

Joe Stringer, Four Peaks Yacht Race, Hong Kong, 27- 28 January 2024

In 2023 I etched out something of a sporting niche for myself. Well, making that claim is a bit of a stretch, I should probably add. I took part in a couple of niche sporting events, with a niche sailing and running format. Firstly, the incredible Scottish Islands Peaks Race (SIPR) about which I have already written a long account, and then the swashbuckling Castles and Islands race in Northumberland. While that race doesn't involve any fells, unless we can consider sand dunes, to my mind it certainly embodies a spirit fell racers would find familiar.

It was after the SIPR that an old school friend called Tom, who lives in Hong Kong, contacted me and told me about a race over there with a similar format - The Four Peaks Yacht Race organised by the Aberdeen Boat Club. Tom owns and skippers a boat, and invited me to go out and be part of the team he was putting together to enter the race. Having never travelled to that part of world, I jumped at the prospect of adventure! Also on board was another old school friend, and my regular running partner Jonny Graham, with whom, amongst many other adventures, I completed a successful two-up Bob Graham Round.

Apparently, the Four Peaks was originally inspired by the Three Peaks Yacht Race in the UK, and first ran (and sailed) in 1985. It involves 5 sailing legs totalling about 90 NM, (flexing here with a bit of sailing terminology I don't *fully* understand) and 4 running stages covering about 40km with roughly 3000m climbing (I just about understand this terminology). You could maybe think about an AL fell race, chopped into four parts, with sailing and kayaking in between. The Four Peaks begins at 10:30am and goes through the night with the average finishing time around 24 hours.

Before describing the race, this was my first trip to Hong Kong. It's an incredible place and the scale of it is staggering. I didn't realise how skyscrapery it was going to be, but it is in fact, the most skyscrapery city in the world. The skyscraperyness seemed even more pronounced because a lot of the time I was looking upon it all from the sea, or from the top or bottom of a hill, of which there are many. One thing Hong Kong is not without, is mega views.

The physical geography of Hong Kong is interesting. There is little flat land, and almost any that there is, has been heavily built upon, much of it reclaimed from the sea. You're very quickly into some rugged terrain, as the majority of the rest of the place consists of hilly country parks covered in fairly dense vegetation.

We were staying in Sai Kung to the east of the New Territories. Here, we had easy access to hills like 'Ma on Shan', the Sai Kung country park, and the MacLehose trail, one of the well-established hiking trails running right across Hong Kong. Most of the slopes of the hills we ran were covered in jungle (we avoided the snakes and monkeys but did spot wild boars and a huge porcupine). We had to climb up a few hundred meters before we could get out of it and experience open sky and views. Because of the overgrowth we had to stick to established trails, which are mostly well built and maintained, often including sections of concrete staircases in places lower down. Not bad for going up, but I always found myself longing for a gentle, heathery expanse, where after picking a point in the distance, I could switch off the head, open up the legs and enjoy a quick descent.



Recce run up Ma on Shan



The top of Ma on Shan

I arrived a few days before the race to acclimatise, hopefully overcome any jetlag, and do some recces of the hills. I just about achieved all this at the same time as being swept along in the whirlwind of my friends 100mph lifestyle of business class lounges, moving house, collecting new cars, and various sophisticated social amusements at private members clubs, and swanky yacht clubs. The highlight of this was listening to a wonderful entertaining talk about sailing in the Philippines and North Pacific by a former investment banker. He opened the talk by saying, "You all know what it's like – you've made a bob or two and think to yourself, what shall I do now? Well, sail around the world I guess...".

"You all know what it's like" - LOL - I'm sitting there thinking I literally can't get my head around the logistics of how I'm going to save up for a pair of the new Inov8s that have just come out. Still, sitting in an exclusive yacht club though aren't you Joe? The irony was not lost on me. The whole thing was fantastic, and just one example of a favourite element of the trip, stepping into a totally different world for a short spell of time.



