

The Grischa Muni Challenge 2010

(A 3-day mountain unicycle race across the Swiss Alps)

When asked by Pfender Joachim, aka Jogi (a strong, competent, skilful and prominent figure on the German unicycle scene) if I would like to join his Muniversal Riders team, for a 3-day multi-stage mountain unicycle race in the Swiss Alps, I didn't have to think twice. I was honoured to be asked to join their team, for what turned out to be an extremely hard, but unbelievably exciting and fun race. Endurance riding is what I do, and this one didn't disappoint; exceeding all my expectations, both in the organisation of the event and the actual riding itself.

It would be the first time this 3-day mountain unicycle race was to be held. The main person responsible for pulling everything together was Markus Buchel (Turtle). From the off-set I'd like to say, the whole event was well organised and very professionally run throughout.

Joe Baxter also didn't need persuading to join Jogi's team, bringing our team to the maximum of 5 riders allowed. Team Muniversal Riders were to be one of the 5 teams taking part, and our team consisted of Jogi, Philp Ries, Flo Kaiser, Joe Baxter and myself, Steve Colligan.

The race was to be staged in Switzerland, in the mountain resort of Arosa, several hours train ride from Zurich. Everyone met up the evening before, apart from Jogi and Flo, who arrived at 6am the following morning – 3hrs before the race was due to start!! Once everyone had arrived the evening before, apart our team captain Jogi and Flo, Markus went through a presentation of the event. He detailed the teams, the riders, the areas we would be riding, and of course the rules and how the points system would work.

The general rules and points system are as follows;

1. Teams have from 9am to 5pm (8 hours) to ride from the start to the finish.
2. Each day there would be a different start and finish point.
3. All team members have to stay together as a team.
4. One member in each team will carry a GPS to track their route.
5. You can only ride a particular trail once. If a trail is ridden twice, then that distance won't be counted.
6. Teams can make use of trains, buses, cablecars, chairlifts and gondolas, but none of them will count towards your distance and points. Each rider will be issued with a lift pass to use on the lifts and trains. Using a mode of transport may be of use to get riders to the top of the mountain, or to connect different areas to ride. The distances travelled on these forms of transport would always be deducted from the daily totals.
7. Points are only given for riding the unicycle (or walking with the unicycle), but not when using any other kind of transport. The team with the most points after 3 days wins.
8. 1 point given for every km riding on roads.
9. 2 points given for every km riding easy off-road.
10. 3 points given for every km riding hard off-road/singletrack.
11. A multiplication factor of x4 is applied when riding downhill.
12. A multiplication factor of x8 is applied when riding uphill.
13. 1 point given for every vertical km ascended or descended.

14. A 5% penalty would be taken off your total daily points for every 15 minutes a team arrives late (note: all teams were allowed to have the first 15 minutes, free of penalty).

From the above you can see a team would get the most points for riding uphill on singletrack. It wasn't just a case of riding the furthest distance between the start and finish points – you had to plan your route carefully to maximise your possible points.

Team Turtliten (Markus' team) were the organisers and so were riding more for the fun of it. I think they had a slight advantage over the rest of us anyway, in that they had ridden a lot of the trails before. They were still extremely strong riders and they ended up clocking up the most points, but only just.

All teams would plan their own route the evening before. Each day would follow the same pattern, with a 9am mass start and a 5pm deadline. The only difference being a slightly earlier finish on the 3rd and final day, finishing at 2pm (with a free first ½ hour late penalty). What was noticed from the start is that every team planned different routes each day and so headed off in different directions, occasionally bumping into each other on route.

At the end of each day, Stefan from Einradshop.ch, would collect in the GPS' and upload the data onto his laptop to analyse the information. All teams would then upload their photos taken during the day to a common laptop. In the evenings a team member would do a presentation of the days riding, with the help of a projector. Detailed maps of the area were projected onto a nearby wall and the GPS routes overlaid to show the actual routes they took. This was followed with a selection of that particular team's photos. Following all the team presentations was a final presentation by Markus, which detailed information for the following days ride.

