "Hell Yeah" moment when the Eiffel Tower came back into view. After passing Princess Di's memorial at the Alma Bridge, we crossed back over the Seine for the start of the run.

T2 4:01

Back along the 1km blue carpet road to find our transition area again and this time it was slightly quicker. I swapped the bike and helmet for hat and shoes and away I went.

RUN 40:26

The French are good at not having to close many roads for major events. The first few kilometres of the run took the same route as the ride. But then it went back and forth across the Seine, down a cobbled path in the middle of the Seine and even down some stairs, it was more like a cross country race than the Paris Triathlon.

At about 4kms, I was feeling the effects of sightseeing the day before. Usually the run is my favourite leg but today mine felt heavy and lethargic. It was at this point that I spotted Jas and the girls who had positioned themselves along the route. It was so wonderful to see them and it gave me a much needed lift for the hill I was about to hit. I thought Paris had one hill called Montmartre but actually there are a few around the Trocadaro and the one we hit was long and steep. This is where I found out about French tri rule #6. Drink stations aren't just drink stations, they are more like morning tea stations with the standard water and Isotar, but there are also bananas, dates, apricots and tea cake! Then I quickly found out about French tri rule #7 & #8...French men are lazy, they walk up hills and when passing a drink station this requires stopping, deciding, consuming and finally continuing.

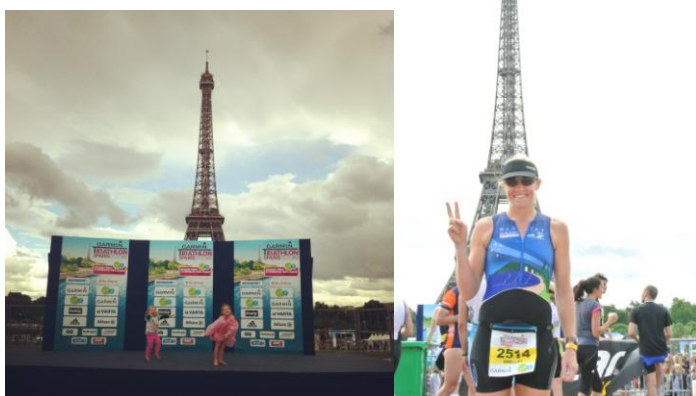


So after passing this station feeling slightly empty handed with just my standard water, I continued trudging uphill passing the men who passed me on the ride. Through the Trocadaro I ran, with an uninterrupted view of the Eiffel Tower except for the busload of tourists oblivious to the triathlon passing them by.

What goes uphill must come downhill and we did, as close to the finish line as you can get without actually finishing. It was just a tease as we turned away back up another hill about a 45 degree slope but thankfully only short, past a 1000-year-old houses, down cobblestoned laneways past bistros with elegant Parisians sipping their Sunday morning espressos. I almost felt like apologising for my appearance. Finally the last 1km along the banks of the Siene and as always my legs found a last little burst of energy. Past the Eiffel Tower, over the Seine and up towards the Trocodaro! Arms raised I race to the line and finished the Paris tri in record time of 2:31:31. Secretly the ride was only 39kms and the run 9.5 km but who's counting.

Immediately after I cross the line I'm given my finishers medal (one I'll keep) and directed towards massage (already full) and recovery.

Well, I thought the drinks station was impressive but only in France would the recovery food include camembert, chocolate, ham sandwiches, nuttella sandwiches, cherries, apricots, dates, bananas, tea cake, water, juice, sports drink and my favourite, no recovery is complete without coca-cola. It was all I could do, not to ask for some red wine, although I'm sure they could've accommodated! I had the obligatory photos in front of the Eiffel Tower and soaked up the atmosphere. What an amazing event! Not so much for the actual race but for everything from the idiosyncrasies of the French to the scenery. The Paris triathlon is high on my list!



The afternoon I was looking forward to was as wonderful as I had hoped. We took the girls to the Latin Quarter and had moules, frites and wine. Later that night we said goodbye to Jas again but luckily just for 3 days.

So what does the Seine taste like? Light, refreshing, slightly woodsy with hints of raspberry and croissants. I prefer Sauvignon Blanc but this isn't a bad substitute.