Skyscraper view from the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club

Anyway, about the race. We started on the water, with the 20 boat fleet assembling in Tai Tam Bay and sailing to Port Shelter in the New Territories. With light winds it took us four-and-a-half hours to sail 21NM averaging 4.6kn. From there Jonny and I kayaked ashore and ran 15km up and down Ma On Shan (702m) before paddling back to the boat and sailing to Repulse Bay to begin the next running leg up Violet Hill (436m). By this time darkness and drizzle had descended. Out at sea, and up on deck it was a bit cold but the temperature on land was pretty much ideal for running, although the consensus amongst the local runners seemed to be that it was freezing, as most of the other teams were wrapped up in winter kit. There were a few comments concerning the vests and shorts we were in but after a time I gave up with the responses about how this was nice and warm compared to the UK and enjoyed accruing a few easy hardness points.

Once the Violet Hill stage had been tackled and we'd kayaked back to the boat, we had a five-and-a-half-hour sail to Lantau Island to scale Lantau Peak (934m). This was one of the more demanding runs with the most climbing, going from sea level to the summit in around 5km. It was also just after 4am when we waded ashore, ditched the kayak, and started the run, so fatigue was starting to creep in. The light winds resulted in more time to rest below deck between runs, where I managed to eat well and lie still with my eyes shut for a good while but never getting any sleep. We gave a good account of ourselves on Lantau, overtaking a couple of other teams, and in the end, clocking the third fastest time on that stage.



Getting ashore at Repulse Bay

After Lantau we sailed into the daybreak and to Lamma Island to get up and down Mount Stenhouse. I'm not sure if at 353m this technically can be classed as a mountain, but it certainly had its fair share of steep, scrambly climbing and thick jungle to negotiate.

Again, we managed to catch and overtake another pair of runners on the descent. The marshal at the peak control point had told us they were the runners from the third-place team, which provided extra motivation, and a bit of extra fun, as we attempted to hold them off. Our aim was to get back on our boat before they got on theirs, and get a head start in the water, to finish in a podium position.

I kept thinking about these little video clips this girl used to post online, where she would wind her boyfriend up. It was easy for her to achieve this because the poor lad was as thick as a submarine door. On one clip she asked him - "if I'm in a race and overtake the person in 3rd place, what place will I be in?" and he just can't figure it out. That's pretty much where I was at by this point as well.

We just about managed it, and crossed the line shortly after midday, 25.5 hours after setting off, to take third place in our 'Division A' boat category. There was a 'Premier' class above us, for bigger, faster boats, some of which finished five hours earlier, but we weren't competing against them, so our team were all delighted with finishing on the podium.

Official results were announced a few days later, and an award ceremony at the Aberdeen Boat Club was held on the Friday after the race. Less of the muddy feet, and paper cups of soup in village halls, I'm used to, and more corporate sponsors, all-world buffets, and media interviews. It was a top night though, and by the time of the prize giving night we'd had plenty of time to look over the data and analyse our performance.

Something I'd anticipated about this race, which I'd learned from the SIPR, was that the odds were stacked firmly in favour of the best sailors, and the race would be won and lost at sea. This swung my way at the SIPR, where I finished ahead of far superior runners, but in Hong Kong I had the opposite experience from a runner's perspective.

One major difference with this race was that your official running time started, not when you began running, but when you got off the boat and started kayaking ashore. Timing stopped when you got back on the boat. There was also no single prescribed landing point where the running legs started, with the kit checks happening on the peaks. Instead, there were 'landing zones' covering large areas of coastline. These provided a range of options for getting ashore, some of which would add a significant distance to the run. Unfortunately, we didn't get this right as a team – a couple of our kayaking transitions were over a mile, and we didn't pick the optimum landing/pick up point on a couple of stages. As a result, our running times on some of the individual stages were misleadingly low down in the results. Being philosophical in defeat, it's the tactics that make these kinds of races interesting, if not fun. It's great when it goes your way, and hard lines when it doesn't. It's a good job that I've had plenty of defeats to make me *really* philosophical.

After all that I was still the second placed runner over all four running stages, the top spot being awarded to Hong Kong local, professional trail runner, and previous winner of the race, Eszter Csillag. I would have liked to have done better on some individual stages but was very happy with second on the 'general classification'. The icing on the cake was race organisers and sponsors making a fuss of me at the awards night, as the 'top international runner' who 'battled freezing temperatures'. Again, I kept my opinion on the real weather conditions to myself.

Overall, it was an incredible trip and an enjoyable race. Hong Kong is a great place to visit for the sights and sounds, and for a variety of pursuits including running up hills. It's a good job really because I'd definitely go back, and the consensus among my team was that we have unfinished business with the Four Peaks Race!



The good ship Rock Steady