

HOW  
WAS IT  
FOR YOU?

# A RACE ODYSSEY

*It gave the world the marathon and the Olympic Games, but the nation of Greece has long stayed off the Ironman radar. Until 2019, that is, with the debut of 70.3 Greece in the Peloponnese peninsula*

WORDS NICK BUSCA IMAGES SIX FOR ONE PHOTOGRAPHY, IRONMAN 70.3 GREECE/TIM HEERIK



**T**he lifeguard's kayak flips over in front of me and almost hits two other swimmers. I've just turned around the midway buoys and, in the 950m that I've already swum, I've been slapped in the face by several 2m swells... and by a handful of competitors. With the rough waves of the Ionian Sea hiding the buoys, sighting – and keeping a straight line – is impossible. I know I have to get out of the water and finish the 1.9km swim leg as soon as possible.

I take a moment to calm myself down, push the kayak out of my way and look for the swim exit. As the lifeguard swims back to his kayak, I finally spot the Costa Navarino resort, from where we'd started our Ironman 70.3 Greece journey.

With the white inflatable of the exit in sight, I switch the cruise control on and swim as fast as I can – within reason! I still have to cycle for 90km and run for 21km in what'll be remembered as the first Ironman-branded event ever organised in Greece, the country that gave the world both the marathon and the Olympic Games.

When the debut Ironman 70.3 Greece race was announced last year, it immediately caught my attention: a middle-distance race held in the Peloponnese peninsula, not far from the legendary city of Sparta and ancient Olympia, but also in the cradle of Greek philosophy (the subject I studied at university). What else could I really have asked of the triathlon gods?

#### DOGS AND DRAMAS

With the race scheduled on a Sunday in April, I fly into Athens on the Wednesday (Kalamata airport in the Peloponnese is nearer to the race venue but flights are in strong demand) in order to have plenty of time to familiarise myself with a brand new course that no one has raced before. The 260km drive from the capital is a pleasant one along the green Attica coast, across the Corinth Strait with its imposing Acrocorinth and then, finally, the Peloponnese, with its olive trees, rocky hills and snowy peaks.

Checking the bike course is a good call. In the flesh, the gradients reveal themselves to be more challenging than I'd calculated from



the course profile online. During my recce I'm also able to see a potential second issue the athletes' guide didn't mention: street dogs. There are many all over the bike course and, at one point, a group of three try to chase me down. I have to stomp on the pedals very hard to leave them behind. And it isn't just me, as other competitors raise the same concern during the race briefing.

#### RELATIVE CONCEPTS

The last time I raced an Ironman-branded event was in 2016 at Ironman Copenhagen, while my last 70.3 was in 2014 at Zell am See in Austria. When I pick up my registration pack at the race village in Costa Navarino (the five-star resort where all the action of the 70.3 takes place), I've the feeling that the level of the competitors has got higher. The athletes look leaner and fitter than I remember, and the bikes racked in transition more expensive. It could be a memory flaw – or a sign of how the sport has progressed in the last five years.

The days before the race unfold in the most classic way: hectic registration and race briefing, pre-race nerves, last-minute dramas ('I need tape, where can I find some tape?'), constant attention to nutrition and rest, but also an overall intention to enjoy the process as much as possible.

In the end, I'm on a holiday that includes racing a triathlon: 'stress' and 'busy' are relative concepts.

That's why on the eve of the race, we also find time to visit some of the 3,500-year-old tombs and palaces that are mentioned in Homer's epic Greek poem, *Iliad*, where the Greeks battle the Trojans.

The night before, I have a hard time falling asleep, thanks to classic race nerves and some equally classic attempts to visualise the upcoming day of racing. On top of that, my wife has become ill and that means (for her) staying in bed for the whole day and (for me) losing my supporter number one. It means I'll have to dig even deeper ▶



#### MEET NICK

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when things become tough during the later stages of the event.

Before I even start the race, the swim leg almost turns into a disaster. After a few hundred metres of warm-up in the water, my goggles break into two pieces. I'm sure they won't survive the waves and I've no spare ones. 'You see, the tape! You needed the tape!' I think. I'm somehow able to fix them and, incredibly, they stay together for the whole swim - before finally giving up once and for all when I take them off on the long, uphill run to T1.

#### SINUOUS SHAPE

After the first 2km on the flat following transition, the bike course takes on its sinuous shape, snaking up and down the hills. The route ensures that athletes ride facing the green and rocky Peloponnese mountains and are surrounded by olive trees at every turn. It's crucial I stay below my threshold, but at a power output that's not making me lose too much time either.

