

Epic Israel started in 2013 in memory of the founder Gal Tsachors father who was tragically killed while out riding. It is a 3 day race with approximately 90km a day with between 1500-2200m climbing per stage. There were 2 short timed sections sponsored by Trek Israel which were on the 1st and 2nd stages and the results based on strava times.

I invited my friend and Fruit4London team mate Graham Jones to race with me in the mixed pairs. We have done quite a few team and pairs events together but never actually raced at the same time. Despite best intentions, our first ride together was the first day of the race.

Not knowing many of the riders we had no expectations but had secret hopes of a podium.

Stage one - 90km 1550m climbing

My start on stage one was bad even by my usual slow start standards and it was difficult to gauge where we were in our category. One girl crashed early on and then about 30km in we caught another mixed pair. The stage was beset with punctures. It was very rocky with masses of thorns and other sharp pointing things just waiting to slash your tyres. Between us we had 4 punctures and no 10 minutes went past without hearing the heartsinking 'pssshhhh' coming from someones tyre whilst sealant flew out coating both bike and rider. With 3km to go we passed another mixed pair obviously having serious mechanical issues. We crossed the line hoping we were in the top 3 only to find out later that we had won the stage! The last pair we passed had apparently had a 15 minute lead but having to run the final 3km put them 11mins back.

Getting to stand on the podium in the leaders jerseys with the other category winners (including Dutch national champion Anne Terpstra) was an experience we will never forget!

Stage 2 - 95km 2200m climbing

We were called up to the front on the morning of stage 2 with the other category leaders. This was even better than the podium even getting interviewed on the line. We were fairly realistic in our expectations for the stage and we were pretty sure we were going to lose the lead.

I had a better start and with much help from Graham, we finished a comfortable 20 minutes ahead of 3rd place but crucially 20 minutes behind 1st which meant we were down to 2nd overall.

Stage 3 - 94km 1700m climbing

We were feeling pretty tired by this point. Though it is only a 3 day race, it was so hot every day that everything felt so much harder.

The plan for today was just to maintain our position which we did, beating 3rd but another 20 minutes. The stage consisted of 2 loops, the first was 38km with quite a lot of single track which was really good fun. It was quite hard coming back into the finish area knowing we had another 56km to go but the first descent out was great which helped!

It was another hot day, starting off at 6.30 am at around 25deg and seemingly suddenly getting to 30+ at around 10am. It really was like someone had just turned the heating on!

We came in to the finish miles off 1st place but also miles off 3rd and we were delighted. The race was very hard, very rocky and very very hot! Day 1 was the rockiest with the steepest climbs, day 2 had the best scenery as we climbing high up mount carmel and day 3 had the most single track. Israel is a country full of contrasts with desert and forests being within 40 minutes drive of each other.

The organisation was fantastic, there were big tents for each rider, lovely cold showers, ice baths and crucially a really comfortable shaded chill out area for post ride complete with eat as many as you can ice lollies. Most of the field was Israeli as you would expect but there were a fair few foreigners and foreign journalists.

The day after we had a rest day wondering around Tel aviv and swimming in the sea. The next day we hired a guide and went riding in the Judean Desert with 2 canadian journalist (keep an eye out for a feature on pink bike). Although most of my family is from Israel and I spent part of my childhood there, aside from a couple of UCI xco races I did there in 2012, I have barely done any riding there so this was an amazing experience. We drove up from Tel aviv, through Jerusalem and lots of green forest, over a mountain and there was the desert complete with camels.

Obviously Israel has a big place in my heart but seeing people from other countries see it for the first time was a real joy. I hope this race continues to grow and attract more international riders. It will take place in

October 2015 so hopefully won't be quite so hot.

<http://www.epicisrael.org.il/en>