



WILDEST DREAM

A TRAIL ODYSSEY THROUGH A UNIQUE, ANCIENT AND UNTAINTED LANDSCAPE PROVES THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME FOR RW'S TOBIAS MEWS

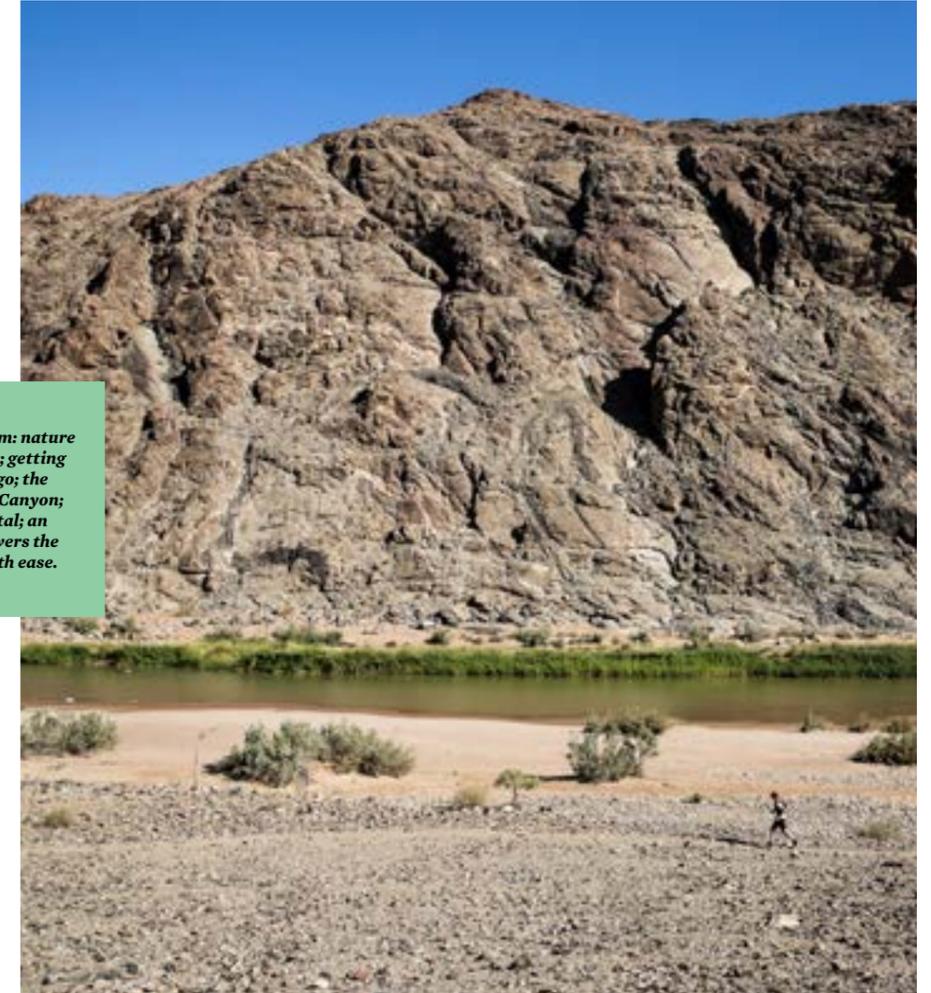
Every day of this monumental five-day race presented immense challenges to the participants.



At 5pm the sun finally begins to mellow in the clear South African sky above the Ai-Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park.

Though the air is slowly cooling around us and today's midwinter temperatures have been relatively benign compared with the scorching 55C it can reach here in the summer, I still seek out shade under the canvas of the mess tent. A generator gently buzzes in the background and above that the air is alive with the excited chatter of competitors recounting their adventures in the third edition of the Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun, a 200km, five-day stage race across the world's oldest mountain desert.

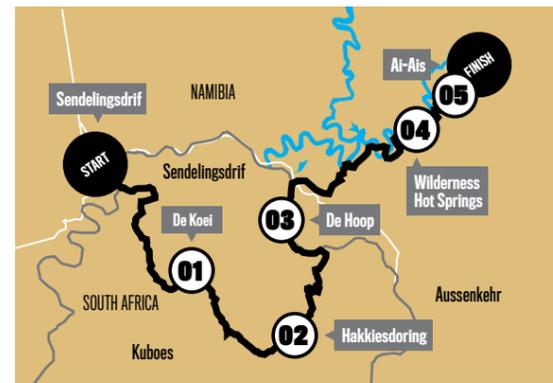
Having spent the final day of the race running 26km across sand and rock, I'd expect to feel nothing but exhaustion, but as I sit sipping on a blissfully cold beer and watching the sun set behind the ancient mountains that characterise the Richtersveld, I feel only a deep sense of tranquility. In contrast to the dozen or so other multi-stage races I've run, which variously claim to be the 'toughest', 'longest' or some other equally enticing superlative, the Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun doesn't make any boasts. With a low-key atmosphere and a field limited to just 80 participants, I'd describe it as a boutique ultramarathon safari for endurance runners looking for an adventure that might well change their lives: long-winded for sure, but accurate. This race is an opportunity to not only challenge yourself physically, but also to expand your mind as you immerse yourself in a unique natural environment – an ancient desert with a geological history dating back two billion years, designated a UNESCO World Heritage site, the only Arid Biodiversity Hotspot on earth, and home to many species of fauna and flora you won't find anywhere else on the planet. →