With it being a multi-day staged event, each day had a different start and finish point, and so covered different mountain ranges, offering a greater variety and options of trails to ride.

Teams could be a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 5 riders in each. If you were in a team of 2 and one had a problem and couldn't continue for some reason, you wouldn't be allowed to continue alone. You were allowed to join one of the other teams though. If you were in one of the larger teams of 5, for example, then the probability of more mechanical breakdowns and injury were greater. Also with the larger teams, there was more chance that one of the riders would be less fit as the others and ultimately affect the team's performance. With being in a team of 5, this potential issue was always hanging over us, but remarkably all 5 riders were as fit, competent and strong as each other. We always rode together, encouraging and supporting each other, as teams should do. Looking back, I couldn't have asked to be in a better, stronger and more supportive team. I made lots of new friends at this event, but none more so than my teammates, and I wouldn't hesitate in sticking with the same team at future events!

Day 1

Jogi and Flo didn't get much sleep as they had driven through the night to get to the start point in Arosa. Introductions and route briefing were done over breakfast. The night before, Philip, Joe and I had come up with several route alternatives, trying to keep our options open, just in case we ran into difficulties, or were running out of time. Today's finish line would be the youth hostel in Davos.



We headed down to the hostel's car park for the 9am start. Looking around, people were riding a mixture of 24", 26" and 29" unicycles, with and without brakes, some geared and some not. What surprised Joe and I was the lack of sports riding clothes being worn, as most people were opting to ride in cotton shorts and t-shirts – we felt a little overdressed in our cycle shorts and race shirts - maybe it's a British thing! I certainly remember feeling very excited, but apprehensive at the same time. It was the first time Joe and I were to ride with our team members, and we felt anxious about not letting them down. As it turned out, all 5 of us had similar strengths and skills at riding technical trails and we all had the stamina to keep racing right up until the end. After a group photo shoot we waited for the church bells to chime the start of the race.

The bells chimed the start at 9am and everyone headed off in different directions with their teams. It had begun!! I can't really comment on the progress of other teams, as we didn't see a lot of them throughout the day. We had decided to spend most of the day riding the trails in the Arosa area, before finally crossing one of the mountain passes to Davos (the finish point) in the afternoon. All the other teams decided to cross over to Davos earlier in the day, and then ride the trails on that side of the mountain. Apart from the first hour, we didn't see any of the other teams that day, and we had the trails above and around Arosa to ourselves.

The weather was perfect – a little sun, but still plenty of cloud to give us cover. Arosa is at an elevation of 1700m (5570ft) and the surrounding mountains went up to 3000m (9800ft). As we took our first gondola, up to 2500m (8200ft), I remembered thinking how beautiful the mountains looked and how excited I was to be finally out there, about to start my first downhill.

With all the teams going off in different directions, we could never gauge how well we were doing against them. This of course would always be the case. Our competitors became invisible and so we were left to race against our own fitness and stamina, always pushing ourselves against this invisible opponent.

Our warm-up run was the trail below the gondola, which dropped 800m (2600ft), back down to Arosa. This was mostly rocky with some steep sections, but fairly easy riding overall. What made it harder was the pace we were riding at. I wasn't sure if everyone normally rode at that fast pace, or

whether it was just 'race fever'. Apart from Philip, we all had brakes fitted – something he would miss by the end of the day! Even though all teams were racing, everyone found time to take lots of photos, and our first descent was no different. Usually these were taken by the front riders, as they waited for the rest of us to catch up, but never being that far behind. With the first descent and mileage behind us, we headed back up the same gondola to ride a different trail from the top.

Back on top, we headed down to Arosa again, but mostly on easier trails. We did go off route occasionally, free-riding through the trees and down the hillside on some very steep terrain, which was so much fun. We were constantly watching each other while riding, being inspired to try things we would possibly avoid. Needless to say, over the 3 days, everyone's riding skills improved tremendously.

