THE SPECTACULARLY BEAUTIFUL AND WONDERFULLY DIVERSE GROOTVADERSBOSCH NATURE RESERVE AND NEIGHBOURING BOOSMANSBOS CONSERVANCY ARE THE SETTING FOR A MAGICAL TWO-DAY TRAIL RUN THAT IS DESERVEDLY RATED BY SEASONED TRAIL CONNOISSEURS AS ‘SOUTH AFRICA’S BEST KEPT TRAIL RUNNING SECRET’. I fortuitously snagged an entry to the fourth edition of the Grootvadersbosch Trail Challenge, held on 21 and 22 June, and set off with my family to see if the event could possibly deliver on this audacious claim. What I found was a truly magical place that exceeded my wildest expectations.
AN UNASSUMING ‘BOOMSNIKOS WORLD HERITAGE SITE’ SIGN WELCOMED US TO A PRISTINE WILDERNESS THAT IS WITHOUT DOUBT THE LEAST WELL KNOWN OF SOUTH AFRICA’S EIGHT WORLD HERITAGE SITES. Despite lying less than three hours down the N2 from Cape Town and a mere 22 km from Heidelberg, this untouched reserve remains gloriously wild. Indigenous lowland forest gives way to fynbos-clad slopes and towering mountain peaks that jut into deep blue skies. A handful of rustic trails meander through this veritable fairyland of endemic fynbos, indigenous forest, lush river valleys, and bubbling mountain brooks. I eagerly awaited the privilege of sampling the reserve’s single-track offerings over the course of the Grootvadersbosch Trail Challenge weekend. 

WHEN NATURE CALLS

GROOTVADERSBOSCH TRAIL CHALLENGE
Unfortunately, I was not one of those untiring energiser bunnies and as the kilometres of strenuous single-track ascent clocked by, my legs became steadily more leaden until I could run no longer. I consoled myself with the thought that walking allowed me more latitude to savour the scenery and snap photos along this scenic route. In fact, the views were so sensationally arresting that I actually stopped a couple of times simply to drink it all in. My appreciation of the reserve’s incredible natural beauty was further enhanced by the weather for this year’s event, which was considered by race organiser Ugene Nell to be the best on record and ideally suited to a trail run.

At the top of the long climb, we crested a high ridge that afforded us northerly views and our first glimpse of the distant Barrydale far below. The 90% single-track route then contoured around the peak and past the overnight hut for the hiking trail. Sadly there would be no rest for weary trail runners, as we immediately plunged into a lengthy descent alongside deep, lush gorges and inaccessible kloofs presided over by craggy mountain peaks.

It was here, at the halfway stage of this totally self-supported 33 km stage, where my hip-belt suddenly snapped. With no refreshment stops or water tables along the route, I was faced with the unattractive prospect of running the remaining 16 km of the stage belt in hand. Thankfully, a friendly fellow runner, Aubrey, gave me a spare wrist strap that allowed me to reconnect the belt and sling it over my shoulder. While somewhat uncomfortable, it was a huge improvement on running with the broken belt and bottles in my hands.

SATURDAY DAWNED COLD, CLEAR AND CRISP; PERFECT CONDITIONS FOR A TRAIL RUN. DAY ONE, affectionately referred to as the ‘Mountains Stage’, gave us little time to find our feet before embarking on a near-continuous and brutally relentless 16 km climb to the top of Boomsmansbos.

The long climb accounted for the lion’s share of the 1,279 m of elevation gain for day one but, while the climb was unrelenting, the gradients were actually remarkably friendly. For those athletes with some solid hill-training miles under their belts, they were able to run the majority of this ascent, while simultaneously enjoying the surrounding vistas and kaleidoscope of sprawling natural beauty.

