

Photographs by Stephen Cunliffe & Nick Muzik

Running Wild

The arid Richtersveld is hauntingly beautiful and scorched by an unrelenting sun. It's not everyone's idea of fun spending five days running 200km across stark and inhospitable desert terrain, but **Stephen Cunliffe** chose this challenging event as an unforgettable way to celebrate his 40th birthday

first-ever Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun. The next two days would see us exploring the /Ai/Ais Hot Springs Park and seldom-seen lower reaches of the wild Fish River Canyon on the

Namibian side of the TFCA.

Having crossed the Orange River at sunrise, we endured a steady, energy-sapping climb. Making use of the ubiquitous zebra trails and our GPS units, we forged a route along the dry watercourses and picked our way along rocky mountain tracks before descending into the iconic Fish River Canyon. The scenery was indescribably impressive, demanding our attention and awe. But the soft sand and polished pebbles underfoot made running challenging, necessitating constant vigilance. The omnipresent threat of a twisted ankle made scenery appreciation a risky pastime.

With a punishing trail marathon already taking its toll on our weary legs, we ran – or, rather, trudged – between steep canyon walls where humans seldom ventured. Our only company was hardy ostriches, reclusive kudu and sure-footed Hartman's mountain zebra. The footprints of trail-runners were interspersed with those of leopards and baboons: this was wilderness trail-running

in its purest form. The skies were big, the silence deafening and the canyon scenery in the soft afternoon light will remain etched in the memory of every privileged Richtersveld wildrunner for years to come.

Trail junkies Owen and Tam Middleton started Wildrunner in 2007 and their multi-stage, off-the-beaten-track running events rapidly developed a reputation for annually offering a select group of 80 wilderness-loving trail aficionados access to some of the most sought-after mountain and coastal trails in southern Africa (*see sidebar*). Far from paved roads and cities, wildrunners become one with nature and experience trail-running in its most primordial and uncorrupted form. Wildruns provide a rare opportunity to explore pristine wilderness, enjoy respectful encounters with wildlife and interact with interesting people, locals and fellow runners alike.

Safety is paramount when hosting an extreme event in a remote and inaccessible location, and a seasoned team of Wildrunner professionals co-ordinates the complex support logistics. From munchie stops and medical care out on the trail to effective radio communications and a mobile race village that shifts location daily, the well-oiled team overcomes all challenges with aplomb.

I finally crossed the day four finish line a couple of hours before sunset. After eight gruelling hours, my legs were heavy, my

knees were wobbly and my feet were sore, but my spirits soared. The endorphin high that engulfs one at a moment like this can only truly be understood by a runner: there's no greater feeling on earth.

After a hot shower to rinse off the dust and salt, courtesy of the hard-working event crew and their portable donkey boiler, I made my way to the campfire, picking up an ice-cold Windhoek Draught from the bar en route. As I pulled up a chair, I overheard the Namibian Park Manager, Wayne Handley, telling a group of runners that this beautiful spot was called the Wilderness Hot Springs Camp. "This is the



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old /Ai/Ais and only a handful of people have ever seen it because it's actually off limits to the general public. We took the decision to unlock this special place for this year's cross-border event as a test case because the wildrun is a low-impact and carefully controlled event, in contrast to 4x4ing," he said.

Despite the warmth of the fire, I had goose bumps by the time I sat down. We were part of something groundbreaking and very special, camping in a place very few people had ever seen. A thoughtful silence ensued as we all pondered what we'd just heard. The necessity of removing every trace of our temporary tented camp in the morning to ensure nothing but footprints remained after we departed wasn't lost on anyone relaxing around the fire.

The untiring Magda de Waal roused me from my fireside musings with a plate of



Clockwise, from above: The arid Richtersveld scenery is as diverse as it's spectacular. Overcoming the notorious Tatasberg Mountain – strewn with giant boulders – is an exhausting undertaking. Roughly midway through each stage, you'll find a strategically located support station to refuel and refill water bottles.

tasty chops, boerewors and potato salad. The delicious food – along with the setting up of camp each day – was ably handled by her and her husband Johan, along with their energetic Richtersveld Tours crew. When I popped my head back into the kitchen tent in search of seconds, Maria – one of the local Nama ladies – confided to me that long before this place became a protected area, old /Ai/Ais was the home of her ancestors. Indeed, the land's one of the few places in the world where the rich heritage of the Nama is still alive. "This is the birthplace of my

their Namibian counterparts. "We have an amazing relationship with the Namibian staff. It never even comes up that we're from different towns or countries. We all work together as one team and we're all good friends. It proves that country borders are often silly things created by people. Conservation transcends this and cross-border adventure tourism events like the wildrun benefit from this camaraderie," he said.

