

Shahzada 2018

### **My first mini marathon**

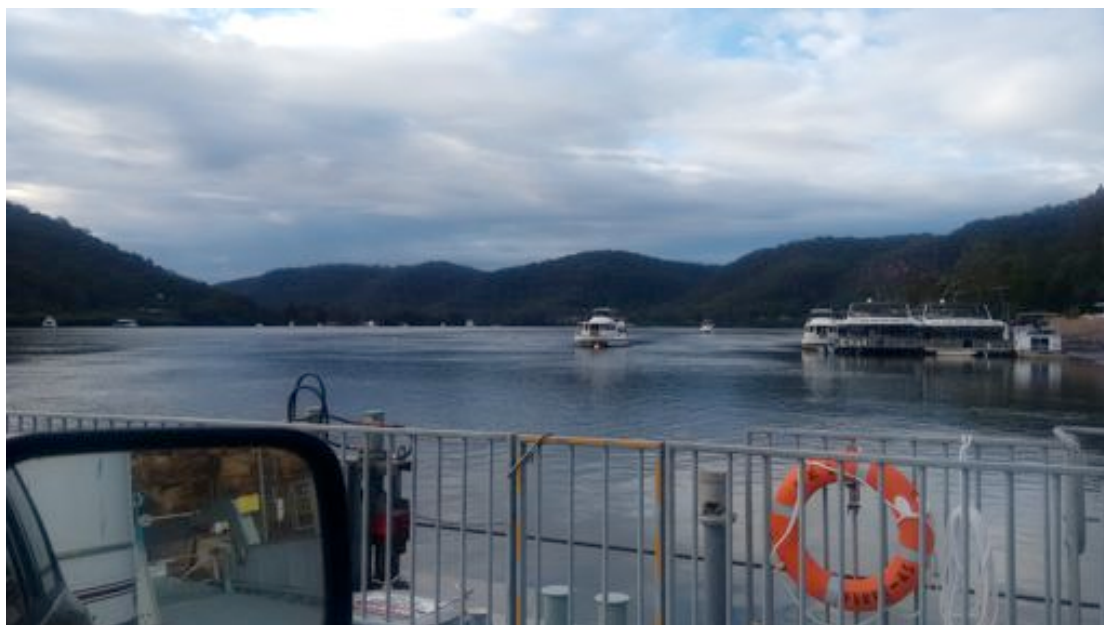
By Dinka Dekaris

I am still not sure what made me decide to attend the famous Shahzada endurance ride this year, a few weeks before it was due to begin. I certainly had not planned for it and was always daunted by the prospect in the past. I guess partly it was all the stress I had been under, both at work and at home, trying to organise all the paperwork needed to obtain a loan to purchase some acreage with my partner. It had all been very taxing and the banks were the opposite of helpful. My work phone and my mobile were constantly ringing, and I dreamed of just disconnecting from it all. The fact that the Shahzada is held in the village of St Albans where there is no mobile phone reception was certainly a bonus in my eyes. Anyway, I figured my horse – Sienna Spirit of Adventure – and I were as fit as we had ever been. We may as well give it a go.

And so, despite any trepidation I still felt, I sent in my forms. The organiser, Sue Todd, is a seasoned endurance rider and a true legend in her own right. Sue answered all of my questions within minutes of receiving them, providing me with much needed encouragement at that crucial stage. Once I had paid my fee the trip became more real and preparations began in earnest. I bought new splint boots for Spirit, a blow-up mattress for my tent, extra hay and hard feed, electrolytes, curash cream and some extra bandages for my horse's first aid kit. I already had the brand new Renegade Viper boots for Spirit's hooves, so I did not have to worry about that. Indeed, on the day I was to travel to the Shahzada, I spent the morning doing some additional paperwork to hand over to council. Then I hugged and kissed my partner, my three dogs and the cat, and drove off to pick up my horse.

The journey to the ride took over five hours, in part because I got lost driving through Sydney. Eventually, though, I found my way to the Old Northern Road. Descending into the valley I caught my first glimpse of the glorious countryside. The Sun shone through the clouds, illuminating the tall eucalypt trees alongside the road, and the blue-green hills beyond. I was smiling to myself, until I came to the steep section of the road that winds its way to Wisemans Ferry. The hair pin turns combined with the very steep grade reminded me of the Kings Highway – a stretch of road I had never taken my float on, because I was so worried about something going wrong. But there was no turning back now. With the little voice in my head muttering “why do you have to do these things”, I slowly made my way down. Soon I was at the bottom and driving onto the ferry. Spirit stomped in the horse float at the unfamiliar movement, so I wound down my window and called out to him: “It's all right, boy.”

Then I took a photo of the river and sent it to my partner. “How cool,” he replied. I sent back a smiley face – it was to be my last text message to him for the next five days.



Some half an hour later I crossed the small bridge that leads to St Albans. I saw the famous Settlers Inn pub and before it, a green park with a children's playground. There were small shacks scattered throughout, with numerous horse floats parked in-between them, on every bit of green space available. People and horses were seemingly everywhere, most of them walking leisurely along the wide grassy verges. Looking around I spotted a sign saying "please report to reception before unloading your horse". I wound down my window and asked for directions from a couple of riders walking past me. And so, at just after five pm, I walked into the office at the Shahzada ride base. I was met by friendly faces and not a hint of criticism at my late arrival. Sue Todd turned up and directed me to my campsite some 50m from the office. There, I was finally able to open the float and lead Spirit out. He put his head down and started grazing immediately. Meanwhile, Sue called out to the people camped nearby: "Hi guys! This is Dinka, please look after her!"

And look after me they did. Over the next few days, Juls, Wayne, Robert, the three young lady riders and their four dogs became my adopted family. On that first night, though, I did not do a whole lot of socialising. After setting up my tent and checking that Spirit was as comfortable as he could be, I took a stroll around the village. At six pm I attended the pre-ride talk by the fire. This formality over, I retreated to my tent and curled up in my doona.