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I eventually crawled across the line in 03:49. Pre-race literature had pronounced that the average runner would finish this stage in four hours, yet most participants found the four-hour barrier a difficult nut to crack, with less than 20% of the field accomplishing this. I think the Grootvadersbosch stage one experience was maybe best encapsulated by an elated runner who collapsed over the line and from a crumpled, panting heap proclaimed, “That is absolutely the most beautiful run I have ever done in my life!” After gulping down a couple more lungfuls of sweet mountain air, he added, “But it is also definitely the toughest run I’ve ever done!” With the challenges of an epic day in the mountains behind us, everyone’s efforts were rewarded with a well-earned lamb potjie for dinner before we collapsed into bed.

I SOON REGAINED MY STRIDE AND ENJOYED LETTING GRAVITY DO THE WORK FOR A CHANGE, AS THE TRAIL STEADILY MEANDERED DOWN INTO A STEEP-SIDED GORGE. SOMEHOW I HAD FAILED TO RECOGNISE THAT AFTER CROSSING THE RIVER THERE WOULD INEVITABLY BE A LONG CLimb OUT THE OTHER SIDE. By now my quivering legs were gone, my energy spent and plodding out of the gorge took a supreme effort. I was extremely grateful when I recalled that the race organisers, in a rare show of compassion, had adjusted the 2014 route so that the last 3 km followed a considerably easier dirt road to the finish at Honeywood Farm.
The final 10 km were tough, with the trail repeatedly descending steeply to cross a river before ascending sharply out on the other side, only to disappear down the next steep slope and repeat the leg-numbing process. But it was cool and peaceful in the depths of the forest and I revelled in the energy of the place, enjoying a much stronger run than the day before.

A final section of ‘kloof trail’ took us hopping and skipping up a gurgling forest stream before a last steep climb out of the woods. After dodging an obstinate herd of grouchy cows, we were finally on the home straight to Honeywood Farm.

I crossed the line with mixed emotions; my legs were tired so I was glad to be done for the day, but the thought of not getting to run these beautiful trails again tomorrow tinged my elation with a hint of sadness.


Setting off from Honeywood Farm, the trail dived into the river valley below and meandered along the water course, skirting the farm where we were staying before climbing up onto a muddy, contouring track that traversed the fynbos-rich slopes of Grootvadersbosch Conservancy. A mixture of single track and overgrown jeep track whizzed by before we plunged back down into an awesome forest of giant Californian redwoods, wild saffraan, and indigenous yellow woods.

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UPFRONT, A DING-DONG BATTLE BETWEEN THE INDEFATIGABLE NOEL ERNSTZEN AND YOUNG BUCK FRANZ-ERICH STREICHER HAD BEEN SETTLED. AT THE END OF DAY ONE, AFTER 33 HARD-FOUGHT KILOMETRES, NOEL WAS FORCED TO RUN AT 3 MINUTES AND 30 SECONDS A KILOMETRE (WHICH IS FLYING) FOR THE LAST FEW KILOMETRES TO ENSURE THAT WILY EXPERIENCE TRIUMPHED OVER THE ENERGY AND EXUBERANCE OF YOUTH BY A NARROW 30 SECOND MARGIN.

Also, on day two the tables were turned when the youngster turned up the heat on the veteran and crossed the line a comfortable 4 minutes ahead of his first-day nemesis, to take the top spot in an overall time of 05:27:07. After the first day, leader Katya Soggot was forced to withdraw with an injury, leaving Karoline Hanks to win the ladies race. Karoline also finished seventh overall in a very respectable 06:32.

The Grootvadersbosch Trail Challenge is synonymous with everything genuine trail runners wish for in an event; natural beauty, pristine wilderness and lots of flowing single track. But don’t just take my word for it; the fact that the organisers of both the Otter African Trail Run and African X, two of South Africa’s premier trail events, chose to run Grootvadersbosch this year should convince you that it’s an epic event to enter.

So if you haven’t been fortunate enough to participate in one of South Africa’s top weekend trail runs, then be sure to add this fantastic Quantum Country Classic event to your 2015 trail running calendar, without delay.

For all the race, accommodation and entry information, visit www.quantumadventures.co.za

For more on the Grootvadersbosch Nature Reserve, visit www.capenature.co.za

If you are looking for a lovely place to stay, try Grootvadersbosch Guesthouse, www.grootvadersbosch.co.za
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