The next day we rose at 6.30am to prepare for the stretch ahead. I struggled out of my sleeping bag into the chilly desert air and pulled on my running kit for the last time. As I packed my kit bag and delivered it to the waiting Land Cruiser, I was filled with conflicting emotions at the thought that today would be our final day of running. My legs were stiff and crying out for rest, but ►



hest-deep in the refreshingly cool waters of the Fish River, we waded across the snaking waterway in search of more compact sand on which to run. Our little group of weary wildrunners was already over 40km into the most gruelling day of the Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun and everyone's tank was nearing empty. At the daily race briefing the night before, event organiser Owen Middleton had cautioned that although day four would afford us rare access to one of southern Africa's last great wilderness areas in a remote section of the 5 086km² /Ai/Ais-Richtersveld Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA), this gruelling stretch of the event shouldn't be underestimated: desert trail-running isn't for the faint-hearted.

After three highly memorable days traversing the South African sector of the cross-border park, and with 120km already under our running shoes, the time came to enter Namibia and make history with the

Above, clockwise, from top left: Dawid Kaswari was the overall winner of the men's race. Stephen Cunliffe inside the Fish River Canyon. Pieter van Wyk, a passionate desert plant specialist. Roland Vorwerk of Boundless Southern Africa.

Below: The rocky landscape is dominated by expansive blue skies and jagged mountain ridges.





► my spirits soared and my soul begged for more.

On this final day, I found myself running alongside Roland Vorwerk (43), Marketing Manager for Boundless Southern Africa, a unit hosted within the Department of Environmental Affairs that focuses on the marketing of transfrontier conservation areas across southern Africa. Boundless is also doing intriguing work with neighbouring communities.

“We always sponsor at least four local runners: two from South African communities and two from villages on the Namibian side, as we strive to develop local ambassadors and community interest

Above: You know it’s roasting hot in the Richtersveld when kudu succumb to the heat.

Below: The Richtersveld isn’t the only Wildrun event on offer. Here competitors battle an unrelenting headwind in the annual Wild Coast Wildrun.

WILDRUN ADDICTION

Wildrunner annually hosts three highly sought-after events – Mapungubwe, Richtersveld and Wild Coast. Participants vary in age from 20 to over 70 and any reasonably fit and healthy person can take part. However, putting in the training kilometres on similar surfaces (beach sand, rocky trails, etc) helps entrants maximise enjoyment.

Wildruns are synonymous with wilderness trail-running of the highest quality. Runners carry mandatory safety equipment, rain gear, sun protection, water, race sustenance, a map and a GPS. All personal kit is transported by vehicle between the overnight camps. All wildrun events are fully catered, including ice-cold beers and soft drinks, while sports masseurs

are on stand-by to rub down aching legs.

Due to the complex logistics involved, each race is limited to a maximum of 80 participants and entries often sell out in minutes. So, whichever of these wildruns piques your interest, don’t delay: click on the event link below for full race details and entry procedures.

■ **Mapungubwe Transfrontier Wildrun** (www.wildrun.com/event/mapungubwe) is a 92km, three-day trail running safari experience through the culturally significant and wildlife-rich bushveld of the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area. From the ancient Mapungubwe citadel in SA and the rolling savannahs of Botswana’s Tuli Block to the towering baobabs and

ancient elephant trails of Zimbabwe, this is the ultimate three-country safari-on-the-run experience in one of Africa’s premier wildlife areas. It takes place in May each year.

■ **Wildcoast Wildrun** (www.wildrun.com/event/wildcoast) is a three-day coastal run traversing the rural homeland of the amaXhosa people from Kei Mouth to Hole-in-the-Wall along SA’s scenic Wild Coast. From deserted white-sand beaches that stretch as far as the eye can see to rolling, grassy headlands and delicate coastal forests teeming with life, the Wildcoast Wildrun affords trail-runners access to one of the world’s most spectacular coastlines. There are two departures every September.

in the wildrun event,” Roland explained. “Look at Dawid Kaswari – an unemployed Richtersvelder – who’s on track to claim victory in the men’s event, despite having never competed in a race before.”

Thanks to Boundless, local communities feel included and are far more supportive of the wildrun taking place in their community-owned conservation area. At these types of events, their involvement is typically restricted to supplying manual labour. While there’s certainly value in providing short-term, casual jobs in a region where unemployment is rife,

having members of the local community take part – and excel – as bona fide participants is even more rewarding and empowering.

Crossing the line – quite some distance behind Dawid – I marvelled at our unique trail-running experience. We’d run through a wilderness that few people ever saw, friendships had been forged amidst blood, sweat and tears and I knew for sure that the Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun would continue to rejuvenate my soul and invade my dreams for years to come.

Visit: www.wildrun.com/event/richtersveld 🌈

