

The city of a thousand towers spread out before me as I stood above the 189 stairs of Prague Castle. I had flashbacks to last year with stair way lined with hundreds of screaming Czechs as I strolled down to the restaurant under the glow of the city lights. Tomorrow would be in stark contrast to tonight's tranquility.

I was in Prague, Czech Republic for the 17<sup>th</sup> annual 'Prazske Schody', an invitational exhibition on 9 June based around Prague Castle and the political core. The centre of Prague is one of the most beautiful suburban areas I've visited. The home of 1.9 million Czech's, the capitals heart is calm, rich in history, deep culture and exclusive style, not losing it 12<sup>th</sup> century aura amongst the modernisation. Its history is laden with battles, political triumphs and disasters, times of wealth, great suffering and waves of industrial success. The stones of every tower, church and alley hold memories of a long and decorated past. The once capital of Czechoslovakia, it avoided much of the conflict of the German occupation except when the Americans inadvertently bombed the city in 1945 after mistaking it for the German city of Dresden over 100km away.

While the opportunity to experience Prague was not to be missed, the chance to join a few of the worlds top riders in the events surrounding the race was the highlight. A few of the guys I'd met here last year and at other races and it was cool to hang out in such an awesome location. Since it's not a UCI event and just an 'exhibition', the atmosphere is very relaxed and everyone is a little more easy going than they otherwise would be.

The start list for the race included Swiss Champions Florian Vogel and Christoph Sauser, Belgian world champion Roel Paulissen, Frenchman Cedric Ravanel, Czech and World Cup front runner Jaroslav Kulhavy and another 30 of the country's best professional riders including cyclo-cross world champions. The start list also included two cross-country skiing Olympic medalists from Vancouver. "Please Ben, be careful not to ride on their ski's" whispered my Czech friend Ivan Rybařík at the mornings race meeting. The mood was easy.

In the hotel looking over St Vitus Cathedral, I spent the afternoon relaxing, trying to catch up on sleep and still recovering from the Vysocina stage race that finished on the Sunday before today's Wednesday start. I was still a little 'cooked'. We had lunch in the restaurant opposite the start line and watched as the atmosphere started to build. TV cameras went up and music began echoing through the streets as general activity increased.

Before long it was time to suit up and greet the cobblestone beast who waited to once again unleash pain and suffering on everyone who rode it. At just 1450 metres long the circuit is quite short, but fits in a massive 60 vertical metres of climbing per lap. With around 19 laps expected for the 60-minute contest, it's a cross country races' total climbing packed into one tough hour.

Ivan and I set out for a few laps. We started with the stairs. All 189 bone jarring stairs. Running fairly light and narrow tyres doesn't help with the vibration, but it's a necessary evil in order to climb a little faster. After the stairs it's down through the cobblestone streets reaching 50km/h at race pace, shooting into a tight archway with a right angle corner on slippery tiles to exit. From here the climbing begins. First with a gentle gradient through a small, quaint street then turning up a steep cobblestone passage to the street above. Traction is an issue in the dry, such is the steepness. The climbing continues up the street and turns back on itself to finally traverse to the top, before plunging down the stairs once more.

This year threatened to hold an additional challenge. The grey sky above was predicted to open up sometime during the race. We had a taste of what we could expect as the rain fell lightly during our last few practice laps. Suddenly it was as if the streets had turned into an ice rink. I descended the stairs and then the fast street descent with a bunch of guys who were going around 70% of race speed. Back wheels locked, feet were out and tyres were sliding as none of us made the downhill right angle corner, instead coming to a stop some way down the street. Clearly rain meant certain peril.

It wasn't just the descent that was an issue, it was also the climbing. At one point it was like trying ride up the Vancouver bobsled track. "This could turn into a very good 'spectator' day," I thought.

A brass band played as we were called to the line. TV camera's rolled as riders were interviewed on the start line in very untypical race circumstances. Politicians and VIP's posed for photographs as the atmosphere began to heat up.

We stood on the line with wet stones under our feet but with the sun making an appearance to the relief of many a rider. The gun went off and elbows went out. 'Exhibition race' doesn't mean anything except that there is nothing to lose. Smashing down the stairs three riders wide with horns blaring and Czechs yelling is something that cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world. It's not possible to look around and your vision is blurred from the jack hammering of the stairs but you feel like you're on an extreme thrill ride though a tunnel of noise and flashing cameras. On the very first lap the stairs claimed their first victim in Vancouver ski medalist Lukas Bauer. He went over the handlebars halfway down and while I don't know the result, it couldn't possibly end nicely.

I moved into the top 10 and the intensity started to hit. I tried hard to get a little bit of recovery on the descent and hold the front group on the climb. I started to drift back a little but was still holding a pace that I wouldn't dare to describe as comfortable but somewhere in the range of bearable. After a few more laps I started to find some legs and get into the rhythm of pushing to 100% then getting a little bit back on the descent. Last year I was in a world of pain after the first lap, pushing harder than I should and was practically falling down the stairs, nothing but an overcooked piece of meat. This year was better and I found some

joy amongst the pain, taking everything in.

My new found enjoyment was to be short lived though. Halfway down the stairs I heard a crunch and next thing I was fish tailing down the stairs, rear wheel locked and eyes like dinner plates. I was hanging over the front of the bike, skidding sideways down the stairs. I somehow managed to stay upright and came to stop. Checking the damage the count was four spokes now in eight pieces, one chain with a 180 degree twist and rear derailleur with carbon splintering in several directions. GAME OVER.

With still more than three quarters of the race remaining I switched to spectator mode and watched an exciting race unfold. The lead group slimmed to seven riders and they seemed content to just keep the pace high without too many attacks. With 15 minutes to go five remained. Sauser flatted and with 10 minutes to go there was just four guys holding the attention of the roaring crowd. They blew their horns and screamed and yelled for Kulhavy, the Czech champion. Swiss pocket rocket Florian Vogel and two Czechs, Ulman and Vokrouhlik remained.

As the last lap bell rang the pace went into overdrive. Kulhavy let it go down the stairs, being the only dual suspension rider of the bunch, and left the other three to try and close the gap. All together once again for the climb to the finish summit, Kulhavy put the pressure on at the front leaving Vokrouhlik behind. Another surge left just Vogel on his tail. With 250 metres of cobblestone climbing to go the riders went momentarily out of sight of the TV camera, leaving the big screens with a view from the top of the hill, awaiting the climbing finishers. Only the spectators on that section could see what was happening. A lone rider came into shot on the big screens. A second later the crowd erupted as Kulhavy emerged with a small gap. He looked back to see Vogel slumped over his handlebars and raised his arms in triumph to the delight of the Czech fans who did the same. The noise of the Czech fans echoed through the narrow streets as an unforgettable finale.

A colourful podium celebration followed under the shadow of the great St Vitus Cathedral as the blackening sky bellowed overhead. As the final awards were presented the heavens began to open and soon a full blooded storm rained down, falling water turning to rivers flowing down the shiny stone corridors of Prague.

Reflecting on my misfortune as I gazed down on the wet streets from my hotel room window I realised how little my result affected the amazing experience I had once again gained from Prague and the spectacular event. After one last meal in one of the town squares I tried my hand at driving home from the Czech capital, amongst the trams, at night, in the rain, on the other side. Ivan's new found 'confidence' in my European driving skills made for an interesting end to our adventure but that's another story.