

KING OF THE MOUNTAINS

The Lesotho Wildrun is an incredible 112km stage race through the pristine, undulating landscapes of a remote mountain kingdom that lies right in our very own backyard. The three-day wilderness journey takes runners through the magnificent and truly wild Ketane Ha Mothibi and Thaba Putsoa mountain ranges in the very heart of Lesotho. Having recently conquered this epic mountain challenge, Stephen Cunliffe shares a tale of a 'never to be forgotten' trail running experience.

The first stage of the 2012 edition of the Lesotho Wildrun saw participants tackle a completely revamped route. The dramatic alteration in the course was explained at the pre-race briefing by Wildrunner Events Director, Owen Middleton, "You might find this hard to believe but stage one is now considerably easier – I mean more manageable – than last year's route." Rumour had it that in 2011 even the winners of stage one were broken by the time they reached the finish line at Semonkong. But, with my race map clearly showing over 2 000m of vertical gain and an oxygen-deprived high point of 2 625m on day one, the Lesotho Wildrun looked anything but easy from the comfort of my dining chair. I had an ominous feeling that a real challenge lurked in wait for us on the morrow.

Setting off bright and early from the mountain gateway village of Malealea at 1 820m, we transferred by minibus to the race start at Ha Searle. With compulsory kit inspections taken care of and dawn breaking, we embarked on the journey of a lifetime. There was no easing our way into the event, as the track immediately began ascending steeply towards the Semonkong Plateau (meaning 'place of smoke'). Running above 2 000m proved tough on the lungs and shuffling would probably be a better word to describe our laboured forward motion under these gruelling conditions. ▶





With the trail zigzagging between a gaggle of tiny rural villages that appeared practically unchanged for a thousand years, it wasn't long before the field spread and I was thankful to find myself moving at roughly the same pace as Stephen Kriel and Guy Jennings. The three of us teamed up and ran together. As we ate up the trail and ticked off the kilometres, I marvelled at the fact that trail running could bring an advertising executive, sixth-generation butcher and journalist together as friends. It would seem unlikely that the three of us 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 was proving to be, navigation was an even greater challenge at times. Owen had warned, "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 44km of tough terrain to get through on day one, we really didn't need to get lost and add on a bunch of 'bonus miles' just for fun! We soon settled into our respective navigational roles. I manned the GPS, Guy kept an eye on the map and Stephen dispatched a well-placed stone to ward off aggressive dogs whenever one of these shaggy mountain mutts looked to be sizing us up for lunch. It was teamwork at its best.

Seven exhilarating and exhausting hours later, we finally rolled into Semonkong Lodge. We might have finished a full hour behind the day one winners, but the backmarkers would only stagger over the line after dark. And I'm not sure they were in any mood to debate Owen's assessment of 'a relatively easy stage one' when they finally hobbled home in just over 12 hours!

I have to say that, for me, day two rates on a par with the best trail runs and races I've done anywhere in the world. It is a breathtaking (in every sense of the word) 28km circular route that takes runners along both the eastern and western edges of the magnificent Maletsunyane Gorge before ultimately visiting one of the most unbelievable waterfalls in southern Africa – the 192m Maletsunyane Falls.

As the start got underway, I heard Owen yell, "Enjoy the spectacular views and friendly gradient of the single track that dominates the early stages, because the steep crossing of the Maletsunyane Gorge will have you bleeding from your eyeballs!"

We set off jogging along a beautiful frost-covered trail, crunching across the frozen ground alongside a picturesque river. It didn't last long; soon we were ascending out of the gorge. With an uncanny resemblance to a procession of ragged old steam locomotives, we huffed and puffed clouds of vapour into the crisp morning air. Not only did we look like steam engines with clouds of condensation spurting from our mouths, but I also felt as if my billowing engine was outdated as I struggled to find some sort of rhythm on the first steep climb of the day.

After a few kilometres we found our stride. By now our running trio had been dubbed 'Team SSG' and we revelled in one of the most spectacular trail runs on the planet. The scenery was quite simply out of this world, but nothing could have prepared me for one of the continent's most sensational waterfalls at the 23km mark. However, before we got there, we had the notorious Maletsunyane Gorge to get through and it was brutally steep. First we slipped and slid our way down to the river. Plunging into the ice-cold water felt heavenly on the weary quads and aching knees, but all too soon we were relentlessly slogging up the other side. The views up and down the valley were sensational, but even those gobsmacking vistas couldn't distract too long from the brutality of the never-ending climb out.

Back on top we passed through a checkpoint, stopped briefly at the daily munchie point sponsored by our new best friends from Hammer, and soaked up the scenery. With our water bottles replenished and our bodies refuelled, we had one last waterfall-viewing stop to make 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 bid farewell to Semonkong Lodge, which had been our humble home for the preceding two nights, and set off on a 40km journey via the Lekhalong-la-Mokhelelise Pass (more commonly known as the Baboon's Pass) towards Ramabanta. Our trail traversed along the spine of the Thaba Putsoa Ridge, before descending south towards the village of Ha Ramokhobo on the north slopes of the Letsunyane River Valley.

Stephen and I were both pretty tired at this stage so Guy took the lead, holding our ragged trio together as we trudged and shuffled our weary way towards the finish line. Voltaren kept the aching knees in check and the

vistas buoyed our spirits. The scenic trail followed a general north-westerly direction before finally dropping down to the Makhaleng River. We plunged into the freezing water, which revived me just long enough to tackle the final short, sharp ascent of the Lesotho Wildrun before we finished on the rolling lawns of the Ramabanta Trading Post Lodge.

Steven Black and Gerry Beukes crossed the final finish line together and shared first place in a winning time of 15 hours 23 minutes and 57 seconds. A very impressive achievement if you consider that 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 almost inconsequential in the Lesotho Wildrun. It was the incredible mountainous scenery, intriguing Basotho culture and camaraderie of newfound friends that ensured an incredible experience for everyone privileged enough to participate in this unique event.

Whether you see yourself as a king of the mountains or a more social 33-hour finisher, this tough race has an appeal 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.

The Lesotho Wildrun would not have been possible without the generous support of chief sponsor Adidas, which also provided some top-quality kit for distribution as spot prizes every night. •

DInfo box

The Lesotho Wildrun is organised by the experienced and professional Wildrunner trail running team (www.wildrunner.co.za) and takes place in April each year. It's limited to a maximum of 50 entrants due to accommodation restrictions and the logistical challenges of coordinating 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 for further details.



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