At the top of the first, longer climb, the route turns around and takes the same stretch of road downhill. I've been worried that the descent could be fast and furious - and dangerous - if the road is wet or if the street dogs decide to put on a show. Luckily, though, they all behave well and the organisers place

a volunteer where one of the most aggressive dogs usually hangs out. On my way down I'm able to see the dog and a volunteer barking at one another! I laugh and keep going.

The part that follows the first descent is a further up-and-down that stretches for another 16km: the first 8km mostly up, the second 8km mostly down. It's not as hard as the first climb, but both the wind and the fatigue start to crack into my muscles. Halfway through the bike leg, I feel my quads and hamstring becoming too tensed and I take a couple of salt tablets to avoid the worst.

The second 45km (a repetition of the first) goes by much better. I feel stronger and my legs feel fresher again. I'm now looking forward to seeing how they perform in the half marathon.

#### TAMING THE BEAST

T2 goes by pretty fast in 3:30mins and that includes a toilet stop. The initial part of the run course is a bit downhill and the clock is showing a pace of 3:55min/km. I know it's too fast even for a downhill section and I feel my heart rate increasing. I won't be able to hold that for long and will pay a high toll if I pursue it. I force myself to slow down to 4:30min/km.

The course continues with a few ups and downs, but from 5km ▶

#### GREEK TRIATHLONS

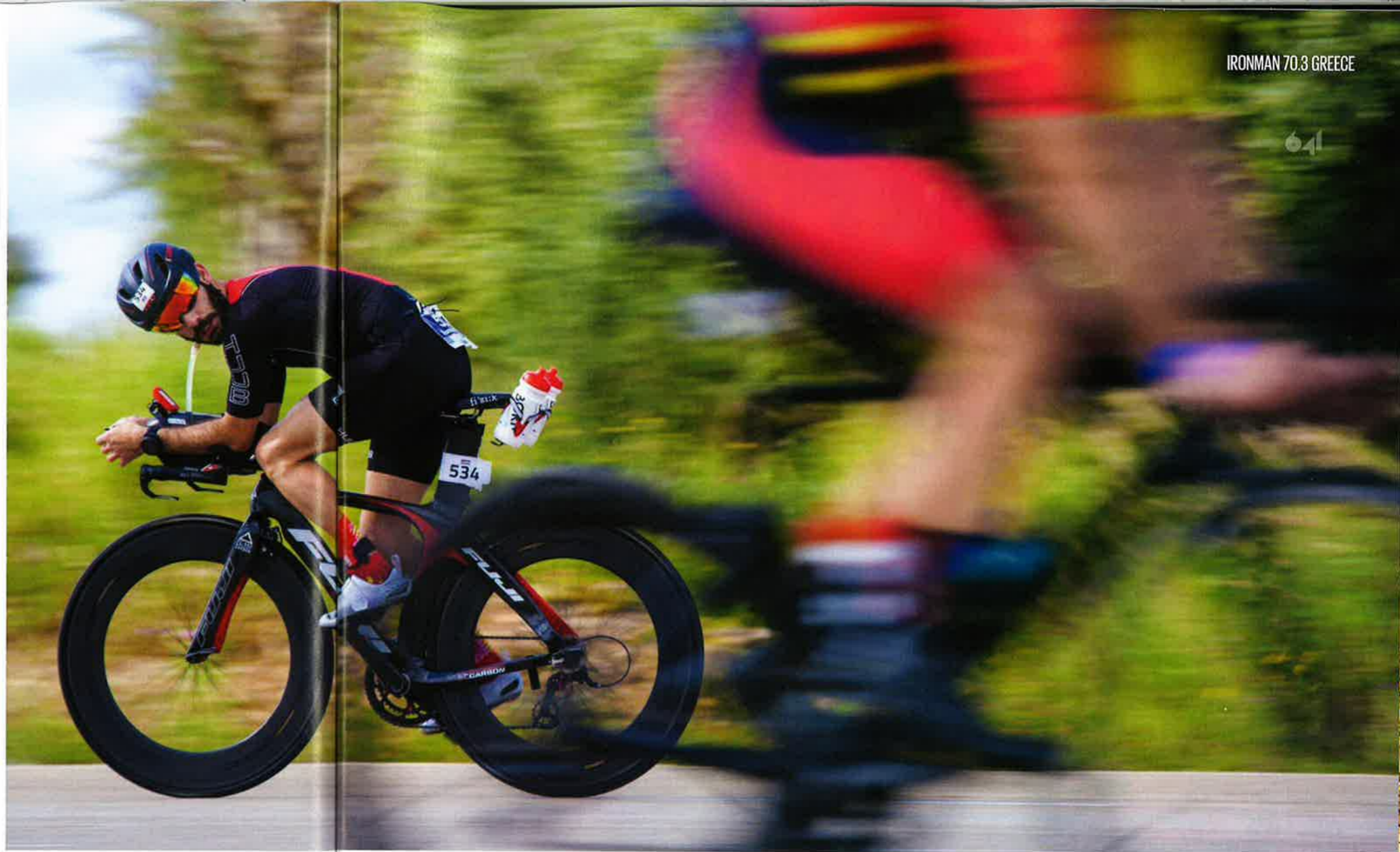
**1** The **Porosea Triathlon** hosts super-sprint, sprint, Olympic, aquathlon and children's races on Poros Island, across the Saronic Gulf from Athens, from 8-9 June 2019. [why-n.gr](http://why-n.gr)

