The Wildcoast Wildrun is arguably South Africa’s premier multi-day trail running event. Over the course of three unforgettable days, competitors run, ramble and roll their way north along South Africa’s most remote and captivating stretch of wilderness coastline. With a fearsome reputation for unpredictability and gusty weather, the ocean-ravaged Wild Coast is both insanely beautiful and unforgivingly brutal. I strapped on my Adidas Supernova Rides and tackled the long trail across windswept beaches, tidal estuaries and rolling grassy hills to sample the highs and lows of the 2012 Wildrun firsthand. Three days and 114 km later I hauled myself over the finish line at the Hole in the Wall exhausted but elated.

Starting at the Great Kei River, roughly 80 km north of East London, the Wildcoast Wildrun traces the former Transkei coastline northwards all the way to Hole in the Wall, one of our country’s most picturesque and iconic natural wonders. The Wildrun route is unmarked bar the start and finish of each stage, and runners need only stick close to the seashore, keeping the ocean on their right, to attain the finish line each day. For the elite runners at the front of the field race tactics and correctly choosing the path of least resistance are essential in their quest for glory. But for most people winning is the furthest thing from their mind; they come instead to immerse themselves in some of the most incredible coastal scenery and rugged running terrain to be found anywhere on our planet.

The next best thing to running barefoot.

Rocks, stones, mud, wet roots, grassland, hard-packed trails and jeep-track.

Trail running in Africa is not for softhearted Barefoot-style running is now widely accepted to be more efficient, faster and healthier but it is simply not practical to run without shoes. Barefoot footwear offers protection and unsurpassed grip while providing the wearer with a secure and intimate fit that’s as close to running barefoot as you can get in shoes. So become a ‘Natural’, with the ALL-NEW TRAILROC range. The shoe that is so perfect for South African trail conditions, you’ll forgive them for thinking they were designed specifically for us!

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DAY 1:
KEI RIVER MOUTH TO KOB INN
DISTANCE: 44 KM / VERTICAL GAIN: 285 M

For many participants, myself included, it is the anticipation of what is to come that is almost the hardest part of these types of events. As Race Director Owen Middleton gives his pre-race briefing, an electric atmosphere of palpable anticipation pervades the legendary Bush Pig Pub. Nervous energy seeps from competitors as they listen to what lies in store over the next 72 hours and you can sense that everyone is considering what the conditions will be like and how their race might unfold over the coming days. After chugging down a couple of carbo-loading beers, the crowd soon disperses, drifting away to try and get some sleep ahead of the longest and hardest stage of the Wildrun.

After a light breakfast and final toilet stop, runners board the Kei River Ferry and cross to the start of stage one. Thrumping music greets our arrival and the ominous countdown to race time begins. At 07h30 sharp the race gets underway. Supercharged with nervous energy from the long wait, 80 runners surge down the riverbank in a tsunami of excitement and pour onto the beach. Fresh legs stride across the hard sand and eat up the first few kilometres with ease, but as the initial surge of adrenalin wears off the field soon spreads out along the wild shoreline.

A gale-force headwind, gusting up to 35 knots, makes all positions highly competitive. A 10 km stretch of narrow, sandy coastline, interspersed with the occasional patch of slippery sea-swept rock, takes everyone past the imposing, rusting hulk of the Jacaranda shipwreck before the first of many ominous-looking estuaries confronts us at the 13 km mark. But, thankfully, it’s nothing more than a waist-deep wade across the Khobonqaba River. Five kilometres later and we’re already at Wavecrest and the first day’s checkpoint, where we replenish our water supplies and rehydrate with the electrolyte offerings of product sponsor Hammer Nutrition.

The checkpoint break is short and sweet; soon we’re crossing over the iNxaxo River and pounding down the beach once more. It’s a long and relentless stretch of exposed beach that demands runners group up and take it in turn front, running into the teeth of a relentless gale. Everyone puts their heads down and tuck in behind the leader to escape the worst of the wind and stinging sand. The conditions are hellishly tough and the Wildrun quickly separates the men from the boys.

Passing through Mazeppa Bay, the trail temporarily leaves the sand and detours onto undulating grassy terrain; it’s a welcome relief after the windswept beach. By the time we finally catch sight of the Wildrun flags that mark the end of day one, most competitors are running out of water and suffering from dehydration. After five relentless hours of racing, a final splash through the Ghoria River Mouth causes many a hamstring to tighten and cramp, but the sight of the wonderful Kob Inn and swimming pool energises even the most utterly spent runners for one final push.

DAY 2:
KOB INN TO THE HAVEN
DISTANCE: 36 KM / VERTICAL GAIN: 510 M

Picking up a jeep track from the gates of Kob Inn, the stage two route immediately sets off across gently sloping grasslands alongside a stormy sea. Respite from the wind-ravaged beach is short-lived and after just 3 km we encounter the first water hazard of the day at Jujura River; a refreshing dip ensures everyone is wide awake and ready to run.

