

FNQ Six Pack 2018 – the soft option - John McMullan

This was my first crack at a multi-day ride and I had some very surprising results. Ride reports are usually chronological but as a first I would like to thank all those who organized and supported the ride. This ride was not only executed with clockwork precision but had an excellent support crew across the days. Cheers all for your hard work and kindness.

Thanks also go to Peter and Vaughan for riding with me on the six pack. We made a pretty good (but slow) team.

I had not traveled with the bike before so Brian had loaned me a spare bike bag and with flights , extra baggage and accommodation booked I was looking forward to the holiday (if one can call the six pack that). My team at work certainly noticed a drop in productivity on my last day at work before my holidays.

Vaughan and I discussed on the Ride for the No Shows that he was driving up and could take my bike – which I gladly accepted to save the hassle of disassembly and the associated work. I dropped the bike to Vaughan's on the Monday and all was prepared including my collection from the airport. Vaughan certainly made my FNQ experience start in a good way. I had a lot of cranking noise so I had brought some spares – including a bottom bracket and the necessary tools to replace it.

Day -1 (or zero) started really well with a nice exploratory ride to Palm Cove using a lot of the bike paths rather than the highway. With my other half being in hospital for the month preceding the trip up north I was a little out of condition and was also carrying a chest cough which could probably be heard for miles. I didn't have time to do more than put a freshly waxed chain on the bike on Thursday evening and hadn't attended to the noisy crank but rode nonetheless with Vaughan. We were working with Vaughan's memory from last year so we had a few wrong turns and basically played it by ear for our warm up ride. I was amazed at the cycling infrastructure on the way – it did favor cars but certainly kept a bit of separation between cars and bikes. It made getting around pretty easy (or was that because the area was flat?)

We elected not to stop for long at Palm cove before returning to Cairns. Pete let Vaughan know that he was in Cairns already after having ridden from Atherton with Gayle so we quickly returned so we could freshen up and have lunch. The afternoon's activities included a trip to the bike shop to get tubes and later a walk with PJ. Fortunately, I had diagnosed the noisy crank to be incorrect tension on the left crank arm which was quickly fixed.

Day 1

The route to Mossman was partially familiar as Vaughan and I had ridden to Palm Cove the day before. Peter and I rode together northwards whilst Vaughan went south and rode the 200. We kept off the highway here and there which allowed us to see the different areas and sights like the clouds flowing down the side of the hills like this:



We stopped briefly at Palm Cove for a muesli bar and amenities stop plus a quick look at the pier on the way past. A few km north and further towards Ellis beach and we had our first bit of magical road where the trees covered the road and gave some welcome shade. The Ellis beach hotel appeared soon after where we found some riders taking a welcome caffeine break and for me a photo opportunity.



Just after Ellis Beach we encountered some climbing with only one impatient driver and soon made our way to the control. I wanted to visit the crocodile farm and see the wild beasts that considered everything a chew toy. I had forgotten to let Peter know before we started so at the control Pete and I parted company and I wandered up the road to the Hartleys Crocodile Adventures for a look.

I limited myself to a couple of hours wandering around the park, took a boat ride to see the crocs relaxing, swimming and eating when fed. I am glad I went in as I had not been to any wildlife parks with crocs and managed to get somewhat of a selfie with an alligator (I am competing with Tara for the best animal selfie but I don't think I can train this one to put its head on my shoulder....)



Once fed and watered at the park I wandered down to the control and took off on the second part of my journey to Mossman. The highway was a little narrower, a little steeper but was very picturesque on the way northward. I am always impressed by how awesome the water looks and was thinking a dip in the water looked so inviting whilst being so dangerous. The detour around Mowbray had some nice scenery and left the noise of the highway behind and I soon flipped to the other side of the highway to Port Douglas where a quick run out on the pier gave some excellent photos northwards and the beachfront a southward view. Being my first visit to Port Douglas it reminded me of parts of the Sunshine Coast and northern NSW beach areas – definitely nice places to visit.