Top to bottom: nature finds a way; getting ready to go; the Fish River Canyon; GPS is vital; an ostrich covers the terrain with ease.



WHERE Ai-Ais Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, Northern Cape, South Africa and Namibia
ROUTE Sendelingsdrif, South Africa to Ai-Ais Hot Springs Resort, Namibia
TOTAL DISTANCE 200km (approx.)
DAILY DISTANCES 44km; 33km; 40km; 49km; 26km
TERRAIN Desert, rocks, mountains
FIELD Restricted to 80 runners
NEXT RACE 12-16 June 2017
MORE INFO wildrun.com/event/richtersveld





The vast, arid wilderness of the Springbok Flats and (below) this is a race that requires climbing skills as well as running ability.

As the sun sinks lower and lower into the jagged horizon I cast my mind back to the beginning of what has been an epic adventure.

DAY 1 SENDELINGSDRIF TO DE KOEI

Five days before I sip my divine sunset beer, the race begins at Sendelingsdrif Rest Camp on the banks of the Orange River, a day's drive north of Cape Town, on the border of South Africa and Namibia. With no route markings to follow for the next 44km, we're relying on our maps and GPS devices, and a few of us, including a world-class adventure racer, immediately take what seems the most direct route: moments later we find ourselves in a local resident's back garden.

A couple of fences later, we're back on track and scurrying through

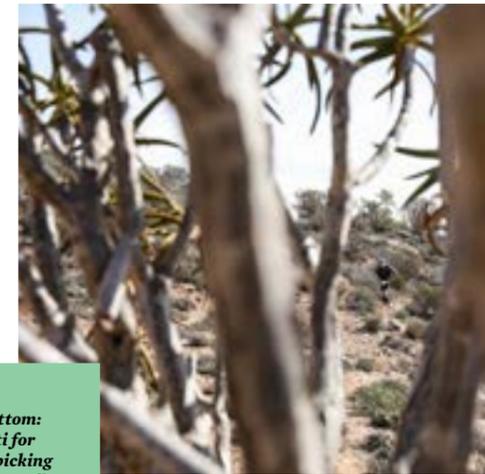


a maze of dry river gorges that lead us to what can only be described as a crystal plane, where the ground sparkles as though littered with a million rose-tinted diamonds.

The initial miles pass almost too quickly. I fall into step with a small group, each of us uttering gasps of wonder as we are struck again and again by the beauty of the elemental, arid landscape unfolding around us. I find myself trying to avoid stepping on the vegetation, deciding that it's hard enough to survive on 68mm of rainfall a year without being trampled on by a wide-eyed trail runner.

My concern for the local flora takes a back seat to my concern for my own aching limbs as the distance and gradient take their toll, however, and it takes something grittier than wonderment to get me

Top to bottom: only cacti for company; picking up the pace on a flat section; Tobias Mews tackles the Tatasberg Boulders; a sore point.



'NO MATTER HOW STUNNING THE LANDSCAPE, 44KM IS 44KM, AND THIS LEG ALSO HAS 1,180M OF ASCENT'

PHOTOGRAPHY: IAN CORLESS

up the viciously steep Hell's Valley Pass at around the 35km mark. No matter how stunning the landscape, 44km is still 44km, and this particular leg of the race also has 1,180m of ascent, but as I cross the stage finish line all the accumulated pain melts away with two simple sentences: 'Lunch will be ready in 15 minutes. Why don't you grab a warm shower.'

One of the many beauties of this event is that you don't have to worry about anything but your running. At the end of each stage your tent is pitched and waiting, your kit inside, and warm showers, a bar and a mess tent for communal eating are all provided, too. It's hard to convey how much these luxuries are amplified after a day pounding through desert mountains.

DAY 2 DE KOEI TO HAKKIESDORING

'Did you sleep well?' my tent neighbour cheerily asks as I poke my head out of the canvas.