The first half of day two is a mixture of hard-packed cattle trails across rolling green hills interspersed with sections of gale-blasted beach. The underfoot conditions along the cattle tracks are a bit slippery, demanding a runner’s total concentration to avoid a stumble or twisting an ankle.

WITH 10 KM OF GAME TRAIL RUNNING THROUGH PRISTINE COASTAL FOREST AND CATTLE-FREE GRASSY HILLS, THE REAL HIGHLIGHT OF DAY TWO IS THE OPEN GRASSLANDS FOR RHINOS, BUT THE GREY BEHEMOTHS REMAIN ELUSIVE.

A final sand-blasted stretch of exposed beach takes us to the Mhlabase River Mouth and biggest thrill of the entire Wildrun. Diving into the muddy water and using the arms instead of the legs provides welcome relief. Just 2 km further on the stage two finish at the Haven Hotel comes into view. We all collapse into the swimming pool, sip cold beer and sign up for massages; it’s a sure-fire recipe to rejuvenate even the weariest Wildrunner.

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DAY 3:  
THE HAVEN TO HOLE IN THE WALL  
DISTANCE: 34 KM | VERTICAL GAIN: 880 M

Surprisingly, the pristine beauty of Dwesa Nature Reserve struggles to compete with the scenic terrain and gobsmacking views that dominate stage three of the Wildrun. The first half of the final day is on mixed terrain - mostly small beaches broken up by rocky points and grassy headlands - while the second half is dominated by grassy slopes crisscrossed by a labyrinth of cattle trails and peppered with aloes. The steep climbs of the final day reward runners with some spectacular ocean views, and the final few kilometres are sheer trail running bliss with wide, hard-packed cattle trails that culminate at an elevated vantage point overlooking the finish in the shadow of a geological masterpiece: Hole in the Wall. It’s downhill all the way to one final river crossing and the end of a remarkable trail run.

After some hard racing and seesawing at the top of the leader board, Pierre van Rensburg eventually secured the overall win in the 2012 Wildcoast Wildrun by a mere 1min 47sec from Angelo Henry, while Tracey Almirall dominated the ladies race and added an impressive third overall to her superb Wildrun performance. Snapping at their heels were ART teammates Duncan Gutsche, Mike Arbuthnot, and myself, who kept the leaders honest and finished a couple of minutes off the pace. For many Wildrunners, however, the goal was simply to complete this extraordinarily bittersweet event.

The true Wildrun experience is difficult to reduce to words. The magnificence of the coastline is beyond contestation, but it is the sharing of unique experiences with like-minded people, the friendships forged through adversity, and the overcoming of shared hardships along the way that ultimately demands the Wildcoast Wildrun be included on every trail runner’s bucket list.

Related articles:
• Muizenberg Mountain Run - a Quantum Classic! (Issue 19, p.68)
• Sport Adventure Sprint Series (Issue 19, p. 86)
• Trail Running Safety (Issue 18, p.70)

2013 WILDCOAST WILDRUN EVENT

The Wildcoast Wildrun is organised by the experienced and professional Wildrunner trail running team (www.wildrunner.co.za). Taking place in mid-September each year, the Wildrun comprises two departures: the more social Journey followed a week later by the Race. The field is limited to a maximum of 80 entrants per event due to logistical challenges and accommodation restrictions.

Entries for the 2013 edition open on 17 January 2013 at midday, and all 160 places usually sell out within 45 minutes. Check out www.wildrun.co.za or get in touch with the registrations manager, Tamaryn Jupp, at info@wildrun.co.za for further details.

Tips

Participants should start training at least three months prior to the event and work on steadily building up their mileage. Make sure to concentrate a decent amount of training time on beach runs and/ or sandy terrain. The Wild Coast is notorious for its strong winds, so run into a stiff headwind whenever you get the chance during training.

There is one ‘munchie point’ on each stage where co-sponsor Gu Energy Labs provides a range of energy drinks and rehydration supplements, however, runners must carry sufficient nutrition to last the duration of each stage.

Only consider doing this event if you’re comfortable running long distances on the beach and aren’t put off by the prospect of a stiff headwind.

Places to stay
• The Thatches - www.thethatches.co.za
• Kei Sands - www.keesands.co.za
• Kob Inn Hotel - www.kobinn.co.za
• The Haven Hotel - www.thehavenhotel.co.za
• Ocean View Hotel - www.oceanview.co.za

Other things to do in the area
If running 115 km along the Wild Coast sounds too much like hard work, then you might consider a more sedate hiking excursion (www.wildcoast.co.za/hiking) along South Africa’s wildest and most scenically spectacular coastline.

Sponsor

The Wildcoast Wildrun would not have been possible without the generous financial backing of premier sponsor Adidas (www.adidas.co.za), which also provided some top-quality technical running kit to competitors.

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