### **Day One - first day of the 400km ride**

Monday began with a wake up call - a loud blaring noise at three in the morning. I managed to get back to sleep, only to wake up again at five am - this time to the sound of many hooves on tarmac. It was a most awe inspiring sound and I loved hearing it. Once the riders were gone, I could hear the rain falling. I turned over and fell asleep again.

I woke up some time later feeling surprisingly well rested. The rain was still coming down, but it was not heavy and did not stop me from doing what needed

to be done. Namely, feeding my horse, cleaning up his yard and getting my bib – with number 241 on it – from the office. By lunch time the rain had pretty much stopped. I took Spirit to the vetting area and got him checked over. He received the go ahead, his heart rate was 38 beats per minute. So far, so good. I headed over to “the barn”, where a simple timber barn was housing a food canteen. In front of it was a large grassy clearing with an equally large fire and chairs all around it. I purchased a chicken schnitzel and sat down next to a lady with a very attractive Australian shepherd dog. It turned out the lady’s name was Pamela and her dog was Ghost. We chatted for a while and then Pamela suggested we do a short ride together, to let our horses stretch their legs.

My ride with Pamela lasted approximately an hour. Half of this time was spent riding, the other half walking. That is because Spirit wanted to race on the way home, while I wanted him to have an easy walk. I resolved the argument by getting off and leading my horse back to base. Despite how it may have seemed, I actually enjoyed that walk. The road we were on was peaceful and wound its way through glorious green paddocks, as well as wooded sections. There was the river, glistening with reflections of the pale afternoon sky. The air was clean and fresh, the way it always is after rain, and I inhaled it gratefully as I strolled along.

That afternoon, lying in my little dome tent, listening to my horse chewing hay, I thought about the ride we were about to do. A full 120km over three days. “Mini marathon” or not, it would be the longest distance I had ever attempted with my horse. I hoped we were both up to it.



*Spirit relaxing in his day yard, with the river on the left. All the buckets and water for strapping ready for the next day.*

### **Day Two – first day of the mini marathon**

This is it, I thought as soon as I woke up on Tuesday. Today it is our turn to ride.

I checked my watch. It was 2am. Best try and get some more shut eye.

I woke up again at 3 and then 4 and, finally, 5am. In pitch blackness, I sat up in the tent and turned on the headlight my partner gave me. It would switch off every time I waved my hand in front of it, but I did not have time to try and fiddle with the settings now. My first task was to put the boots on my horse. With the ground soft and muddy from the previous day's rain, this turned out to be more of a pain than usual. At last though, it was done and the boots were on Spirit's feet. I straightened out slowly and strolled over to the car to get changed into riding gear. After putting on my water backpack and the bib over the top of it – it was important not to have anything obscure the number – I went to saddle up.

It was not until after the ride officially started, at 6.30am, that I remembered I should eat something. Luckily we were heading past my camp site. Still on foot, I jogged back to the car with Spirit in tow, and grabbed an apple from the front seat. But I only ate a few bites of it. The rest I was forced to relinquish to my horse. Oh well. I was not that hungry anyway.

That first start was the most nerve wrecking for me. I was in a large group of riders moving slowly along Wollombi Road, a dirt road leading away from the township. Most everyone was sitting astride their horse, walking and trotting along. Not me, no. I was too busy hanging onto Spirit's reins, trying to keep him from trampling me. *Tell me again why you like this*, the little voice said in my head. I don't know. I honestly don't know, I thought while Spirit pranced and huffed and snorted. Getting on him was not a safe proposition for the simple reason that he wanted to lash out at the passing horses. I had just one option and that was to let everyone move past me. Once we were alone at last, my fiery steed calmed down sufficiently to enable me to get on. But he was still rearing to go. He knew the other riders and their horses were out there, in front of us. I am quite certain he knew exactly how many there were. He was probably counting them as they went past.

It being early morning, the air temperature was quite cool and it added to my horse's excitement. No sooner was I settled in the saddle than he was off, ears pricked, nostrils flaring, chomping at the bit and tossing his head as though to say: "Let me at it, let me run! I want to run!"

"Stay at a trot, please," I said while gripping the reins firmly. Spirit did not like it, but I was quite insistent for two reasons. One, the road surface was hard and too much cantering and galloping would take its toll on his legs. Two, I wanted to preserve his energy and save it for later in the ride. We had 40km to cover on that first day. I tugged a little on one rein, warning Spirit to listen to me.

Grudgingly, with another defiant toss of his head, he obeyed. That is to say, he stuck to a trot instead of a canter-come-gallop. But oh, what a trot it was! Spirit's entire body swung left to right, up and down as he extended each stride, and it was all I could do to match him. Soon I heard a beep from my GPS watch. I looked down in disbelief. We had covered the first kilometre in just over three minutes, the equivalent of almost 20km/h – at a trot. Knowing Spirit as I do, I realised it would be pointless to try and slow him down. So I bounced along quietly and

listened to his noisy breaths and the sound of his hooves striking the ground. Hrrr-hrrr, hrrr-hrrr. All around us, the valley was in the shadow of the nearby hills, but no less magical for it. From the back of my horse I gazed in wonder at the large expanse of green, the cattle grazing quietly, the mist rising from their bulky bodies. In the crowns of the trees that lined the road, birds chirped and flitted about. I looked up at the great blue sky and felt lucky to be here.

It seemed quite some time before we came to the first check point. Here we turned off the main road and onto a dirt road winding its way uphill through the forest. Although the going here was a lot tougher, it did not slow us down. With boundless energy Spirit took on each rise, preferring to canter uphill rather than walk or trot. I let him choose his preferred pace for the most part. Let him burn some energy, the ground was pretty good underfoot anyway.