We decided to take an early lunch down in Arosa, picking up sandwiches from the Spar shop. After a 20 minute break we headed up one of the cablecars to do one final downhill before leaving Arosa. Again we headed off-trail (not intentionally), trying to find interesting and challenging routes down the mountainside. By now, Philip was starting to miss having a brake fitted to his unicycle, especially as he was riding a 29" wheel. He was an extremely fit guy and never rides with a brake – I still don't know how he managed to ride the whole day without having the luxury of pulling a brake lever.

Before leaving Arosa and heading over one of the mountain passes, we refuelled with water. We had an 800m (2600ft) climb to reach the top of the pass, with very few options to replenish our Camelbaks with water on route. By now the clouds had thinned and things were becoming hotter. We rode where we could, but steepness and terrain dictated that we walked a fair amount of the ascent. As the afternoon wore on, we started to realise that we should have started the climb over the pass sooner. This pass was taking longer than anticipated, and reaching the hostel in Davos in time was becoming an issue! The views continued to be impressive, especially with the good weather and we could see down to Arosa, across the valley behind us. We continued to gain height, but were then confronted with a sight that stopped us in our tracks – a near vertical wall of rock, more than a hundred metres high. We couldn't see a track going round it, but instead noticed one going straight up it! Because of the steepness and dangerous exposure, a metal staircase had been built into the rockface to aid walkers. Needless to say, we didn't ride this section! Once we reached the top of the stairs, it was an easier and gradual ride/walk to the top of the pass. We were very relieved to have finally reached the start point of our downhill to Davos. Time was definitely not on our side and we would struggle to reach the finish in time. But it was all downhill from here on.



We were hot and tired, but excited to have a massive downhill to the finish in Davos, 900m (2950ft) below us. It was such a shame we couldn't linger on the way down, as we were now racing our new opponent – the clock! Practically the whole route down was rideable, sometimes steep and sometimes following the contours around the mountain. We were constantly looking for a more direct and quicker route to descend, but none were obvious. It was almost comical watching us ride everything before us, getting faster and faster the closer we got. We were tired, but hyped up from the days riding and determined to beat the clock. However difficult the terrain became, we just rode everything – nothing was going to get in our way!



We finally reached the outskirts of this 'massive' town – our thigh muscles burning from the speed of descent. It was now just after 5pm and we were eating into our 15 minute grace. Our biggest challenge now faced us....., trying to find the youth hostel!! We asked several people and were sent this way and that – I don't think anybody actually knew the whereabouts of our finish line! Finally we asked a bus driver and were told it was the other end of town. We boarded the bus in the hope of reaching our goal in time. After getting off the bus there was a steep ride uphill to the youth hostel and the finish. All the other teams had already arrived and were sat outside waiting for us. We crossed the finish line 12 minutes too late and so 5% of our total points for the day would be deducted - but we still came out on top! We were all very tired, but on a massive high from the riding – it truly was an awesome day. As we sat on the steps of the hostel, Sandy, Philip's brother, brought out 5 beers for us to celebrate with..... These were extremely well received and tasted wonderful – thanks Sandy.



The evening ritual was to shower, eat, team presentations, followed by a presentation for the following day, team planning, and then socialising. Philip was a massive help with route planning, as he snowboards these mountains in the winter. He may not know the actual trails so much, but his knowledge of the area was invaluable. Our finish line for the following day would be the youth hostel in Valbella, which was the other side of the mountain from Arosa. Our route would take us back through the place we started this morning.

During the evening presentations it was obvious that we weren't taking as many photos as the other teams. Some of the photos were very creative and hilarious. We may have won the day on points, but we lost it on photography!! This was to change the following day!

Once the GPS data was uploaded by Stefan, he then had to deduct all the transport taken from the total figures. All the stats below are actual unicycling/walking distances.