I was on the home stretch and made my way to Mossman quite quickly to find waiting accommodation and a crocodile free pool to soak in.

Day 2

I had decided that I would complete one 200km ride during the six pack that Day 2 would be it – maybe more if I felt up to it but bearing in mind that I had not ridden consecutive days (other than commutes and a weekend with two Horizontal Hundreds) I would see how I went. I chose day 2 because I had not been beyond the Daintree Village and was eager to explore.

Vaughan gladly joined Peter and I after his quickest 200km Audax the day before (sub 10 hours) as we would be riding at a slower pace (ie mine) for the day.

We kicked off with a loop of Cooya Beach and while on the Cook Highway we were greeted with an excellent sunrise to the right of the highway with sunlight streaming into the avenue of trees on the slight climb before the turn to Cooya Beach. After we turned off the highway our shadow was on the roadside canefield showing our outline as a peleton – not something you see very often.

Our ride through the North Mossman and quick trip to the beach was uneventful with us heading towards Daintree Village in the early morning with a bit of low level mist closer to the village adding a sense of wonder to the area. Vaughan noticed a python on the road near Cape Tribulation Road which we later discovered had been run over and wasn't just basking in the sun as we first thought. We saw James heading southwards from the village as we were nearing and passed the CQ campsite being established as we entered town. We soon found the control and stopped for some oranges and bananas, then Vaughan and Peter had breakfast at one of the café's before we headed off to catch the ferry.

Once north of the river we followed the course along Forest Creek Rd to find the stamp then started the climb up to Mt Alexander lookout. This is where my lack of riding preparation, chest cough and steep hill combined to make my day harder than it needed to be. I managed to ride half of the climb before I needed to rest the body so I continued to walk up, giving way to the vehicles coming up from the ferry. Once at the top I had a bit of a rest whilst taking a couple of photos



then we headed off to Cape Tribulation, enjoying the descent and the superb scenery on the way. I did wonder how long it took for the double decker bus parked in some-one's yard to get over the hill. I was

amazed at how many people live in the area and wondered often how life would be like with little external contact and only the neighbours for company.

We arrived at Cape Tribulation to find Kim waiting patiently. A quick lunch and then up to the beach for another photo opportunity (and a stamp) before heading southwards. At this time, I realized that we were just on my time limit to get to the next control so I took off at a flying pace to get to Cow bay and up to the lookout. Peter and Vaughan caught up at the turn to Cow Bay. I stopped to massage the feet that were telling me that I had been pushing hard then rode down to cow bay, turned around then bolted back to start the climb up Mt Alexander. By this stage, I had been pushing pretty hard and my attempt to ride up the hill was less successful than the southern side so I resigned myself to getting to the top on shanks' pony. With 2.2km to climb and 24 minutes to do so I thought I would have a minute or two to spare – not to be – I reached the control at the last possible minute.

Having pushed so hard, my blood sugars had bottomed out so I needed time to recover at the lookout – this turned out to be about half an hour of slowly consuming oranges, slice, lollies and water. Peter took off early to do the descent as he takes it slow. Kim and I discussed my current state of health, the fact that I didn't want this ride to beat me and that I would see how I was feeling at the ferry, then at Wonga. If I needed to stop riding, they would be the places to make a decision. Vaughan and I headed off once I made sure I had sustenance for the return trip. The descent to the ferry was really good despite the road being a little ordinary and once across on the ferry I started feeling ok.

Letting Kim know we headed off southwards. We discussed stopping for a softdrink at Wonga to top up the energy levels then kitted up for night riding before continuing on. At Wonga, I let Kim know I was continuing to ride so he headed back to Mossman to help with the end of ride activities. We headed onto Bamboo Creek Road, then Syndicate road before the softdrink and mountaintop food wore off – leaving me needing to stop for a couple of muesli bars before continuing on. Like other rides during the dark, I took advantage of the stop and turned my headlight off to look at the night sky – just like everything else up this area, I wasn't disappointed with the view.