After a lot of climbing the track we were on levelled out, with one side dropping off steeply. Finally we were out of the shadows and in the glorious sunshine. More than this, through the gaps in the trees I espied the most magnificent views. The kind of views that take your breath away. Gently, I persuaded Spirit to slow down to a walk, allowing me to gaze open mouthed at the shimmering hills below us, the blue haze of eucalypt forests stretching as far as the eye could see. Above us, on the uphill side, the sheer rock formations were equally impressive. The sandstone resembled graceful sculptures with many interesting curves, platforms and miniature caves. In short, I was in the most beautiful, spectacular country I had ever ridden through. I looked down at the clean, pale sand that made up the track. It was so lovely compared to the tough, rocky tracks in Canberra and surrounds.

“Ah, Spirit,” I sighed happily, “I could spend all day here. But we have to keep moving...”

We picked up the pace again and quickly caught up to some of the other riders, giving Spirit the chance to overtake them. This he did with relish, pinning his ears at each horse he passed. Kilometre after kilometre he trotted, cantered and galloped, right until we reached a very narrow goat track leading steeply downhill. I slid off at this point, as did every other rider I saw. Large rocks and boulders were everywhere, and together with trees made for an interesting course with lots of slow going. I unclipped one of the reins from the bridle and let my horse go before me in some spots. In others, I asked him to follow me without treading on me. Each time he stopped as I asked, and I thanked him out loud for his patience. It made some of the other riders smile.

At the end of the descent, we arrived onto open paddocks once again. From here, a lovely, soft track wound its way through some paperbark and eucalypt trees, along a lovely lake on which black swans and white herons could be seen. Riding along at a brisk trot, I kept up a live commentary for Spirit's benefit, describing what I was seeing. Then I spotted the sign for the photographer ahead and urged him into a canter. Seconds later we were back on the main road. This took us back to the village more quickly than I expected.



*Cantering past the photographer on day one.*

With the village in sight, I looked at my watch. We had completed the 40km in a time of four hours and 39 minutes. That was pretty good, considering the slow descent we had to undertake. I was quite pleased and even more so after Spirit vetted through OK, with a heart rate of 42. Day one, done and dusted.

That afternoon, with the Sun shining, I took Spirit to the sandy beach along the river. He has always loved rolling in soft sand and did not miss the opportunity.

This pleasant task completed, I took myself to the showers. The hot water was heavenly after all my daily exertions – the ride itself, strapping the horse, cleaning all the gear, fetching water for the next day, and so on. After my shower I returned to the campsite feeling refreshed and relaxed. With my hair still wet, I sat down on the grass to let the Sun do its work. I brought a Sudoku puzzle book with me to keep me occupied, but I could not really concentrate. Every now and then I would look up and observe Spirit grazing and the four dogs from the neighbouring camp running around playing. The river provided the perfect backdrop to the peaceful scene, making me wish I could somehow capture it all and take it home with me – it would be the perfect antidote to stress and anxiety, that much was sure.

Before nightfall I took Spirit out for another stroll, this time around the village. All the riders / strappers were doing this to help the horses stretch their legs and prevent any tying up. Once it was dark, I put on several extra layers of clothing and my head torch, and headed over to the barn. I ended up missing the pre-ride talk, because I was having so much fun chatting to the villagers around the big open fire. Luckily, we were given the handbook which included a map of each day's ride and the instructions on which number arrows to follow. I remember looking at the map and thinking how tomorrow would be easy, since we had to do just 28 kilometres.

How wrong I was...

### **Day Three – second day of the mini marathon**

The second night at St Albans was very cold, so cold that I ended up sleeping with both the doonas pulled over my head. I slept a bit longer regardless of this, waking up just before 5am. Unzipping the tent flap in pitch blackness, I heard it crackle. That was when I knew everything was frozen outside. My first thought was to simply go back to bed. I shook it off quickly, pulled on my boots and stepped onto the crunchy frozen grass.

“Good morning, boy,” I said to Spirit as I gave him his hay. “Sorry I’m a bit late with your breakfast.”

To my surprise I warmed up within minutes, just by doing a few chores – namely scooping up the poo by the light of my head torch, cleaning Spirit's feet and putting his boots on. By the time I was done, dawn had arrived. I gazed at the white frost that covered everything and thought: “Time to pull out my fleece lined riding tights.” The warmest tights I owned, they were windproof and largely waterproof, too. As I pulled them on I wondered if I would come to regret it later. Maybe so, but right now, I had to have them.

At 6:30am on the dot, we set off from the ride base once more. As before, I was surrounded by other riders, while I walked next to my horse. Yet something was different, I realised. That something was Spirit. Instead of carrying on, prancing or lunging forward, he walked calmly beside me, not bothered in the slightest by the other horses walking and trotting past. Well, what do you know. Greatly

encouraged, I lead him down the main road for only a short time before getting on. The moment I was in the saddle, Spirit sprung forward into a trot. This I took as a good sign, certainly better than having a horse who is too tired to move.

We were trotting along the paddocks not far from the start line when suddenly Spirit shied violently. I brought him under control before turning to see a little Shetland pony trotting up to the fence.

“Silly boy, Spirit. The pony won’t hurt you,” I chastised him. We resumed the nice forward trot without further incident. I was keen to keep moving as there were quite a few riders behind us, and I knew how Spirit hates anyone overtaking him. I was also keen to leave the main road, which was a tar road with not much of a shoulder to ride on. Thanks to the surrounding hills, the road was also in the shade and I greatly desired to be in the sunshine. Although people had told me earlier that my face was still there, I could not actually feel it – I was so cold.

Hrrr... Hrr... Hrrr... clip-clop, clip-clop. On and on we trotted through the frozen landscape, along the road, across the wooden bridge, past some place called the Wombat’s Gully then past a little cemetery. At each kilometre we passed, my GPS watch would emit its quiet beep, telling me how we were tracking. Three kilometres, four kilometres, five. We were just rounding another corner in the road, when I heard the sound of hooves behind us. I half turned in the saddle to signal the other riders to pass.

Then someone said, oh-so-cheerfully: “Did you know you’ve lost a boot?”

