



Trail of kings

In this first of a four-part series on extreme trail runs in southern Africa, Stephen Cunliffe conquers the Lesotho Wildrun – a gruelling three-day GPS-guided footrace through the magnificent Ketane Ha Mothibi and Thaba Putsoa mountain ranges

Limited to 50 runners, only a fortunate few experience the alluring landscapes of the 120-kilometre Lesotho Wildrun stage-race in this remote mountain kingdom on South Africa's doorstep.

Departing in the dark from the mountain gateway village of Malealea, we are transferred by minibus to the race start near the hamlet of Ha Searle. An intimidating 44km stage, including over 2 000 metres of vertical gain and an oxygen-deprived high point of 2 625 metres, awaits us.

Understandably, the starting arena exudes an intoxicating blend of excitement and trepidation. With the compulsory kit inspections completed, we set off at sunrise on what would ultimately prove to be the experience of a lifetime. And to top it all, this was not an easy stage that would help us settle into the race: the track immediately began to ascend toward the Semonkong ('place of smoke') Plateau.

I have to admit that running at high altitude takes some getting used to. 'Shuffling' is probably a more accurate word to describe my laboured progress. The conditions are gruelling, with the trail zigzagging between tiny villages that appear practically unchanged for a thousand years. On this occasion, it didn't take long before the field spread out, and I was grateful to find myself moving at a similar speed to Stephen Kriel and Guy Jennings. We agreed to team up and run together.

As we ate up the trail and ticked off the kilometres, my thoughts drifted and my mind marvelled at the fact that trail running could bring together an advertising executive, a sixth-generation butcher and a journalist as friends. It would seem unlikely that we would have ever met, much less developed a genuine friendship, without the shared trials and tribulations of attempting to run across Lesotho.

As tough as the running proved to be, navigation was often a greater challenge.

Wildrunner Events director Owen Middleton had warned us: "Remember, the GPS is only a navigational tool and should not be followed blindly. There are trails everywhere in the mountains, so be sure to take the path of least resistance that's heading in your general direction."

With over a marathon of tough terrain to get through on the first day, we really didn't want to get lost and add on a bunch of 'bonus miles' for fun.

We soon settled into our various navigational roles. I manned the GPS, Guy kept an eye on the map, and Stephen was always ready to ward off an aggressive dog with a well-aimed stone whenever one of the shaggy mountain mutts seemed to be sizing us up for lunch. This was teamwork at its finest.

Seven exhilarating and exhausting hours later, we finally rolled into Semonkong Lodge. We might have finished an hour behind the winners of stage one but, having endured a punishing 12 hours on their feet, the backmarkers would stagger over the line only after the sun had set. This left them little time to recover before the next stage got under way.

Personally, day two was on a par with the best runs I've done anywhere in the world. The circular course follows a breathtaking (in every sense of the word) 28km route, taking runners along both sides of the magnificent Maletsunyane Gorge before passing the 192m Maletsunyane Falls a few kilometres before the finish.

As the start of stage two got under way, I heard Owen yell: "Enjoy the views and friendly gradient of the single track now because later, the steep crossing of the Maletsunyane Gorge will have you bleeding from your eyeballs!"

We set off at a jog along a frost-covered trail, crunching across the frozen ground alongside a river. But soon we were ascending sharply out of the gorge.

As we huffed and puffed large clouds of vapour into the crisp morning air, our



Photos: Kelvin Trautman

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Travel Planner

The Lesotho Wildrun is organised by the experienced and professional Wildrunner trail-running team (www.wildrunner.co.za). The event takes place in April each year and is limited to a maximum of 50 entrants due to the limited accommodation and logistical challenges of co-ordinating a trail run in such a remote region. Anyone interested in signing up for the 2013 edition should check out the official race website (www.lesothowildrun.co.za) or get hold of the registrations manager Tamaryn Jupp at lesotho@wildrun.co.za or call (021) 821-9898 / (072) 438-3242 for further details.

panting team bore an uncanny resemblance to a ragged procession of those old steam locomotives.

With clouds of condensation spurting from my mouth, I felt as if my antiquated engine was past its sell-by date, and I

struggled to find any sort of rhythm on the first steep climb of the day.

A couple of kilometres later, though, we found our stride. By now our running trio had been dubbed 'Team SSG' (initials of our first names) by the race organisers, and we revelled in one of the most spectacular trail runs on Earth. The scenery was quite simply out of this world, but nothing could have prepared us for one of the continent's most exceptional waterfalls at the 23km mark.

First, however, we had the notoriously steep-sided Maletsunyane Gorge to get through. After slipping and sliding our way down to the bottom, we plunged into the crystal-clear river.

The icy water felt heavenly on our weary legs, but all too soon we began the relentless slog up the other side.

The views up and down the valley were sensational, but even these gobsmacking vistas couldn't distract me for too long from the brutality of the seemingly never-ending climb out the valley.

Back on top, we passed through a check-point before stopping briefly to refuel at the daily 'munchie' point sponsored by our new best friends from Hammer.

With our water bottles replenished and our energy levels revived, we had one last waterfall-viewing stop to make as we soaked up the scenery on the gentle trail back to Semonkong Lodge. No matter how serious you are about racing, it would be criminal not to steal a few minutes to marvel at this cascading natural wonder.

On the final day, we waved a fond farewell to Semonkong Lodge before embarking on the 40km journey via the

Lekhalong-la-Mokhelelise Pass (commonly known as Baboon's Pass) toward Ramabanta. Our trail hugged the spine of the Thaba Putsoa Ridge, before descending toward the village of Ha Ramokhobo on the northern slopes of the Letsunyane River Valley.

By now, cumulative fatigue was taking its toll. Both Stephen and I felt shattered, so Guy took the lead and held our ragged trio together as we trundled our weary way toward the finish line.

After gulping down a couple of Voltaren tablets to keep my aching quads and knees in check, the panoramic vistas buoyed my spirits as the scenic trail slowly wound its way toward the Makhaleng River.

The icy water revived us just long enough to tackle the final short and sharp climb of the Lesotho Wildrun 2012.

The finish suddenly came into view on the rolling lawns of the Ramabanta Trading Post Lodge.

We crossed the line together with arms held high. We had made it!

Steven Black and Gerry Beukes shared first place in a winning time of 15 hours, 23 minutes and 57 seconds – a very impressive achievement if you consider the backmarkers were taking only marginally less time than this on a daily basis.

Team SSG officially crossed the line a couple of hours behind the winners in 17 hours, 20 minutes and 27 seconds, but finishing times turned out to be largely inconsequential.

It was the incredible mountain scenery, intriguing Basotho culture and camaraderie of newfound friends that combined to ensure

the Lesotho Wildrun was a remarkable experience for everyone who enjoyed the privilege of taking part.

Whether you see yourself as a king of the mountains or a more social 33-hour finisher, this tough race appeals to trail runners of all ages, stages and abilities.

Yes, you need to be fit but this is, above all, a rewarding wilderness journey with like-minded people – a life experience that you'll find yourself savouring long after the race is won.

Stephen Cunliffe would like to thank chief sponsor, Adidas, for its financial backing and high-quality race gear. The Lesotho Wildrun would not take place without the committed and generous support of Adidas. Check out www.adidas.co.za/running.

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