Great Cranberry Island 50K
July 21, 2012 by David Holmen

On July 21, 2012, I ran the Great Cranberry Island 50K race. Great Cranberry Island is the largest of the Cranberry Isles, a group of small islands on the coast of Maine. There are no bridges connecting Great Cranberry Island to the mainland. To get to the island, you need to take a ferry or water taxi. This makes the island feel somewhat isolated. The island's year-round population is only a few dozen people, so everyone knows each other. There's a real small-town atmosphere.

Great Cranberry Island has one paved road, running the length of the island. The road is two miles long. The race consists of a 3.07 mile out-and-back, followed by seven complete four-mile circuits of this road. The road's rolling hills and occasional views of the ocean give you a constant change of scenery, even though you're running the same route several times. The course also takes you by most of the homes on the island. It's easy to see when you're approaching the start/finish line, because the sides of the road are lined with the flags of every state.

Runners are encouraged to spend a night on the island. There aren't any hotels, but an area near the start/finish line is reserved for rustic camping on the night after the race. There are also several families that rent out their homes. I was with a group of 10 other runners who rented a large house for two nights. Our house was located right in the center of the island, along the same road we would run. From the front of the house, we had a nice view of a large inlet called "The Pool."

I flew to Bangor and drove about an hour to get to Northeast Harbor on Mount Desert Island. After eating lunch (pizza with lobster and bacon), I parked my rental car at the Mount Desert police station, where overnight parking is available for $10 per night. After parking my car, I bumped into Pascal Radley who was staying in the same house. After walking around Northeast Harbor for a while, we took the next ferry to Great Cranberry Island. From the ferry, we had views of the Cranberry Isles and the mountains of Acadia National Park.

When we got to the island, we stopped at the Great Cranberry Store to get some groceries. We expected to have to walk a mile with our luggage to get to the house, but an island resident gave us a ride. This is quite common. If you start walking down the road, the next person who drives by will offer you a ride. We arrived in the late afternoon, so we had several hours to explore the island.

After unpacking, Pascal and I walked from our house to the dock and back – about half the island. Along the way, we bumped into several other Marathon Maniacs who also rented houses. We also saw many of the signs along the route. There were signs for each runner, with their names and home towns. Runners who were members of Crow Athletics each had a crow on their sign. There were also signs with inspirational quotes.

Since many runners don't arrive on the island until the morning of the race, packet pickup is held that morning. To give runners who are camping enough time to set up, the race doesn't start until 11:30. That means we run through the afternoon. In past years, it's sometimes been quite hot. This year, the forecast high was 76 degrees with mostly sunny skies.

In the weeks leading up to the race, I was conflicted about how fast to run. My previous race was a DNF, so I considered running conservatively to make sure I could finish comfortably. When you're used to running marathons, it's easy to misjudge and start a 50K too fast. On the other hand, I had some surprisingly fast training runs in temperatures as high as 89, so I felt like I might be able to set a PR, even on a warm day.

I woke up early, so before packet pickup, I started walking toward the end of the island I hadn't seen yet. I didn't walk the entire length, but I went far enough to see the sign with my name. I also saw a sign with a quote by Steve Prefontaine. "To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift." Pre was a truly gifted runner who fought for every second whenever he raced. After seeing this sign, I knew I couldn't run conservatively. I was compelled to strive for a PR.

To set a PR, I needed to run an average pace of 8:30 per mile. I started the race at a pace that felt somewhat relaxed, so I was surprised when I reached the one mile mark in 7:50. I slowed down slightly, but settled into a pace that was just a little slower than 8 minute miles.

After a couple laps, the runners were spread out all along the course. Whether you're fast or slow, you have opportunities to see all the other runners several times. You also get to see many of the island residents. The islanders really support this race. Many of them were race volunteers. The rest came out to watch the race and cheer. One woman rode back and forth on a bicycle, and she sprayed sunblock on anyone who needed it. Another was picking blueberries and them giving them to runners as they passed.

Even though this race is an ultramarathon, there was a chip mat to record our times at the marathon mark, and it's a USATF-certified marathon course that can be used to qualify for the Boston Marathon. The Boston qualifying time for my age group is 3:30. That's an average pace of 8:00 per mile. It took slightly more effort with each lap, but after keeping up this pace for five laps (19.07 miles), I decided to go for it. I realized that if my marathon split was under 3:30, I would have a very good chance of setting a 50K PR, even if I blew up in the last five miles.

When I finished my sixth lap, I was just barely under the pace I needed for a BQ. Although the hills aren't huge, they're just big enough that everyone speeds up and slows down on different parts of the course. Because of this, I was a little worried that I might slow down a little without realizing it. To compensate, I picked up my effort a little. Actually, I picked up my effort a lot. I passed several runners who had been ahead of me the whole race. When I reached the marathon mark, I looked at my watch and saw that I beat my BQ time by almost a minute and a half. I had averaged 7:40 over the previous three miles.

Almost immediately, I ran out of gas and was forced to slow down. Some of the runners I passed were now passing me. The last five miles were a struggle, and my pace slowed considerably. Despite my slower pace, I knew I would set a 50K PR if I just kept running. I eventually crossed the line in 4:14:36, a PR by more than eleven minutes.

The finisher medal is one of the nicest I've ever seen. It's in the shape of a lobster claw, and it can be converted into a belt buckle by removing the ribbon. In addition to the medal, each finisher also received an island rock with the words "GCI Ultra 2012" written on it. The rocks are symbolic. Each runner leaves a piece of themselves on the island, so we each get a piece of the island to take with us.

One of the highlights of the weekend was the post-race lobster dinner. Each runner received a dinner ticket with their race packet. Additional tickets for friends and family were available for purchase, but you had to buy them in advance. Dinner included corn on the cob, potato chips, crackers, watermelon, beer and lobster. Each runner was given a whole steamed lobster, still in the shell. It was BYOLC (bring your own lobster cracker). When they were done cooking lobsters and corn, a few of us used the coals from the fire to roast marshmallows and make s'mores. I returned to the house before the party was over, so I missed the karaoke and fireworks.

Each runner also received a ticket for breakfast the next morning, courtesy of the ladies aid society. As with the dinner, you could buy extra tickets for friends and family. I wish I could have stayed longer, but after breakfast I needed to catch the next ferry.

Race director Gary Allen is a full-year resident of Great Cranberry Island. He has a passion for running and directing races. His pride in the island really shows. I'm sure he'd like as many runners as possible to experience this race. I'm inclined to agree.

I've run well over a hundred marathons and ultras. Some have small town charm. Some are held in remote areas. Some have beautiful views. A handful offer truly unique experiences. This race has all of that.