What? No. No, I did not know. I had even leaned down to check on the boots a few times, and did not spot anything amiss. But now I leaned down further and realised the lady rider was right. Spirit was missing a boot from his left hind hoof. I cursed silently as I spun him around.

“Did you see where it was?” I asked the rider trotting past me.

“Near the bridge, I think,” she said. I thanked her and set off, back in the direction we came from.

It turned out the lost boot was less than a kilometre from the ride base. Right near that paddock with a pony, where Spirit had shied so violently. I spotted the little orange object on the side of the road, undamaged, upright and very much alone – or so it seemed to my relieved mind. Lonely or not, it was a lovely sight. All the backtracking, with me searching the ground along the way, was not wasted after all. The only downside was, we had lost time. Significant time, in fact. I measured it precisely and so I know our little boot incident cost us 5 additional kilometres and more than 30 minutes of riding time. Within sight of the little village, I dismounted and wrestled to put the boot back on. Then I hopped back onto my confused horse and asked him to go back out on track. He objected at first – I swear I could hear him thinking “but the ride base is just there” – but eventually he relented. We started off again, with all the other riders well in front.



During that entire ride, we never caught up to anyone. Naturally, since we were dead last, there was also no one to overtake us. Thus, Spirit and I did the ride entirely on our own, from start to finish. Our first challenge came in the form of a cement truck roaring up behind us. Sure, the driver slowed down when he saw me, but the noise of his brakes was enough to unsettle Spirit noticeably. I did not fancy having an accident, so I jumped off and held onto the reins while the truck drove past us on the narrow piece of road. There was nowhere to go, no shoulder to walk onto and so put some distance between us and the large truck. Even with me standing beside him to boost his confidence, Spirit trembled all over, his eyes wide with fear. The moment the truck was past us, he leapt forward like a coiled spring. Fortunately, my split reins were long enough to allow him to do this. I let the reins slide through my fingers before pulling him back toward me, all the while talking to him in soothing tones. Inwardly, I cursed. If we had not lost that boot, we would have been off the road before that truck came along.

Sighing with irritation, I swung back into the saddle and moved off with purpose. That purpose being, to finish the ride as quickly as we could. Amazingly, although there was no one in sight to act as encouragement, Spirit seemed to share my resolve. He moved briskly along and past the first checkpoint. Then across some fields and to a large water crossing. The exact point to cross was marked with long stakes, which of course would mean nothing to my horse. The water being quite deep, I experienced a moment's doubt, but I did not let Spirit know this. In other words, I did not make a fuss. Instead I sat quietly and gave him the chance to assess everything for a few seconds. Then, ever so gently, I asked him to move forward. To my surprise he did so readily, stepping boldly through the deep water, deeper than any crossing we had encountered before.

"Good boy, Spirit," I praised him out loud. "You're such a good boy."

We traversed the second sandy bank and made our way onto a quiet country road lined with the most perfect looking paddocks, and some poplar trees. The arrow pointed left, so we turned left and took off at a trot alongside the grassy verge. This soon turned into a lovely, long canter. We passed some horses grazing contentedly in their paddocks. Then, just before another bend in the road, I heard the sound of trucks. No, not again. Fortunately, I espied a driveway nearby, and I rode into it before jumping off.

"It's all right boy," I told Spirit. "I'll be right here, between you and the road."

Three noisy trucks came and went, with my horse looking on. This time, he did not tremble and did not explode into movement when they were gone. Good. That is very good, Spirit. I patted his sweaty neck then hopped back on.

"Let's go," I said. I had this crazy idea that I could make up for lost time by keeping a steady pace. Little did I know.

Soon we came to the second checkpoint. The helpful person told me to head straight up the hill. Despite these marvellous directions I managed to stray onto

someone's driveway, as I simply could not spot the track itself. Forced to dismount in order to search for the markers, I finally spotted some tape tied to the trees. Beside it I found a little goat track, surrounded by shrubs on either side. No wonder I could not see it. Noting how steep the hill was, I made an executive decision to walk up it and give my horse a break. At home I frequently hike with my dogs through the steep hills near our house. *I can do this easily and have a fresh horse at the end of the climb*, I thought.

So, with my horse following behind me, I hiked up... and up... and up. Midway through, in the shade of the eucalypts and banksia bushes, I stopped and took off my possum vest. But there was nothing I could do about my very warm, thermal riding tights. I did not have spare tights to change into.

The bushland sure was beautiful, with a very coastal feel to it. I spotted banksia bushes, wattles, grass trees and several different kinds of eucalypt. It was a wonderful hike and I enjoyed it a lot, right until we came to the big boulders. At first they seemed to be blocking our path. Then I spotted the way through. I had to pause many times just to make sure I was on the right track. And to catch my breath. The climb sure was long, as well as steep. Dressed warmly and with the Sun high in the sky, I worked up quite a sweat. I did not mind, though. I had my water backpack and I was keeping well hydrated. With the air smelling sweet and the gorgeous views of the valley stretching below me, I was happy to be out here. We would have to make up for any lost time later.

After the long, hot hike up that steep hill, I climbed into the saddle determined to start moving more quickly. Alas, it was not long before I had to slow down to a walk once more. The dirt road we were on was wide, but so steep that it made it impossible to trot down – to my mind, at least. As long as we were walking, I figured it made no sense to stay in the saddle. I jumped off again and made my way down the hill on foot.

I lost track of time while moving so slowly, but at some point the ground levelled off at last. Great, I thought, time to move. But then I saw the trail taking off into the bush once more, onto another narrow goat track. This turned out to be the most challenging descent I had ever undertaken with my horse. Dubbed the McKechnies trail, the narrow track was strewn with large boulders, zig-zagging its way down a steep hill. In places, both horse and human had to walk over rocks and jump down from boulders onto the track. It did not help that the surface was a layer of dust as opposed to firm soil. With my mind conjuring images of my precious horse falling and injuring himself, I took it extra slow. Each time Spirit stopped, I stopped as well. I made sure to let him get a good look before asking him to move forward. A few times as I lead the way downhill, I could hear his hooves sliding over the rocks and his great weight crashing down as he made another leap.

