

The lead up...

Well, so a group of us decided that it would be a good idea to go to Raro (1) for a holiday and (2) to paddle. The stories we had heard about Raro, was it was not going to be easy. The waves could be big, and I mean real big!! Some of local paddlers who had gone to Raro, said that the Mount Races were a must for training purposes and that we had to learn how to right our boat in the event that we tipped out. Tip out you say? Eek! I don't wanna be tipping out in the middle of winter....

With great enthusiasm our small group committed to training for paddling the races. Once a month we would set out to Tauranga, convince the local club to supply a steerer for one of our boats, and off we would race.



Not quite Raro... or even Tauranga. Winter training on the Waikato River as part of the lead up.

The first race I remember, the weather was (shall I say) utter 'crap'. What are we doing? It was awfully cold and windy, (sounds like some other regatta we know about). Thanks to Sheryll, who knows the people who run the event, they all knew we were new to this game, and they promised to keep a close eye on us over the course of the races.

Back to the cold though. It was so choppy that first day, we were not allowed to exit out of the harbour. Off we went on our 10K race, coming out across the channel and the boat was rocking and swaying in all directions, the armour was slapping hard on the water, and a squeal was heard in the boat (it didn't

come from any of the women). I thought seriously at that point we were going to go over. Fortunately for the Waka Tron and Waka Mako crews no-one went in that day.

Down to the bouy racing against crews half our ages (maybe even a quarter of our ages for some). It was the signal that we were going to be back on shore warming up very shortly... but, argh, we turned straight into a head-on southerly wind. The stroke lengths cut-in half, heads went down and we lost our rhythm. Low and behold, Waka Mako was making ground on us, came up alongside, and then passed. Me, (being the stroke), I thought to myself "I'm not letting these guys take the glory on this race, not with ours being the younger boat. We are never going to live this down", so I picked up our rate, screamed a few cusses and we were off again. (Forgive the competitiveness Ric)

Finally we made it to shore, ahead and happy. Freezing cold and I swear I had, hypothermia setting in. Did I say we were not actually first? We had junior crews that were way faster than us, but it was all good experience. Once on shore we decided (which also became the ritual) that we would head to the hotpools, warm up and then go for a feed. Getting into those pools the first time, our legs were freezing and it stung so badly. But, eventually that went away and everyone started feeling jovial again, reflecting on the race and content that we actually did it without going in.



The crew head out in one of the Tauranga-series events

So, once a month we kept going, working our way up to getting out into the ocean and doing the 18 K races. Only once did a boat go upside down (Waka Mako), but that didn't slow those guys down. The boat was righted with ease and off they went again.

The locals got to know us well and they supported us throughout the series telling us how great we were doing. Occasionally they would shout things from the support boats, cheering us on. It was great knowing people were out there for us.

Thanks to this series we were told we had gone through great training for Raro. Getting used to the ocean swells, knowing when to call, knowing when to push and make the most of the waves. We actually started having fun. The WDBA also gave us official tip training which took the jitters away for those who hadn't done it :D and it was great to watch from on shore. Anyway, thanks Tauranga. Keep up the series, great experience.



The Event...

OK, so Rarotonga was brilliant. Thanks to Al for the idea and thanks to

Jenny for convincing us we could do it, then doing all of the relationship building to get us there!

We took two teams – **Waka Mako** and **Waka Tron**, both open teams. We had Jenny, Dot, Alan, Muzz, Helen and Ric in one crew and Sarah, Maelene, Gin, Dan, Emma and Sheryll in the other team. I think it is fair to say that none of us (Sheryll excepted) had any idea what to expect. We were told that we were seriously under-experienced to be attempting even the 12K Iron event so we set out to get some experience quickly.



We entered the Tauranga Mauauo series to get some rougher water time. The unexpected capsize several hundred metres off Ocean beach was just the sort of experience people were talking about. We learned to rig and unrig wakas, we learned what a S*** Rope was for and how to fit one, we learned how to handle water that isn't as glassy smooth as the river and how to paddle 18K without losing anyone to cardiac arrest.