We continued on and soon rode through Mossman and up to the gorge car park. Vaughan's sheet said there was a stamp somewhere but we took the quick option of a selfie .



before

heading back to the motel – to arrive with 10 minutes of BRM time remaining and to applause from the entire contingent. This day was Vaughan's slowest 200km Audax. It was probably Peters too but only Vaughan commented because he had his quickest and slowest in consecutive rides on the one weekend. What an achievement.

Day 3

Having trashed myself on day 2, my stupid part of my brain was still trying to tell me that I would be ok trying to ride up the Rex – fortunately my sensible part won and I took the soft option to the top with Kim to ride the 0/50 option. It was definitely a better hill climb than those riding it had. The surprising thing is that we didn't find James until well after the top of the hill.

I set off from the control near Mt Molloy breaking new ground for me – I hadn't ridden three consecutive Audax days before, nor had I been on these roads. It took me a bit to get going after the previous day's exertions but the scenery well made up for my sluggishness. Lake Mitchell soon appeared as a photo opportunity and a quick left onto Quaid road gave me my first climbing for the day. With protesting legs I took a bit of time getting to the top of the first rise then on the downhill my legs started to wake up and let me enjoy the ride more. I had heard rumours that the road was in poor condition but up until the turnoff to the left it seemed ok. I did notice a couple of sink holes in the road near the gate on my return.

On the way down I passed the first of the 100km riders – they caught up really well. I enjoyed the descent (and little lump) down to the highway and continued until I spotted a flock of kites circling something a few k's down the road. I stopped again to get a short video of the flock as I had not seen more than one kite at a time before. Continuing on, the scenery was very reminiscent of where I grew up presenting some more

photo opportunities before I headed off to the Golden Drop Winery to sample a few wares, purchase a couple of bottles and a mango icecream. It is amazing that one of these icecreams doesn't last from the winery any further than the bridge on Bilwon road on the way out.

It wasn't long before I entered Mareeba and took some of the back streets avoiding the main road until close to the end. I had intended to spend about 5 minutes working but didn't find the location so maybe next time. This was a better day for me and the recovery went really well.

The afternoon presented me with a little time to do some maintenance on the bike – swap the chain out (using paraffin wax gets about 400km per waxing) and I had a pre-waxed chain ready to install. James and I had a bit of a discussion regarding chains and lubrication, bottom bracket tools (I had my 3d printed one with me) and general maintenance. Once cleaned up, I took to the pool to relax and cool down before we all headed for dinner.

Day 4

Day 4 was new territory for me as well. Vaughan, Peter and I were riding as a group and our morning saw us head to the gokart track for some cold laps (one I videoed) before heading west along a slight climb in search of a secret stamp. My legs were a lot better after the recovery riding the day before and I took advantage of the descents to make up a bit of time. Once back at Mareeba, we stopped at a shop for supplies then headed out on Chewko road avoiding the bulk of the traffic. We found the control at the top of a little climb and we rested briefly, topping up our energy reserves before heading onwards. The day was starting to warm up and a bit further in our journey we arrived at the Mt Uncle rum distillery and dropped in for a cold drink and a description of the produce before continuing on. We got as far as Hansen Road before we were asked to vacate the road by a very friendly policeman to allow a wide load to pass us. As it turned out, it was a nacelle for one of the wind turbines travelling to Mt Emerald. We continued on and eventually caught up to the convoy another few km along the road where it was being raised on the trailer for the Granite Creek crossing.



The size of these is impressive and as we found out in Atherton they weigh 120Tonnes which explained why there were two trucks pulling the load. It is not often you get this close to one to appreciate the size.

We stopped and watched the river crossing (yes it was on a bridge) and before long we were stopping to take photos of the irrigation channels. This was also a first for me as I hadn't seen this type of water distribution before. We soon found our way through Rocky Creek where they had restored a WWII Igloo and continued to climb to Tolga where we stopped for another cold drink and a quick dash down the hill to Kairi. The little detour around the side roads was a change from the major roads in the area before hitting the dip at Mazlin Creek.