"I'm sorry, boy," I said to him without turning around. "If I had known it would be this bad, I wouldn't have brought you here. It's too dangerous and I sure wouldn't want you to get hurt. And for what? So that I could have some fun. I

could never forgive myself if something happened to you. You know? No, it's true. Believe me."

I truly did feel bad for my horse taking him down that hill. But there was no helping it now. We had to keep moving. I apologised to Spirit at least a dozen times along the way, my heart in my throat. I remembered the scene from my favourite movie – The Man from Snowy River – where the hero rides down "that terrible descent". I felt quite justified in describing this as my own "terrible descent", never mind that I was descending at a walk and leading my horse instead of riding him. The danger of slipping was very real and I was truly relieved when we reached the bottom without incident.

In a bit of a daze, I looked over the lush green paddocks we found ourselves in, searching for the next sign to follow. It did not take me long to spot the white square with a number and an arrow on it, nailed to the timber fence not far from where I was standing. I hauled myself into the saddle and set off through the tall grass, no longer caring if we were walking or trotting. The Sun was beating down on us, all the other riders were far in front, and I was painfully aware that our ride time had blown out to something like five hours already. That is much too long for a ride of just 28 kilometres. Not that it mattered any more, because I was too tired to give a damn. And of course, Spirit and I had done five kilometres more than the others, I reminded myself.

I was snapped out of my gloomy thoughts by the sight of the next check point. The 4WD was parked at the end of a nice, flat and very wide dirt road lined with birch trees. Next to it I spotted a familiar figure. I urged Spirit into a trot.

"Hey, 241, I waited for you!" said my friend Myles when he saw us. I could not help but smile. I then explained what had made me so late. How I had to go back and get Spirit's boot.

"You did the right thing by your horse," he said and offered me some lollies. I thanked him, took two of the lollies and went on my way.

The final trot along the gravel road was hot and slow, but Spirit knew where he was now, which meant I did not have to coax him to keep moving. Just one more corner, the next corner. No, the next one. We finally arrived back at ride base a full six hours after the start. When handing me my time slip, one of the ladies commented "that's a full ride... an 80km ride". I nodded and smiled. I was just glad to be back.

Half an hour later, Spirit vetted through OK and we received the go ahead for day three of the mini marathon. After the gruelling hike / ride of six hours, I was a bit worried about a repeat of the experience, so I asked what day three is like. One of the vets had the answer, and assured me it was nowhere near as hard. I had to be content with that. As I lead Spirit to the riverbank and watched him roll in the sand – our daily ritual by now – I told myself I would make sure to take it easy. If my horse looked tired I could always withdraw. We had already had an amazing adventure, regardless of how the next day turned out.

That afternoon I enjoyed my hot shower more than I can say. After drying off, I applied Voltaren cream liberally to the sore parts of my body: thighs, gluteus, hamstrings, calf muscles and anywhere else I could reach. I pulled on a pair of light tights more appropriate for the warm, sunny afternoon, and made my way slowly to the barn. After some hot chips and a bacon and egg roll, I made my way equally slowly back to Spirit. I palpated his back and found two sore spots in the area just behind the saddle. Someone later told me this was due to the heat build up. Gently I applied Voltaren cream to the area, as well as some Rapigel to his legs. Then I sat down on the grass and relaxed. One of my neighbours soon came by to join me. As he sat there, Spirit put his head through the fence and tried to take hold of the beer bottle.

“You better watch him,” I said with a laugh. “I once gave him a bit of beer and he absolutely loved it.”



*Spirit enjoying the sunshine after the second day's ride.*

Later that afternoon I did a bit of shopping, buying a new red halter for Spirit and a red water bucket. Then I joined the throng of people walking their horses around the village. It was good for my muscles, too. Better than sitting down and letting myself get stiff and sore.

In the evening, with Spirit rugged up against the cold, I headed back to the big fireplace next to the food barn. I missed another pre-ride talk while chatting to my new found friends, including a lovely man named Sahaj, who was 71 years old and had spent a full 45 years in the valley. It was lovely talking to him, and equally lovely to see the villagers reconnecting.

“Oh, hello Sahaj! I haven't seen you in ages!” was a common cry, followed by much hugging and laughter. And as the evening progressed there were more such greetings to be observed: young and old, singles and couples, the people gathered, embraced, chatted and smiled. That Wednesday evening, the circle was

full and everyone was enjoying themselves. Sahaj and I talked at length about the village, its history, about living on the land, about life. The flames flickered and danced and threw a warm glow over the scene, making it seem positively idyllic. Sitting there with a hot doughnut in hand and good people all around me, I thought how fortunate I was to be there. It was a feeling that remained and that I still carry with me, weeks later.

As wonderful as the evening was, I could not stay too late. Shortly after 8pm the weariness caught up with me. I said my farewells, walked over to the public phone box and called my partner to say good night – another daily ritual. Back at the campsite, I fetched Spirit's woollen rug from the back of the car. By the flickering light of the head torch – it was still turning off each time I waved a hand before it – I brought the rug into my tent and spread it on top of the two doonas. I was already wearing my riding tights, tracksuit pants, a T-shirt, a jumper, a possum wool vest and a poncho. Now I added a woollen hat, fingerless gloves and extra thick socks. Then I crawled into my bed and attempted to read the book I had brought. I read one page before deciding my hands were cold. I put the book down, turned off the torch... and fell asleep more or less instantly.

#### **Day Four – third day of the mini marathon**

It was 5am, a fact I ascertained by pressing a button on my GPS watch to illuminate the dial. I lay there in pitch blackness for a few minutes more, stretching my legs experimentally. Then, slowly, I sat up and turned on my little head torch. This time I managed to press the right button, so that the light no longer winked out when I waved my hand in front of my face. Bonus! With the torch on my head, I looked around me. Everywhere the light shone, the inside of the tent sparkled like crystals in a magic cave. Wow, I thought. How cool...