We arrived at Raro on the Sunday afternoon and managed to find our way to Muri and our accommodation. Loving the warmth and the beautiful lagoon but still terrified of the possibility of paddling out into the Pacific and never coming back. No partying that night (as far as I know) and then a mad rush to get to Trader Jacks for the start of the Mixed Iron race on Monday. I have to say that from shore the sea looked almost mill pond like. Still, not convinced there weren't 6 metre breaking waves out there waiting.

Having found and rigged our wakas we lined up to launch down the ramp next to the pub. Wow, the water was almost the same temperature as the air. Paddle out to the start off the Boiler and wait. Nerves at breaking point after 6 months of preparation. When the flag dropped we were off. Not as



fast as some (the Waka Mako crew are all teenagers!) but not at the back of the bunch. At about this stage we noticed that the boats that had got ahead disappeared for short periods. There really are swells out here. 6K down the coast and round the turning mark. Getting a bit confident now. Surely we can cut this corner a wee bit? Those swells certainly seem to be growing? There was a bit of grumbling from the crew about how close we might be getting to the reef and after asking who was steering this &\$*#\$\$@ waka we did a sharp right turn and got out to sea a bit more. The water is the most amazing colour

and silky smooth to top paddle in. Completely different from anything we had experienced to date.

We finished respectably with a few wakas behind us and proceeded to jump out of the boat in 10 feet of water. There's a pecking order when it comes to your turn to get the boats up the one ramp so the post-race relaxation takes place in the sheltered water in front of Trader Jacks. The island drums are playing and the water is WARM! Once the waka is safely stored across the road, the first order of business is a beer. I have never had a Steinlager Classic that tasted so good or went down so fast. I blame all of the icy mornings and scary Mauauo races.



After that, the week seemed to slip into Island time. Nothing seemed to matter. Sprints at Muri were great fun. What a way to party! One of the highlights was getting the chance to paddle a couple of the wakas back from Muri to Avarua. 12K with no pressure. We stopped and watched fish on the bottom in 50 feet of water. Only the approaching darkness could make us put any real effort into getting there.

Cheesy product placement. Quick! Call Lion for sponsorship...

We watched the crews setting off on the Friday morning round Rarotonga and decided that we would have to come back. That was the next challenge. 43K right around the island including sea changes. Awesome!

Our entry has been accepted for a mixed crew to paddle round the island this year. Now we just need the money, training, fitness and organisation..... Easy!

Ric



...and, that holiday regatta that some paddled at rather than the Hamilton S12s was:

- A place where you could drink pinacolada's from a coconut (DB)
- Been there, got the t-shirt ! What goes on tour stays on tour! But yes, there were some self-inflicted illnesses as well as something dodgy in the water which made for a not-so-pleasant flight back to Auckland (SO)
- a disappointing show of dis-unity by the rebels who went (EP)
- choice!! The water was so clear and warm. (VC)
- where the cool people were (MM)
- a conflict of interests (DH)
- The best beer I have tasted in 20 years! (RG)
- a superb event and location - you have to "go" - some "went" more than others! (JD)

THEN there was the musing on fruit juice by the member with razor sharp teeth and dorsal fins in 'The Letters Home'

Dear Mum,

Well, we are off to Rarotonga. After months of meetings in cafes, pubs, and in travel agents we have all got our passports and are all (mostly!) under the 20kg weight limits for our bags. (Don't be embarrassing mum, stop taking photos. I'm trying to look cool here. What do you mean my shark hat isn't cool?)

I will never diss Air New Zealand again Mum. After the first couple of wines (free!) I was well on the way to getting settled into the rhythm of island life. Thank goodness you told me to pack my sunblock Mum. When we stepped off that plane onto the tarmac, and into the shipping container that was our check-in queue, I thought I was going to melt. The only thing that kept us going was a nice man who played the ukulele and sung to us while we waited to go through Customs, Biosecurity, and Baggage Claim (all in the same room!)