I head for the breakfast tent, grab a coffee and watch the first runners set off. Start times are based on the previous day's finish times, with the slowest runners leaving first and the fastest playing catch-up. A while later I watch David, a member of the local Nama people, set off at a blistering pace. Having accidentally missed a checkpoint yesterday, which landed him an hour's penalty, he seems determined to make up time. I wonder how on earth he knows where he's going with neither map nor GPS to guide him, but soon enough I'm following.

Today's stage is shorter – 'only' 33km – but we soon discover it's by no means easier. It seems that the deeper you head into the Richtersveld the more beautiful it becomes, and the less accommodating the terrain underfoot. One moment we're on sand, the next we're hopping between rocks, which requires a deftness of foot that challenges even the elite runners. The bloody knees of former Marathon des Sables Champion Elisabet Barnes provide a stark reminder that one false step can be costly.

Later that evening, local South African National Parks (SANParks) manager Pieter van Wyk regales us with tales of how the local wildlife survives in a desert where it rains just once a year. His passion shines as bright as the stars above us, and somehow our scrapes and bruises don't seem so bad. →

DAY 3 HAKKIESDORING TO DE HOOP

Day three's 40km stage promises many rewards – including the spectacular Tatasberg Boulders – but also some serious challenges. We begin on technical trails, weaving in and out of a series of granite gullies before reaching the Springbok Flats – a vast expanse of desert flanked by towering mountains. For a moment I think I spy other runners in the distance, only to realise they're 'halfmens trees' – cactus-like and so named because of their human-like shape.

The subsequent flat(ish) 10km should be a chance to stretch the legs and make up time, but the sandy surface saps our energy. There is, though, ample reward for our toil: the Tatasberg Boulders are a sight to behold. Some of these mighty lumps of ancient granite are the size of a house; others are stacked one upon another as though plonked there by mischievous giants. We clamber up them, leaping across the gaps, muttering prayers that we don't slip. At the summit, we're given an unparalleled view of the Richtersveld and our camp for evening, De Hoop, on the banks of the Orange River, where we'll later take a dip in the refreshingly cold waters, Fish Eagles hovering above us and lush oasis greenery all around.

*Top to bottom:
preparing to cross
the Orange River;
mountain zebra;
on the final descent;
at the end of the race,
the joy is clear.*

DAY 4 DE HOOP TO WILDERNESS...

As dawn breaks over De Hoop Camp, excitement is in the air. Today the race will take us into Namibia. 'We had to get permission to do this,' race director Owen Middleton tells us as we squeeze into an inflatable dingy. There are various official border crossings into Namibia but this isn't one of them, which adds an extra frisson of excitement to our careful negotiation of the Orange River.

After disembarking on Namibian soil, we begin our journey through Fish River Canyon, the second largest in the world after the Grand Canyon. We trace our route along old jeep tracks before a climb takes us up to Zebra Pass, named after the mountain zebra that have somehow managed to adapt to this arid climate and unforgiving topography.

The route is gruelling, with sand, loose stone and rocky terrain underfoot, but the experience is



'SOME OF THESE LUMPS OF ANCIENT GRANITE ARE THE SIZE OF A HOUSE'

magical. The ancient mountains rising on either side bear silent witness as we snake our way up the river canyon in the brilliant sunshine, while some runners are treated to glimpses of ostrich and zebra.

We arrive at Wilderness Hot Springs exhausted and elated in roughly equal measure. As he leads us to a rather underwhelming shallow puddle, the Namibian Park Manager tells us that this area, which is normally off limits to the public, is the original Ai-Ais, which is Nama for 'burning water'.

DAY 5 ON TO HOT SPRINGS

The next day, we leave Wilderness Hot Springs with heavy hearts. Only 26km now separate us from the end of what's been one of the greatest adventures of our lives. The camaraderie forged in this brutally, beautiful landscape will live long in the memory, as will the privilege of immersing ourselves in this unique and truly wild corner of the world.

After the majesty of the Fish River Canyon, today's stage is a trail runner's dream: ridge running, steep climbs, technical descents and the sort of single track that would have mountain-bikers salivating.

The final technical descent is a glorious way to arrive at our final destination, the Ai-Ais Hot Springs Resort, a luxury natural spa hotel nestling in a lush valley and the end of the Fish River Hiking Trail.

After a life-affirming gulp of lager I pause to reflect, observing the grins carved into the faces of my fellow runners as they embrace, congratulate and generally share the moment. It's difficult to put into perspective what we've just experienced. We are simply passing through a natural wonder that has stood here for millions of years. Anyone who is lucky enough to run the Richtersveld Transfrontier Wildrun will have an experience that cannot be replicated anywhere in the world. It's the benchmark by which all my races will now be compared. It's been a rare and wonderful chance to run wild. 