Of course, this meant it was going to be another freezing start to the day. I braced myself for the cold air, unzipped the tent and stepped outside. Slipping on my warm winter gloves, I made the short trip to Spirit's yard and fed him his breakfast. I then busied myself by picking up poo, working quickly to help me get warm. In next to no time I had the yard clean. I pulled on Spirit's boots and checked my watch. Five thirty in the morning. The first light of day was dawning and I still had plenty of time to saddle up. I grabbed an apple and walked over to my neighbour's camp a few metres away. Standing around their fire to get warm, I explained how I had time to spare today.

"Ahead of schedule, eh?" Wayne joked. I nodded.

"Tomorrow I am going to sleep in," I said. "And if everything's frozen again, I'll just stay in bed."

Everyone agreed with the sentiment. We stood and chatted for a while longer, before getting on with our preparations. I took extra care when saddling Spirit, swapping the saddle blanket for a clean one and adding an extra memory foam pad under his saddle. Then I fetched his fancy Arabian halter and slipped it on

under the bridle. I had brought it to use on the final day, being dress up day. The theme this year was Halloween and my own costume comprised of tights with a printing of bones, a matching tank top and gloves. I packed the gloves into a little pouch that I clipped onto the saddle. There will be plenty of time to put them on later. For now I will use the thick winter gloves. I filled up my water backpack and slipped it on, followed by my number bib. Briefly, I debated with myself whether I should remove the “tush cushion” from my Pandora saddle, as it could rub over long distances. I decided against it, mainly because I was convinced it would be a slow ride, which was when the cushioning was needed.

As it turned out, I was wrong about the speed of the ride.

Six thirty in the morning, the curious procession of Halloween-themed horses and riders set off. I spotted several clowns, a witch, a grey horse dressed as a dragon, with green spikes along its mane. I was walking with Spirit the way I always do, and when I looked back at him I noticed a layer of thin ice had formed on the saddle. Lucky for me I kept the tush cushion on, it was made of fabric and would be a lot nicer to sit on. Spirit did not seem to mind the cold, indeed he was quite calm as he walked beside me with his ears pricked. I knew I could get on him straight away, but remembering the incident from the previous day, I made sure to walk him past the paddock with the scary pony. Along the way, I checked his boots multiple times. All seemed in order. Right, time to get on.

Desperate to keep my face warm, I wrapped my scarf around it. It worked, kind of – but there was nothing I could do about my toes. They felt frozen, like the valley we were in. The air was crisp and still, and I knew it would be some time before the clear blue sky delivered on its promise of a warm and sunny day. Yet none of these minor discomforts diminished my joy at being out here, riding through the gorgeous countryside on my equally gorgeous horse, on our way to completing the famous mini marathon. Look, there, the mist rising from the river. And there, a kookaburra sitting on a fence. How great it must be to live here.

Kilometre after frozen kilometre, my horse moved forward at a fast trot, his back swinging underneath me with each springy step. We passed the first checkpoint, turned onto a dirt road and came to a gate where I had to dismount to open it and close it behind us. From there, the dirt track took us uphill and through a forest of tall eucalypts, ensuring we stayed in the shade. I let Spirit choose his pace. He slowed to a walk on some steep sections then cantered up others. At length the track levelled out, giving him the opportunity to recover. We were walking along in a very relaxed manner when suddenly, I saw one of Spirit’s ears swivel backwards. In the split second before he sprung into a trot, I caught the distant sound of hooves behind us.

From that moment on, our pace increased dramatically.

Clearly determined not to be overtaken, Spirit trotted and cantered along the undulating trail, the sound of his hooves echoing noisily in the morning stillness. I was glad when we finally burst into the sunshine, but I had little time to enjoy its warmth. I was too busy moving forward with my horse, keeping my balance

without hindering him. We caught up with other riders and overtook them without a pause, though I did recognise one of my heroes – Ben Hudson – in his mask, and waved hello. Ben yelled out something about my costume, I tried to reply that I had my special tights on as well as gloves for later, but I doubt he heard me.

Uphill and downhill Spirit trotted and cantered, and I never once tried to pull him back. We were of a single mind, a single spirit, the spirit of adventure moving forward like an unstoppable...

“Whoa, Spirit,” I said as I noticed the rider in front of me move off at a fast canter, her horse obviously spurred on by the noise of our approach. “We can stay behind her, she’s moving quickly enough.”

If my words had any effect, it was not noticeable. Before I knew it, we were hot on the other horse’s heels and any attempt to pull back was in vain. Hrrr-hrrr! Hrr-hrr! Spirit’s breaths came in noisy bursts, his hooves thundering along the hard ground. I tried to keep a respectable distance from the other horse, but each time the gap between us widened, Spirit sped up. Eventually, I saw the lady rider turn around in her saddle.

“Would you like to go past us?” she asked politely.

“I think so, yes,” I replied and gave Spirit his head. He pinned his ears as we galloped past and I barely had time to register the sheer drop off and the cliffs to our right. Then we were in front, with no one barring our way. Ok, Spirit, are you happy now?

My relief at being in the lead was short lived, because it soon became apparent that the mare we overtook – she was a mare, I later found out, ridden by a lovely lady called Geraldine – was not happy to be left behind. As she raced to catch us, Spirit pinned his ears some more and took off like a shot. I did not really mind at first, but when the track took a turn downhill and Spirit failed to slacken his pace, I panicked. What if he tripped and fell? People were always telling me not to gallop my horse downhill. Slightly unbalanced and with my heart in my throat, I tugged and pulled on the reins, one at a time. It was no use. Thundering down hill at full speed, Spirit was unstoppable. I could either go with him, or fight him and possibly fall off. So I went with him, clinging to his neck like a woman possessed.