Once we found all our luggage (well, almost all of it, but we found the rest of it again later on, so no worries aye) we were off around the island to get settled into Varas; our home for the next week or so. We are off to have a look at the competition now and I think someone said something about getting stuck into our duty free so I'll try and write again soon.

Love,
Baby Shark xoxox

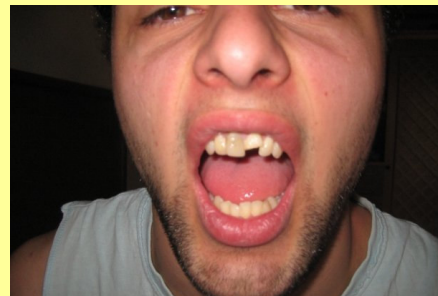
PS: There is this cat that hangs around our rooms like a bad ginger smell. He especially likes Dan - it must be his nurturing nature and soft hands. There is also a Chicken running round with all her little chicken nuggets, cute!

Dear Mum,

Well, today was the big day - the day we proved to all our competition (big, brown, muscular) that Waka Mako and Waka Tron (not so big, not so brown and not so muscular) can do it, and do it well. The conditions were amazing - and once we got out on the water I was mesmerised by its colour! It was, honest-to-god, the exact colour of powerade. In some places you could see the bottom - and it was deep as. The race was good; all those training runs at Tauranga and at Raglan definitely paid off and we did ourselves proud. Now we are off to Trader Jacks for a bit of a de-brief and lord knows what else. I'll let you know how we go!

Love,
Baby Shark xoxox

PS: Last night, Andrew broke his front tooth and now he looks like a hill-billy. Does that make me his sister, or his cousin?



Dear Mum,

I'm going to describe what happened last night, and then run it through a Russian censoring machine so you get the safe version.

After finishing up with our races, we relaxed with several [redacted] at Trader Jacks. Ric had the best [redacted] of his life there and wouldn't stop telling us about it. Once we got back to Varas we congregated around Sarah and Maelene's room (the location for a [redacted] [redacted] later) and feasted on some greasy [redacted] and yummy [redacted]. Al mentioned that Mondays were Techno nights at the Razza so Han, Muzz, Al, Sarah, Mae and I piled in the van with a full pump bottle ([redacted] [redacted]!) and danced the night away. Because of the black lights, my [redacted] went see-through a bit so everyone could see my [redacted] but I remembered to put my fragapani flower in the 'taken' ear so no one gave me [redacted] [redacted], except for Sarah who thought it was [redacted]!

After we left the Razza everything gets a bit hazy, I think Sarah put [redacted] all over the [redacted] [redacted] and I may have fallen down a [redacted]. Ric and Dot got a late night [redacted], and there was a pretty intense game of [redacted] on the beach. Maelene made [redacted] with the security guard and at some stage we got into our beds – all except Sarah, who ended up [redacted] with Al.

I think we're all planning on taking it easy today at any rate.

I hope things are O.K. back home,
Love Baby Shark xoxox

Dear Mum,

Man, we are so hard. We actually are. Today we thought it would be a good idea to attempt to summit Rarotonga. After talking to Sheryll and Vaughn, (they are mucho wiseo to the ways of the Raro tourist) they told us the best way to go about it was to find the guided party and tag along. Pssh. We don't need directions.

After a hard-ish climb to the almost-top (there was a really steep bit at the end that didn't look worth the extra effort) and chatting to the random chicken and rooster we found up there, we decided to make our own way down, following a pipe and what looked like the trail. Well.

Impromptu mountaineering aside, the descent was interesting. Once we finally made it, surprisingly with no major injury, the guide who had taken his lot down the (correct) path informed us that we had taken what is known as the "suicide" path. Understandably we needed a bit of a drink and a sit down.

Tomorrow is the round the island race, the main event and the reason a lot of these people are here. Will be very cool to watch.