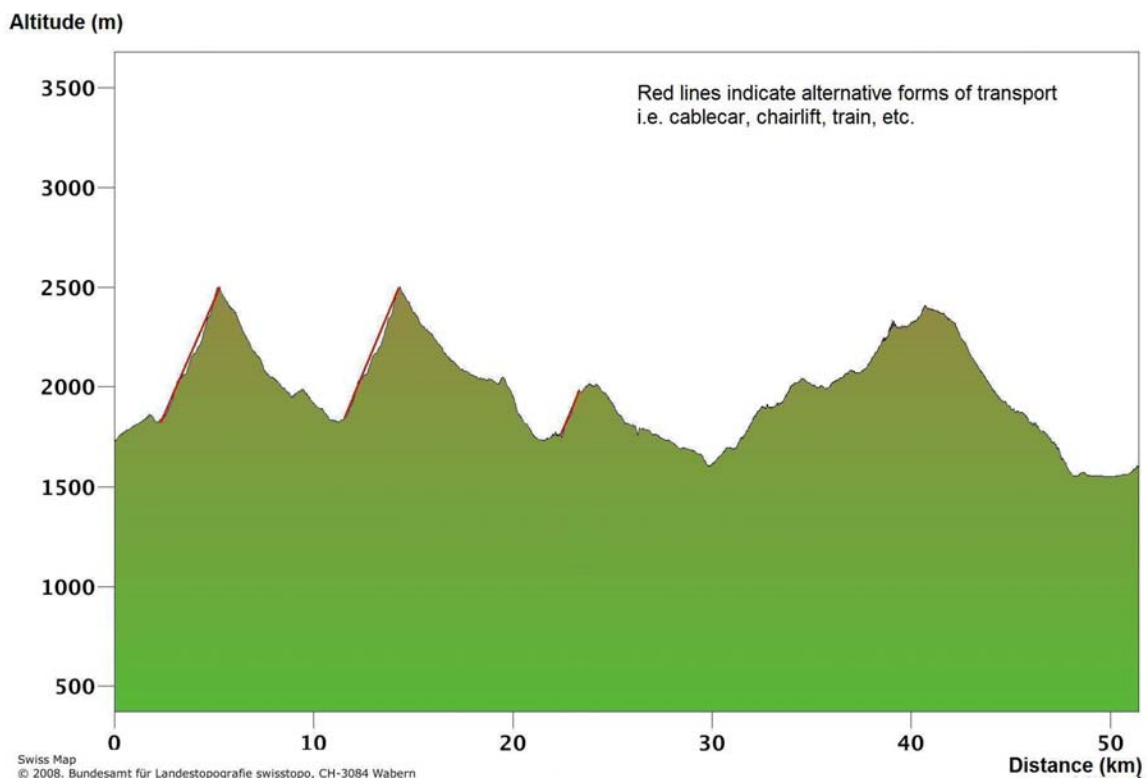
Stats for day 1

Distance - 43km (26.7 miles)

Uphill - 2126m (6975ft)

Downhill - 3825m (12550ft)

Profile for day 1



Day 2

When I awoke the following morning I felt surprisingly good, as I was expecting my thigh muscles to ache, or just be tired, but they felt great. After Joe and I ate double everything for breakfast, we were just about ready for anything!! There were even less clouds than the previous day, so things were going to be hot again.

Philip decided to take Jogi's spare 26" unicycle, as it was fitted with a brake. This would be the first time he ever rode with such a luxury!

All teams set off in the same direction at the 9am start, heading towards the funicular railway. This train was the only realistic way to get teams up the steep mountainside. Half way up we changed onto a 6-seater chairlift that would take everyone to the summit, 1100m (3610ft) above Davos. After a group photo shoot on the summit, everyone headed off down the other side of the mountain.