We entered Atherton via the Gillies Highway and soon ran dangerously close to needing to apply the brakes to sit within the speed limit as I pushed the downhill to attack the hill up to the hospital. We were nearing the end of our journey for the day and when we turned onto Herberton Road we spotted some of our group ahead. I pressed up the hill with Vaughan thinking I had taken his 'catch up' comment seriously but I was a bit tired and aching and was giving myself some riding relief by changing positions. Within minutes we turned into the motel to find a small but welcoming group.

The wind farm presentation at dinner was very informative – you never really appreciate the size of the turbines until you have something to scale them against (like the nacelle during the day) and few appreciate the challenges and constraints of the construction until sessions like this.

Day 5

Day 5 was to be my second most difficult day. Once again, PJ Vaughan and I agreed to ride together – Peter and I were treating it as a Holiday and Vaughan appreciated my moderate riding speed. The day started a little cool so we were rugged up for a while as we headed through Wongabel and some awesome morning mist before we turned onto the Kennedy highway and steadily climbed for the next dozen km. We were given a rest partway due to the roadworks but made our way to the turn onto Upper Barron Rd where we stopped to regroup and I took a photo of the GPS showing the height of 1003m at the turn. I haven't been this far above sea level since Tasmania or when flying. Upper Barron Rd provided some spectacular scenery on the descent particularly at Bromfield Swamp where Robert pointed out some of the wildlife. We finished our descent into Malanda and had a look at the hotel which let us appreciate the size of the wind turbine blades that were longer than the hotel verandah. We headed to the bakery for a quick bite and drink then headed out on the lumpy Glen Allyn Rd to the Nerada tea factory to arrive at the control to a very relieved support crew - we had very little time to spare – somewhere around 5 minutes. I took a look at the tree kangaroo just inside the driveway – I hadn't seen one of these before and when I came back out Robert arrived at the control just in time to the relief of the control crew.



The three amigos headed off again after I reminded Vaughan and PJ that I had one more photo to take along Topaz Road for a friend. Wandering off along the route we climbed again, passing some interesting sights like the fence loaded with buoys. As my grandson is very nautical at the moment I took a photo to show him later. After turning onto Topaz road – towards Butchers Creek which has also been labeled ‘little Siberia’ due to the influx many years ago by Russian immigrants. I stopped to take a couple of photos for a friend whose family is still in the area before we continued on our descent into Pearamon then Yungaburra.

We started to descend once we turned onto Topaz Road and continued through some pleasant scenery through to Yungaburra. We visited the Afghanistan Avenue of Honour before stopping at the lake briefly before returning to the town center in search of a drink.

On our way again but with more climbing ahead we went in search of the Curtain Fig Tree.



With photos taken we were on our way again along the Gillies Hwy with a bit of a climb before turning off the hwy to yet more climbing to get back to Atherton. With all our stopping along the way, we arrived at the end with several minutes to spare, looking forward to lunch at the railway cafe, cleaning up and a dip in the pool.

Day 6 – the road home.

PJ had already ridden this section the Friday before the six pack so Vaughan and I were left to our own devices. Once again we started off via Wongabel with little traffic. Riding at the speeds we do allows you to really appreciate the scenery as you ride. I can see the appeal for the regional lifestyle here even if it does have hills and chills. Pictures like this helps show why we ride where we do.



Some of the route was common to day 5, much of it avoiding the climbs of the day before. With most of the first 30km being farmland the scenery was very expansive allowing for nice views across valleys to the other hills. Once through Peeramom we got to Lakes Drive and soon found a nice rainforest descent to Lake Eacham to find a swimmer in the lake and some more stunning views.



The photos do not do the lake justice – you need to visit on a day like this one to get the best out of it – and have time to soak up the ambience.

Heading away from the lake through some more forest we took to the Gillies and made our way to the control at Lake Barrine. Once again the scenery lived up to expectations but Vaughan and I didn't stay long – we continued along the Gillies stopping to take in the signs and letting a truck go past before we neared the much anticipated descent.

