

# TO HELL AND BACK

**DUBBED THE 'GRAIL OF TRAIL', THIS BRUTAL 42KM FULL TRAIL MARATHON WEAVES ITS WAY ALONG THE VERY SAME ROUTE AS THE LEGENDARY OTTER TRAIL - SOUTH AFRICA'S MOST ICONIC AND SPECTACULAR HIKING TRAIL - AS IT TRAVERSES THE RUGGED COASTLINE AND CROSSES THE MANY RIVERS WITHIN THE MAJESTIC TSITSIKAMMA NATIONAL PARK.**

Forget the Marathon des Sables, forget the Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon, forget every other endurance race I've ever competed in ... when cramps gripped my quads 26km into the Otter Trail Run, I would have sworn that this was the hardest, most gruelling trail marathon I'd ever signed on for. With a swim across the Bloukrans, three steep climbs and 16km still to go, my sub-seven hour finish was looking like an impossibility. In fact, just completing the event within the eight-hour cut-off was suddenly looking like the ultimate challenge.

### **HOW TOUGH IS THE OTTER?**

I was not the first person to find this a tough race. Hardened trail runners described the inaugural 2009 Otter Trail Run, which attracted some of the best endurance athletes in Africa, as 'the pinnacle of outdoor endurance events'. And, although it's only been on the scene for three short years, this epic event has earned a deserved reputation as one of continent's toughest trail runs.

Race organisers, Magnetic South, in association with SANParks and chief sponsor Hi-Tec, offer an incredible opportunity to energetic outdoor enthusiasts to run the full length of the Otter Trail once every year, with the Otter Run and Ramble being the only times when trail running is permitted on this legendary trail. The Otter Run, with a cut-off of eight hours, is recommended for the more serious trail runners, while the Otter Ramble, with its more lenient 11-hours cut-off time, can be completed by any reasonably fit person.

### **SALT RIVER PROLOGUE AND THE ABANGENI**

This incredible two-day adventure begins with registration, safety equipment checks and the Salt River Prologue. The Prologue is an essential part of the Otter Trail Run and the demanding 4km course functions as a seeding race for the main event the next morning. Upon completion of the Prologue, the fastest 16 runners become known as the 'Abangeni' or 'Challengers' and these top athletes start in one bunch ahead of everyone else. A four-minute delay follows their departure, after which the rest of the runners are set off in groups of four participants, according to the ranking of their Prologue results. The seeded groups are deliberately spaced 30 seconds apart to spread the field, as the narrow trails of the Otter would never cope with 200 athletes charging off en masse straight into a single-track bottleneck.



Eventual Ramble winner Maritz Theron wades across the Lottering River at the 20km mark.

## THE OTTER AFRICAN TRAIL RUN

At the final race briefing, event director, Mark Collins, scared the hell out of all the competitors, especially the first-timers like me, with nightmarish stories of the ordeal that awaited us early the following morning. "It astounds me that there are 200 maniacs out there willing to voluntarily take on Africa's toughest and most technical trail marathon ... you are all crazy people," he concluded. After scoffing down a huge plate of carbo-loading pasta, I slunk away to my bed and ruminated on his terrifying words and the huge challenge that lay ahead.

On the morning of Friday 30 September, 200 endurance athletes from around the country, along with a sizable international contingent, gathered in the inky blackness below a star-studded sky at Storms River mouth. Nervous tension mingled with an electric atmosphere in the cool morning air ahead of first light. As dawn broke on a picture-perfect day, we set off running through indigenous coastal forests, into deep ravines, over imposing mountains, past stunning waterfalls and across the fynbos-clad slopes of the Garden Route National Park. ▶



**From left to right:** The stunning Garden Route shoreline | The notorious Bloukrans River crossing | A precarious floating bridge provides one final obstacle before the finish | Race rules require competitors to carry a predetermined list of compulsory safety equipment in case of injury and bad weather | Swept by waves and strong currents, the Bloukrans crossing is not for sissies! | Riana Vorster powers her way around the Salt River Prologue course ahead of the Otter Ramble | The treacherous terrain calls for total concentration. **Far right:** Otter Ramble competitors contending with 60mm of rain and flooded river crossings.

