Running Wild

The arid Richtersveld is hauntingly beautiful and scarred 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 a 40th birthday.

After three highly memorable days traversing the South African sector of the cross-border park, with 128km already under our running shoes, the time came to enter Namibia and make history with the first-ever Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun. The next two days would see us exploring the Ai/Ais-Hot Springs Park and seldom-seen lesser reaches of the wild Fish River Canyon on the Namibian side of the TFCPA.

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 wadis and picked our way along rocky mountain tracks before descending into the iconic Fish River Canyon. The scenery was indescribably impressive, demanding a respect for its pristine nature and experience 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 puppies Owen and Tam Middleton started Wildrun in 2007 and their multi-stage, off-the-beaten-track running events rapidly developed a reputation for annually offering a select group of wilderness-loving long-distance 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 primal and uncorrupted form. Wildrunners 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 mancave stops and medical care out on the trail to effective 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 iced-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 place where the rich heritage of the Nama is still alive.” This is the birthplace of my 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 cross-border adventure tourism event like the wildrun benefited 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 still and I was crying out for rest, but

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

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 lands one of the few places in the world where the rich heritage of the Nama is still alive.” This is the birthplace of my 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.

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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 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

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.

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.