“Relax, Spirit,” I told him, when I had regained the power of speech. “Just relax.”

Then, for some reason I cannot name, I started singing: “Relax, don’t do it... na-na-na-na to it... Relax, don’t do it...”

The singing calmed me down somewhat and when we headed uphill again – still at a gallop – I knew the worst was over. Soon after, I heard the galloping hooves behind me. So that is why my horse galloped out of control! I half turned in the saddle to see Geraldine hanging onto the reins, much as I had been doing.

“Do you mind if we go past you?” Geraldine asked, a little pale in the face.

“Go ahead, please,” I replied. Then, a little apologetically: “They seem to be egging each other on.”

Cantering past me, Geraldine rolled her eyes. “Jesus! Are they ever!” she said and took off.

Thankfully, the uphill climb slowed Spirit enough to let them gain a bit of a lead. Just before the next check point the going got tougher still, and so I reached the next checkpoint at a walking pace.

“Two for the price of one,” I called out to Myles – my little joke on my number, 241. Myles asked me which way I wanted to go, since I had the choice between the steps and the valley.

“The steps,” I said firmly. I had heard too much about the steps to not try them. Besides, I knew the route via the valley was several kilometres longer.

After passing the checkpoint we traversed a steep rocky section. At the top of which I slid out of the saddle to give Spirit a break. It sure felt good to stretch my legs after the hard riding I just did. I patted Spirit’s glistening neck and let him rub his face on me before strolling forward. The path we were on was soft and the surrounding trees offered shade that was welcome, now that it was warm. A few minutes later I climbed into the saddle again and urged Spirit into a trot. Very soon after that, we came to another marker pointing a way off the dirt road and uphill through bushland. The track was narrow, but fairly open and easy going, so I stayed on and let Spirit pick his way through. The trees were shorter here, letting in a good amount of sunshine and offering glimpses of the valley far below. And so, with Spirit making his way carefully along – he has always been a slow walker and very clever on his feet – I sat back and enjoyed our surrounds. Occasionally when my horse had to climb a rock or traverse a steeper section of the track, I leaned forward and grabbed onto his mane. Then I relaxed once more and thought how great it was to be alive.

The steps were not labelled or marked in any way, but I knew we had reached them when I saw the first of the large boulders. Beyond it, the ground dropped sharply away, making it difficult to spot any kind of path. Eventually, I found it – a narrow dirt track sandwiched between two giant pieces of rock and curving out of sight below us. I took a step down into this crevice and looked back up at my horse. What a great photo this would make, I thought to myself. Spirit stood on a large boulder at the top of the track, with the bright green bushland all around him, looking absolutely beautiful.

“You look great, you know that?” I said, smiling. “I wish I’d brought a camera.”

From his great height on top of the boulder, Spirit gazed down at me doubtfully. If he could talk, I am sure he would have said: “Are you crazy, woman? I am not going down there.”



“I know,” I said, answering him. “But trust me, this is the way.”

I have had Spirit since he was a weanling and I knew his trust in me was strong. But as he took a step forward and followed me into the narrow space, I felt a pang of fear. Please be careful, my beautiful boy. I could not bear it if something happened to you.

With utmost care I negotiated my way down the infamous steps – a combination of huge stone ledges, narrow dirt tracks and smaller rocks strewn along for an added challenge. It did not help matters when my left thigh seized up in a cramp. Leaning on my horse for balance, I grabbed my ankle and did my best to stretch out the throbbing muscle. Then I exhaled slowly.

“Ok, I’m ok,” I said. “Now please, follow me exactly.”

We proceeded downhill at a snail’s pace, me hopping from one step to another – this was the only way to prevent that thigh from seizing again – and Spirit following behind me. The previous day I learned that my horse will indeed try to follow my footsteps and that, should I try to step aside to let him past, he was bound to follow. On day two, this had led to him being balanced precariously on some small boulders. Today, I made sure not to put him in the same position. I threaded my way through carefully, leaving enough of a gap to allow Spirit to take a leap and skid to a stop behind me.

It seemed an interminably long time before we reached the bottom. At the same time, I was surprised to see the ground levelling off, with no sign of any spectators or anyone to commemorate the moment with a photo. Oh well. At least we made it all the way down the infamous steps safely! I gave Spirit a pat, checked the girth then climbed back on board. Prior to taking the steps I had swapped my gloves and now had my Halloween gloves on, with their skeleton print. The photographer happened to be just around the corner from the base of the steps, and so we got our photo on day three. Now all that remained between us and the ride base was a relatively flat stretch of dirt road.



*Our Halloween costume. On the way home at the end of the third day's ride.*

There was not much shade on that road at that time of day, but despite the heat and having done more than 40 kilometres already, my horse trotted along with his head held high, ears pricked forward. Occasionally he broke into a canter and I let him, even though I have never been a fan of cantering on hard ground. Some five kilometres from the finish line we caught up with Geraldine and her mare once more. The sight added wings to Spirit's feet, except this time I managed to keep him at a trot. We then passed Sue Todd and her riding companions going the opposite way, as they headed out on the second leg of their 80km ride. I smiled at Sue with fresh appreciation for her efforts. I also smiled because we were almost home and I knew we had made it. We were about to complete the Shahzada mini marathon!

An hour or so later, after strapping Spirit and taking him to the vetting area, it was official: my horse and I had successfully completed all 120km. At the final trot out with the vets giving us the thumbs up, people clapped and cheered and I felt on top of the world. First, I took Spirit to the river and let him roll in the sand. Then I headed over to the phone box.

"Hi, Mum!" I yelled exuberantly. "We're finished!"

"What?" I heard Mum say. "The entire 50 kilometres?"

I smiled to myself.

"Yes," I said, adding: "Actually, we finished at noon. It just took a while to get vetted through etc."