**THE OTTER TERRAIN INVOLVES TECHNICAL TRAIL RUNNING SUCH AS JUMPING OVER TREE ROOTS, DUCKING UNDER BRANCHES, HOPPING OVER SLIPPERY ROCKS, RUNNING ACROSS UNSTABLE PEBBLES AND CHARGING THROUGH RIVERS. THE FIRST 4.5KM IS THE MOST SUSTAINED TECHNICAL STRETCH OF THE RACE AND REQUIRES FOCUS AND CONCENTRATION. THE BRIEFEST LAPSE WILL COST YOU YOUR RACE, WITH A TWISTED ANKLE OR WORSE. OUR RACE WAS NO DIFFERENT TO PREVIOUS YEARS, WITH 12 COMPETITORS FORCED TO RETIRE EARLY DUE TO SPRAINED AND SWOLLEN ANKLES.**

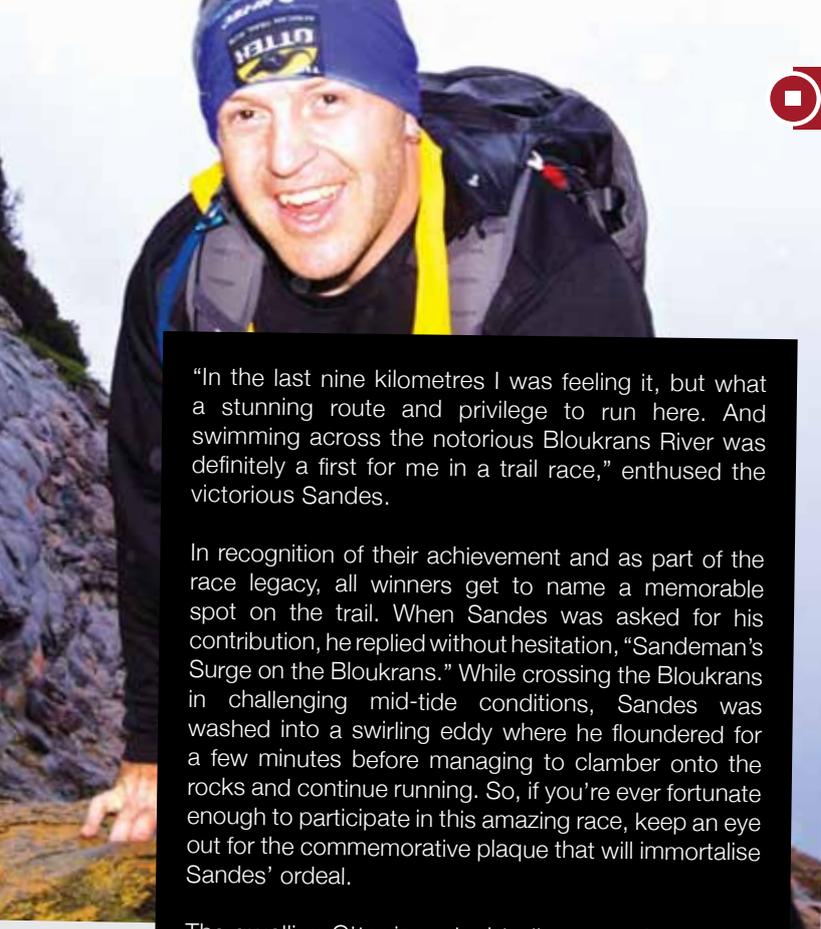
Hugging the shoreline for most of the way, the course demands competitors cross four sizeable rivers, all of which involve getting more than just your feet wet! The third of the big rivers is the infamous Bloukrans River, which involved a long wade followed by a short swim and a scramble onto the slippery, mussel-encrusted rocks on the far side. Lifeguards, safety personnel and emergency response equipment were a welcome sight at the Bloukrans crossing and I'm sure I wasn't the only exhausted runner that silently thanked Magnetic South for putting such thorough planning and preparation into the safety aspects of the event – not least the crossing of this perilous river.