The top of the mountain was very rocky, but easy riding, apart from the initial drop, which was steep, loose and full of jagged rocks. This wasn't really the place for Philip to learn how to use his brake, and soon enough he came off, sliding down the rough terrain on the outside of his thigh. As usual, he just shrugged it off and got on with it. Moments later, on another steep rocky section, Joe lost control (which was very rare) and his unicycle hit the ground, snapping his brake lever - fortunately I had a spare.

The top of the mountain was fun to ride, but once we descended onto grass, things changed for the worse. The grassy slopes were churned up by grazing cows and were rutted, bumpy and muddy. For ½ an hour or so it wasn't pleasant riding and the conditions were making it hard going. We finally left the frustratingly bumpy slopes behind us and descended onto an easy gravel road. This was where we had our one and only puncture – poor Philip, he wasn't having a good start!



The gravel road changed into a very smooth road, which became even more boring. We were clocking up the mileage, but it wasn't steep, interesting, or fun. All that changed once we spotted some singletrack dropping over the side of the road, going down towards the river. Things really did change, and the singletrack followed the stream for the next 7km (4miles), dropping 600m (1970ft). It was fast, exciting and very scenic, especially with the waterfalls. The terrain was constantly changing as we weaved our way down following the course of the river. As we descended, the walls of rock either side of us became narrower and steeper, turning it into a gorge. The riding was lovely and we stopped many times to take photos – too many times!!



We were heading down to Langwies, where we could catch a train up to Arosa. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived at the station we had missed the train, and had to wait 50 minutes for the next one! We were hot, sweaty and hungry, but there was nowhere to get food. All we could do was wait it out and eat some of our snacks. At least we had time to dry our sweaty body armour and riding shoes in the hot sun!

The train arrived on time, like all trains do in Switzerland, and took us up to Arosa. Unfortunately there was no time to grab some proper food when we arrived, as the cablecar was about to leave. We met some of the others, who had caught the train we missed. At least we managed to refuel our water supplies from the toilets at the lift station!

From the top of the cablecar we did a short downhill to connect with the same long chairlift we took twice the day before. This would get us to the top of the mountain and make it easier to reach the Valbella side. Now at 2500m (8200ft) we rode the rugged and barren terrain for the next 3km (2miles) until we reached the final pass, which was the start of a 1300m (4265ft) drop, down to Churwalden. As we crossed this bleak and unforgiving land it was hot, but there were still snow drifts left behind from the winter snows, several months before.

The initial descent over the pass was steep, rocky and very technical. Joe showed us how to ride this seemingly impossible terrain, using all his trials skills – and he made it look so easy! I did manage to ride most of the harder parts, but not all of them. Because of the steepness and effort required to ride, we did stop more frequently. When stopped, it was the only time you could safely admire the dramatic setting, with mountain ranges as far as you could see. And far below was Valbella, our goal for the day.

As we all watched each other ride the harder technical bits, it became so infectious, and we were all trying things we'd possibly avoid if we were riding alone. That top section was so much fun and the mountain bikers up there just stood watching with their mouths open! For most of the ride down it

was steep, but not always technical. There were parts where we could really get some speed up and our riding flowed down the mountainside.

Just as the day before, we started to become concerned about our time and finishing before the deadline. We had one more chairlift to take, which would take us up the other side of the valley, above Valbella. From there it would be a steep, but easy run to the youth hostel. We very nearly became unstuck when we arrived at the chairlift, as we caught it with 1 minute to spare before it closed for the day! Relieved that we made it in time turned into anxiety as we sat on what must have been the longest, SLOWEST, chairlift in the Alps!! We were on it for about 30 minutes – seriously. When we got off the top we were racing against time again and still had a steep, but easy 300m (985ft) drop to the finish. The pace was seriously fast and my poor legs have never spun so fast. The same as the day before - everyone was outside the hostel waiting for us to arrive. Today though, we finished exactly on time. Another fantastic day's riding.

Two days completed and no serious injury – just minor falls and scrapes. We were all feeling very strong and definitely having a great time. Remarkably, our riding skills and fitness were similar, which enabled us to stay together throughout. Apart from us all enjoying each other's company, we couldn't have hoped to be in a more balanced team – perfect!