Love, Baby Shark xoxox

PS: Han has the plague; it looks like its spreading. I'm keeping a pocketful of posies just in case.



Dear Mum,

Today was the 'fun' day of the festival, with sprints that were semi-formal and fun races afterwards. Andrew even got in the boat and had a go – his changes were a bit messy but at the end he was just as knackered as everyone else.

After the sprints there were races that revolved around either keeping the ama up, running with coconuts, or drinking beer (sometimes in combination). An older gentleman showed how easy it was to shimmy up a coconut tree, and then a drunk ozzie attempted (and very quickly failed) at following him up there. We made the most of the umu that was put on – like a hangi but better because it's Rarotongan! We lost Jen for a while, but she was spotted later on talking to a group of very handsome men. We ended up at Ric and Dot's resort, (Yes! They have a whole resort!) making the most of their tab. I ended up having an early night, still feeling the effects of Monday!

Love, Baby Shark xoxox

P.S: There were several whispers around the island that later on that night, a mysterious sound of a stag roaring was heard by a few drunken paddlers. We still don't know if there was an actual stag or if the paddlers were just really, really, drunk.



Dear Mum,

We watched parts of the round Raro race today – definitely something we'd like to try someday. Unfortunately a couple of the women's crew's got into trouble on the reef but other than that the big race was a success.

Hanging out in downtown Raro is an experience – there are a mix of tourists and locals and everyone is so friendly. The markets are unlike anything I've ever seen – they're actually targeted more at locals than tourists and it's where everyone gets their fresh produce, although there is still a fair amount of overpriced trinkets to be found. I found a very cool paddle necklace (last year's model going for cheap!) and Gin treated herself and Dan to the 2009 version. They are lovely reminders of what we have achieved here.

Love, Baby Shark xoxox

PS: Upon further investigation, what I initially thought were copious amounts of squishy poo in the water around Muri beach is actually some kind of gross sea cucumber. I'm still not keen on them.

Shark facts #74: The writing in these letters is small because:

- Sharks have really good eyesight.
- They are hand, er, fin written, or
- the articles were late and space was limited and baby shark owes me a lot of beer.

Dear Mum,

The plague is starting to spread, so we got out of Varas and went for a drive around the island. We stopped off at the Rarotongan- very very flash- and shared an Island Girl. Quite cheap too at \$25.00, and that thing was massive! We also had a poke around the old Sheraton. It was amazing to see all the waste there - a huge development literally abandoned.

Helen and Muzz went wind surfing today. Limited wind, but looked like heaps of fun from where I was sitting on the beach! There are a few of us who have invested in scooters. Andrew, Helen and I are sharing one and Jen hired one too. They are very cool and while getting my license was an interesting experience (although when Helen got hers it was more interesting again... something about driving on the wrong side of the road for a wee while!) they are a cheap way to get around and are pretty safe despite no helmets.

We are all having a great time, although mostly everyone leaves today. It's amazing how fast it's gone.

Love, Baby Shark

PS: There is a very funny sign on the way to Avarua, listing all the things you need to remember to have a safe night out in Raro. They sure do push safe-sex here!



Dear Mum,

Everyone else has gone-burged. It is just Andrew, Muzz and I in Raro for one hour and 20 minutes today. (Yes, our flight leaves at 1.20am!) We've spent it in the common room of Varas, playing 500 over and over again, since sleep was futile - all the international students were getting merry with the Malibu Muzz couldn't finish, and had put on the 'for anyone' shelf.

We got to the airport and (surprisingly) queued with the crowds wanting, for some reason, to get out of Raro and to NZ. The outgoing bit of the airport was a wee bit more impressive than the incoming (very underwhelming duty-free though...) and once Muzz was stocked up on nicotine to get through the flight, we were off.

See you soon,

Love Baby Shark xoxox

PS: When we left Varas, most of the chicken nuggets were still there... although we are pretty sure that the cat managed to grab one of them.



A 'classic' photo by Tobi Deinlein who raced around the mount to get this photo of the 18km Ocean Race.