I like to take advantage of the descents after working hard to get to the top but alas the truck that passed us was soon holding us (and several cars) up until we reached the first lay-by on the way down where the truck driver kindly waved us through. Once we had all sorted out our pecking order (cars, me then Vaughan) I took off down the range reveling in the awesome road surface, good visibility, dry conditions, lack of other vehicles on the way down and pedaling where if I wanted I could have coasted. If you need a gift at the end of some awesome riding then this is pretty much at the top of the list. I kind of compare it to the descent on Mt Mee but sooo much longer and better. This is one to put on the 'must do' list.

After about 25 minutes I found myself on a slight climb (disappointing I know) and waited at the top where it was safe to stop for Vaughan to catch up. He wasn't far behind, and neither was the truck. After a short chat we rode on and then took to the outskirts of Gordonvale before meeting up with the Bruce Highway where we saw a lot of harvesting activity in the adjacent cane fields including the cane tram bridge over the highway with a tram crossing as we passed. Turning onto Maitland st we were greeted by another tram

starting off so I made a video as we passed so I could share it with my wife and grandson. We also encountered a new road caution sign. I am sure that most of the riders saw it but it was the first one I had seen in FNQ. With the cautions given by Gayle and Kim during the ride briefings and the tracks we saw during daylight I can fully appreciate the sign.



Riding along Mt Peter road was the last bit of rural scenery before hitting the urban sprawl of Edmonton and much more traffic. Riding through the White Rock area we could see the effort that the council had been putting in to make some commuting routes that were off the highway particularly with the interchange near Woree. The Cairns flat roads were providing us with some very nice speeds combined with very interesting intersections to traverse. Once into Cairns proper we were on the home stretch with the Holiday Inn just kilometers away. We arrived at the inn to a small reception and an invitation to order some lunch to finish the ride while we waited for more riders to arrive.

Kudos to the riders that did a full strength – after doing my bit, I can really appreciate their effort.

Reflection on the FNQ Six pack.

I had listened to the stories from last year about the six pack and that many riders had turned up with the intention of multiple 200km rides. PJ had basically said he would ride one 200, the rest would be 100's as it

would be a holiday. Vaughan wanted to attempt 3, and I wanted to do one 200 for the Year Round Randonneur with a 'I really like the look of these other two 200s' but aiming to take it day by day.

I had arrived in Cairns with a chest cold and lack of riding the month before so I was very out of condition and day 2 bore this out quite harshly for me. What I did achieve though was seven consecutive days of riding in beautiful scenery while having the opportunity to visit some attractions along the way. This was by far my best multiday achievement because I had found five days of commuting (53km per day) tough in the past so I am very happy with how I fared. I was a little ambitious thinking that on this trip I could ride more than one 200, but common sense won out and I had a really excellent time with the riding and the company along the way.

Even with my difficulties of day 2 and my 0/50 option of day 3 my recollection of this tour will really positive with good achievements which had been underpinned by good riding company that were willing to ride mostly at my pace.

I learned a lot on the ride – I probably don't need to carry a spare tyre, bike prep is paramount to avoiding issues and good planning makes things go really smoothly. Vaughan learned something too – you can stop and take in the scenery on the way – you only need arrive at controls before they close.

Vaughan had two other milestones as well – in the one weekend he had his quickest (sub 10 hrs) and his slowest 200km (13h10) Audaxes.

My thanks again to the organising crew and supporters – who were awake before the riders and went to bed well after – your efforts made this not only a success but an event that people will want to participate in.

Thanks again to Vaughan for transporting my bike, collecting me from the airport, getting me out for a ride on the Friday and to both him and Peter some awesome company and mothering along the way.

For anyone thinking of riding the six pack in the future – it should definitely be on the to-do list. The scenery needs to be visited to be fully appreciated and make plans to visit the scenery you haven't seen before so pick your 200s with care if you aren't up to riding a lot of them. For me, I thought I would struggle – in reality a bit but I became comfortable with the 100's on successive days – the perseverance is really worth it.