That evening, during the team presentations, we were clear winners in the unofficial photo competition. Our photos of Flo taking time out from our riding were hilarious and confirmed how much fun we were having.



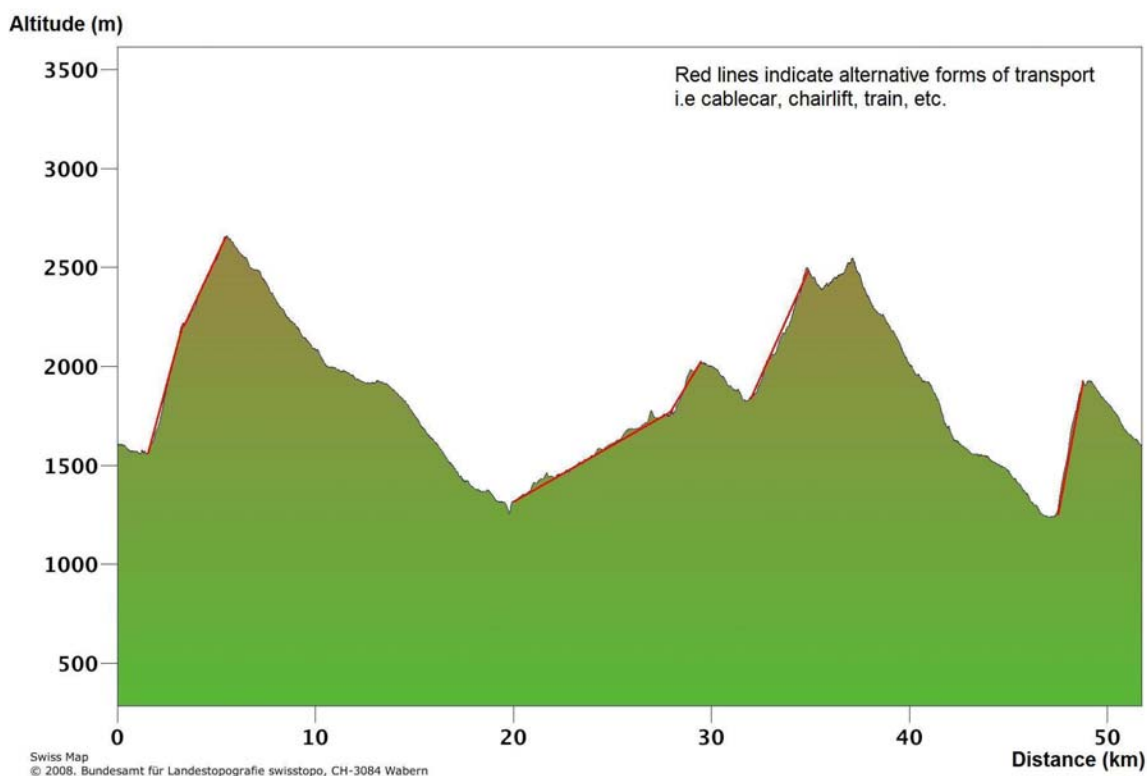
Stats for day 2

Distance – 31.7km (19.7 miles)

Uphill - 568m (1863ft)

Downhill - 3688m (12100ft)

Profile for day 2



Day 3

This was the final day of the race and also the hottest – there wasn't a cloud in sight. This was also the day that we decided to do the whole thing without the use of other forms of transport. We relied on manpower alone and were the only team to do so. Today would be shorter than the others, finishing in Switzerland's oldest city, Chur, at 2pm (with a 30 minute grace allowed after that).

After the usual double breakfast we were ready to go. On the stroke of 9 O'clock, everyone headed downhill, apart from our team, who went uphill. It was steep and easy going, but it soon became apparent that the sun was going to make things harder.