My partner had a similar reaction and was very happy to hear that I would be back the next day – one day earlier than planned. The change in plans was due to the freezing night temperatures. For as much as I loved the sunny afternoons in St Albans, I had come to dread the sub-zero nights. I longed for the comfort of my bed and the warmth of our little home. I also missed my partner and the rest of my furry family more than I could say.

“I love you,” I said to my partner, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Now it was time to truly relax, for all of the riders who had completed the mini marathon. While the true grit riders were still out on track, us mini marathoners could take a shower, change into clean clothes, grab some hot food from the barn, and most importantly – gather at the vetting area for the dog races.

Oh, it was the most enormous fun to be sitting there in the Sun, watching dogs and their owners line up for the race. At the sound of “get, set, go” everyone sprang forward – in every direction. Dogs yelped excitedly, leaping this way and that, so that some of the people tripped and fell, eliciting much laughter from the spectators. At last, though, the group made its way out of the vetting area and down the street. Then left into another street and up a small hill – silently I admired those who had completed a ride today and now were running with their dog – and back home. We clapped and cheered as the winner was named, the dogs received their medals and photos were taken.

The dog race over, it was time for more shenanigans. Namely, the costume parade of the dogs. There were categories for the scariest dog, the hairiest dog, the dog that looked the most like its owner. I was proud that my neighbour – the blonde girl by the name McKenzie – won this latter category with her blonde dingo-look-alike dog. It was a hugely entertaining event all in all, with dogs big and small parading around in various costumes. I counted two spider-dogs – where spider legs were attached to the dog, making it seem like a giant spider – as well as Mario Brothers costumes, two little dogs with toy riders, and a fluffy dog with a unicorn on its back. The unicorn was bloodied with a knife through it, which made us all squint and stare until we worked out what it was. I joked that my little dog, a cross between a Jack Russel and Shitzu, could easily win one of the categories, and perhaps I should enter her picture.

I spent the remainder of the day relaxing with Spirit and taking him for walks around town. In the evening I headed for the barn with its big open fire once more. Sahaj was there, as were many of the riders, people I now considered friends. We sat around the fire, ate good food and chatted, and I caught myself wishing this was not my last night at the Shahzada. I knew I would miss the evenings by the fire and its warm glow, a glow that was matched by the smiles of those around me.

As I type these words weeks later, I can vouch for their correctness. And yet, whenever I think back to that time by the fire, I do not feel sad. I just feel glad.

## Day Five – the ceremony

Friday was the final day of the 400km Shahzada endurance ride, but for us mini marathoners it was the day of the ceremony. I was told to assemble with other successful riders at the village green opposite the vetting area, and to bring my horse, of course. I got up at six am, a real luxury compared to the previous days. Another luxury was the temperature, which remained above freezing and seemed positively balmy to most of us. After cleaning up Spirit's yard and feeding him breakfast, I removed his rug and took him for a leisurely walk along the river and through the village. We then had to wait until 10:30am for the ceremony. Not wanting to put a dirty rug on my shiny horse, I left him without a rug. For once, he chose to simply stand and look around him instead of rolling in the dirt. Did he know what was coming and chose to stay clean? I doubt it. But it was nice of him to co-operate, for once.

At the appointed time I filed into the designated area with the other riders and their horses. I felt ridiculously happy to be there, it was almost like a dream. Spirit stood beside me sporting his new red halter, quite indifferent to it all, trying to graze the few tufts of grass at his feet. I tried and failed to remain calm as the names of riders and horses were called. Deep inside me the feeling of joy battled a host of other emotions, chief amongst them pride at my horse and our achievement – the achievement that began many years ago. I thought back to when Spirit was just a little weanling, following me around at liberty, nuzzling me for a treat. Now here he was, standing with me, waiting to receive his prize. He truly was a champion, my little Arab with the large doe eyes.

Ten or more riders were called and stepped forward to a round of applause. And then it was our turn. My heart beat loudly in my chest as I heard them say:

“Dinka Dekaris riding Sienna Spirit of Adventure.”

*Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry* – was all I could think as I walked up with Spirit. My Spirit. My beautiful, beautiful boy. Hastily, I blinked back tears as emotion welled up in me once more.

It was fortunate no one asked me to give a speech, or I assuredly would have burst into tears, so overwhelmed was I at the time. As it was, I was able to smile and receive the large blue sash and our log book, without the dam inside me spilling over. Better still, at the crucial moment when the camera went click, I looked up at Spirit – and so our final photo shows me smiling at him, which is as it should be. What the photo does not show are the words I recited silently, words I say at the end of each and every day:

Thank you for the joy, beautiful boy. I love you.



*Dinka Dekaris and Sienna Spirit of Adventure receiving the blue sash for a successful completion of the Shahzada mini marathon. A very proud moment.*

The rest of the day passed as though in a haze. The drive back lasted more than five and a half hours, in large part due to a terrible downpour that descended on us unexpectedly. We made it back safely, though, for which I felt immensely grateful. Leaving Spirit snug in his rug and his hay net full of delicious hay, I made the final short drive home and fell into my partner's arms. Then I hugged each of the dogs and the cat, too. I jumped up and down and showed off our blue sash – Spirit's sash that he earned by carrying me around safely for a full 120km. I suddenly found I was crazy with excitement, as I tried to relay everything that had transpired in the past week. I was full of plans for the future, too. I was happy, so happy I could scarce describe it.

My burst of energy did not last long, it goes without saying (I know everyone who attended the Shahzada would know this, so I had to come clean). Around eight pm that evening, as my partner snuggled with me to watch a movie, I looked at my watch and whispered wearily: "Just so you know, I'm not going to stay awake much longer..."

More than a month later, as I reflect on the experience, I can say with certainty that my Shahzada journey has changed me. It was as much an emotional journey as a physical one. A time of discovery, a time of bonding with my horse and forging new friendships. I know now that I am tougher than I think, I know my horse is even more amazing than I thought, and that early starts are good for you. Most of all I know I will be back at St Albans the next time the Shahzada rolls around. Because this ride? This is one ride that you simply must not miss...