**2** The stunning island of Crete will welcome the **Chania Triathlon** on 9 June 2019, with sprint and Olympic options both on offer. [chaniathlon.com](http://chaniathlon.com)

**3** Ancient Epidavros in the Peloponnese will witness **Epidavros Action** take place from 14-15 September 2019. A host of race distances are on offer. [why-n.gr](http://why-n.gr)

**4** Over in the culturally Greek (but independent) Republic of Cyprus, the next instalment of the tough middle-distance **Olympusman 03** is set for 16 November. [activatecyprus.com](http://activatecyprus.com)

*"The mid-30s air temperature makes the challenge complete. 70.3 Greece is now unfolding as a nasty beast that needs to be tamed"*



Our man Nick (left) settles into his groove on the 90km bike leg



HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?



onwards it's mostly flat. It's even more beautiful than the bike course. The first section zigzags through small villages where crowds cheer everyone on with gusto. The route then ventures along dirt roads and vast stretches of paved road without shade.

The rising 35°C air temperature makes the challenge complete. Ironman 70.3 Greece is now unfolding as a nasty beast that needs to be tamed. But once I find my rhythm, as I did in the swim, I only focus on the target and on my breathing. As soon as I feel myself overheating or going too fast, I quickly glimpse at my watch and correct my speed accordingly.

#### ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE

The course proceeds through an outstanding birdwatching area, which is adjacent to some of the best beaches of the region: Voidokilia and Ntivari. I try to increase my pace in the last 10km and eventually succeed. With that heat, it's a pure struggle and quite a bold move. But I'm passing a lot of athletes and my mind feels strong.

When I feel my gaze start to drift, dropping on a few metres in front of me instead of further in the distance, I try to wake myself up with some powerful words and refocus on the horizon. 'The finish line is out there, not by your feet, the finish line is out there, not by your feet...' I start repeating to myself.

I've been overtaking runners for most of the half marathon and no one tries to set up a challenge – nor do I with those who are flying past me. But, as always happens in the last hundred metres, out of the blue someone tries to force the pace and outsprints me ahead of the finish line. 'Bloody hell,' I think. I accept the challenge and try to stay with the guy, but he's too fast and



finishes in front of me (he was also running a relay, I later discover).

#### THIS IS TRIATHLON

After last season's final race at the ITU Long Distance World Champs in Denmark in July, I'd felt broken and burned out. I'd raced with injuries and had to walk the last 15km of the race. It was only nine months ago, but it now seems like a distant past. I now feel accomplished.

With 70.3 Greece, I found the motivation I needed to move on from my World Champs debacle, and build up my fitness and mindset again. It hasn't been easy to prepare during the winter, but I conclude a

#### GREECE 70.3 INFO

**First event**  
2019  
**2019 starters**  
1,174  
**2019 finishers**  
1,111  
**Next date**  
TBC 2020  
**Entry fee**  
€240  
**Nearest airport**  
Kalamata  
**Website**  
ironman.com

near-perfect day of racing and a perfect race-plan in 4:50hrs (27mins for the swim, 4:43hrs on the bike and a 1:30hr run split), good enough for 15th place in the men's 30-34 age group.

It was an epic battle in the Peloponnese, and by the end I felt like the Spartan warrior king Leonidas the 1st (played by Gerard Butler in 300) at Thermopylae! So if you're looking for an early-season race with a challenging course that allows you to discover a little known but fantastic region of Greece, I recommend Ironman 70.3 Greece on your 2020 racing schedule. Just remember to pack some tape... **220**

# 220 TRIATHLON

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