After our initial climb of 300m (985ft), we had the pleasure of a 700m (2300ft) drop on singletrack to the bottom of the valley. Most of it was through forests, twisting and turning, ducking and weaving under low braches and over protruding roots. It was such a pleasure watching the others ride and there wasn't anything they wouldn't attempt, and vice-versa.

Once out of the trees, at the bottom of the valley, we started our torturous climb back uphill through a different forest. The 600m (1970ft) climb, literally did turn into a climb! The trail started off gradual and was easy going, but slowly it became narrower and narrower and more overgrown. None of it was now rideable and we ended up pushing our unicycles uphill. Eventually, all signs of the trail disappeared completely, leaving us wondering which way to go. We knew we had to get to the top of the mountain, so we continued upwards through the trees. The slope became steeper and steeper and the unicycles had to be carried over our shoulders. Eventually things became so steep that we struggled to climb and carry our unicycles at the same time. This was where team work came in; passing our unicycles from one to another, to get past the near vertical wall of grass, roots and fallen trees. It was hard going and it really slowed us down, but eventually we emerged from the forest onto a gravel road. We were very relieved, but hot, tired, fed-up and now concerned about getting to the finish on time....., again!



Once on the gravel road things became easier, but it wasn't long before we were on singletrack again. This time it was more cross-country and fun to ride. As previous days, the views from higher up these mountains were impressive.

One of the things I noticed about Flo's riding, was that he was extremely good on the technical stuff. But when there was a crowd watching, more often than not, he would fall off in front of them. As we traversed around the top of the mountain, there were a large group of walkers coming the other way. Right on cue, Flo fell off, hitting an electric fence (to keep the cows in) and electrocuted his neck!! It could only happen to Flo!

Eventually we reached the start of the mountain bike downhill course, which finished in Chur. We refuelled with water, readying ourselves for the last descent of the day and a drop of about 1200m (3940ft) through the forest, to the end of the race in Chur. This purpose-built downhill course had some of the steepest trails I'd ever ridden. By now we were seriously racing against time to get to the finish in time. We were tired and hot, plus the steepness of the trail made the whole thing technical to ride. Our descent was faster than we would have liked, and before long our thighs were burning from the extra effort required to fight the steepness, and gravity itself. The brake helped of course, but the extra effort keeping a tight hold on the lever became tiring on the arm. We hardly stopped, but when we did it was only briefly, so we could all keep together. Every 5 minutes I would shout out the time (nobody had a watch, but me). We would look through the trees at the sprawling city below, but it didn't seem to get any closer. Several times I'd stop and look back up at the steepness of the trail I'd just ridden and say to myself, "did I really ride that?" It went on and on and on and seemed never ending. Eventually we could make out cars and then people moving along the streets below us – we were getting closer. The sweat was pouring out of us by the time we emerged

from the downhill course and onto the streets of Chur. Joe had just drunk the whole 2 litres of water in his Camelbak during this final descent! We only had 5 minutes of the extra 30 allowed left, so we continued pedalling like madmen through the streets to the finish line. We arrived with 1 minute to spare at the end of the extra 30, so no points would be deducted!! Talk about cutting it close!

We had done it! We were very tired and certainly hot and sweaty, but we felt like super heroes after that last descent. The beers that followed were extremely welcome – thanks whoever bought them.

We all sat outside, chilling and recalling stories of the day, relieved that we could finally have a rest. Once all the GPS data was collected by Stefan, we had a final de-brief and prize giving. Markus announced the winners of the first Grischa Muni Challenge, as our team, Muniversal Riders!! 😊