But, ultimately, the big rivers proved the least of my worries. The Otter Run involves no fewer than eight 'significant' climbs, with three of these exceeding 100 vertical metres for a total elevation gain of 2,700m overall. The endless ups and downs of this brutal course soon took their toll on fatigued legs. Some of the climbs would best be described as 'inhumane', with the extreme gradient forcing even the strongest athletes to walk on some of the steepest stepped sections.

After the Bloukrans swim and two more tough climbs, I was suffering badly and rapidly approaching a wall. The run was starting to blur in my memory, cramps niggled at my quads and I felt as if I had long since crashed through the pain barrier. Friendly SANParks rangers gave vocal support and encouragement to us, while thoughtful race marshals also provided the rugby scores in the SA-Samoa World Cup match, but my increasing exhaustion was distracting me from the surrounding beauty of the landscape.

It took 34km before the course finally hit its first sustained section of flat trail. Unfortunately, by this late stage, most runners had become involuntary walkers like myself, and it was a monumental challenge to try and force my cramping legs and empty fuel tank to take advantage of the easier trail conditions. However, stunning views of huge waves crashing onto a pristine rocky coastline under bright blue skies buoyed my spirits, providing a surge of endorphins that helped me dig deep for one final push around the infamous 'Cramp Corner', down onto the beach and across a precarious floating bridge, before finally finishing at De Vasselot campsite in Nature's Valley.

Returning from his epic victory in the gruelling Leadville 100-mile ultra-marathon in America, Ryan Sandes, the soft-spoken trail runner extraordinaire, dominated one of the strongest trail running fields (Ryan Sandes, André Gie, Will Robinson, Bruce Arnett, Greg Goodall, John Collins and Victor Gugushe) ever assembled on South African soil to clinch first place and the coveted Grail in Africa's premier off-road running event. Shaving an impressive seven minutes off André Gie's record, Sandes finished in a blistering 04:40.



"In the last nine kilometres I was feeling it, but what a stunning route and privilege to run here. And swimming across the notorious Bloukrans River was definitely a first for me in a trail race," enthused the victorious Sandes.

In recognition of their achievement and as part of the race legacy, all winners get to name a memorable spot on the trail. When Sandes was asked for his contribution, he replied without hesitation, "Sandeman's Surge on the Bloukrans." While crossing the Bloukrans in challenging mid-tide conditions, Sandes was washed into a swirling eddy where he floundered for a few minutes before managing to clamber onto the rocks and continue running. So, if you're ever fortunate enough to participate in this amazing race, keep an eye out for the commemorative plaque that will immortalise Sandes' ordeal.

The gruelling Otter is undoubtedly one of the hardest and simultaneously most exhilarating events I've ever taken part in. I staggered over the line, with the other mere mortals, two-and-a-half hours behind Sandes and the Abangeni in 110th place, but, thankfully, well within the eight-hour cut-off time.

Race director Mark Collins summed it up perfectly at the final dinner and prize-giving ceremony when he said, "This race never ceases to amaze and humble me. Two hundred trail runners completed the Otter in under eight hours, which blows my mind. And we saw an impeccable display of athleticism and running, especially from those who battled home in a gruelling 12 hours in tough wet condition on the Ramble."

**MUCH LIKE THE COMRADES, FROM NEXT YEAR MAGNETIC SOUTH WILL BE INTRODUCING THE UP RUN FROM NATURE'S VALLEY TO STORMS RIVER MOUTH, AND THEREAFTER IT WILL ALTERNATE ON AN ANNUAL BASIS. IT'S A TOUGH PROSPECT, BUT THE BREATHTAKINGLY BEAUTIFUL OTTER IS A REALISTIC PROPOSITION AND WELL WITHIN THE GRASP OF ANY KEEN TRAIL RUNNER, WHO IS WILLING PUT IN SOME HILL WORK. SO, DON'T PUT IT OFF, SIGN UP NOW FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME ON SOUTH AFRICA'S 'GRAIL OF TRAIL'.**

## DInfo box

Otter Trail Run contact details:  
Race website: [www.theotter.co.za](http://www.theotter.co.za)  
Organiser's website: [www.magneticsouth.net](http://www.magneticsouth.net)  
Email: [info@magneticsouth.net](mailto:info@magneticsouth.net)



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