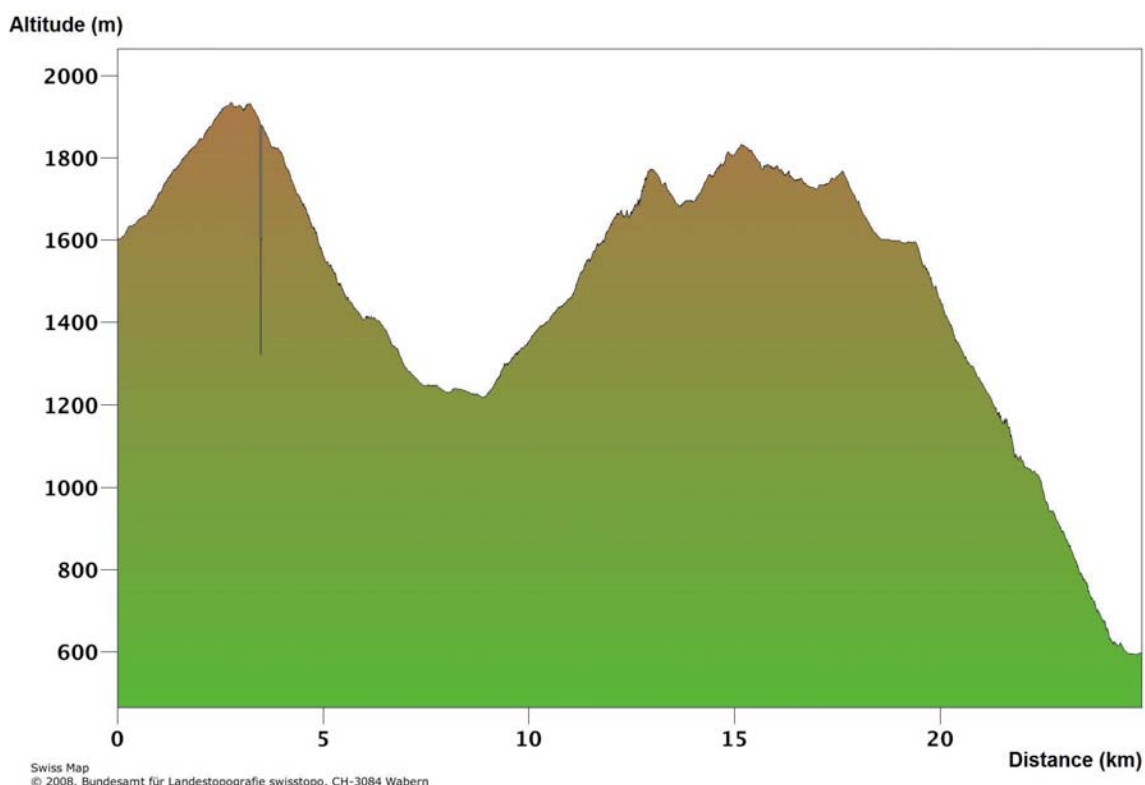
Stats for day 3

Distance – 24.8km (15.4miles)

Uphill - 1746m (5728ft)

Downhill - 2758m (9050ft)

Profile for day 3



Most of the riders knew each other already, but for Joe and I, we had made lots of new friends, especially the ones we rode with over the previous 3 days. I couldn't fault the way the event was run, as it was very well thought out, planned and executed. Behind the scenes we had Stefan sorting out the GPS data, and both he and Elke were transporting everyone's luggage from hostel to hostel. Throughout Markus and Adrian were making sure the whole thing ran smoothly, and so a massive thank you to them.

I'm writing this a week after the race and I'm still on a massive high! It really was an incredible event to be involved in and I'm certainly looking forward to being involved in the next one. 😊

A final thank you;

Jogi – thanks for inviting me to join your team, your cheerfulness and for looking after the rest of us throughout.

Philip – thanks for helping with your knowledge of the area, guiding us and for your endless positive optimism.

Flo – thanks for all your endless funny moments and for keeping us all so cheerful.

Joe – thanks for looking out for me on the trails, for accompanying me out there and for showing us all how to ride the really technical stuff.

I was really proud to be a member of Team Muniversal Riders and wouldn't hesitate to be a part of the team again. Thanks guys!

Steve Colligan, August 2010

