

RUNNING

with the offers

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Dawn on 20 September 2009. One hundred and seventy-nine crazy individuals dressed in skimpy shorts and Hi-tec bibs are huddled together, eagerly awaiting the start of the inaugural Hi-tec Otter African Trail Run.

Everyone is chatting and joking but it doesn't hide the tension in the air. The countdown starts and the first four runners put their timing 'dibbers' in the electronic checkpoint and sprint off. The race is on. Twenty seconds later the second batch of four follow, smiling for the cameras, followed by the rest of the field, seeded according to the times achieved in the prologue run the previous day. By some bizarre coincidence the Otter Trail, one of the world's most iconic hikes, is exactly marathon distance, 42 km. By some ugly twist of fate, this coincidence was spotted by one of the top-class adventure racers in the event organising company, Magnetic South. A lot of dreaming, brainstorming and wheeling-and-dealing later they had wooed SANParks into allowing the first ever trail run to take place along their flagship trail.

Not surprisingly, the run sold out quickly and most of the country's top trail runners took up the challenge. Though a stand-alone event, the Otter Run was only one stage in the Southern Storm duathlon – a 350 km mountain biking and trail running event from Storms River in the Tsitsikamma section to the Ebb and Flow camp in the Wilderness section of the new Garden Route National Park, so for nearly half the field this was just the start of their endeavours. I, in my naïve, somewhat optimistic fashion, had signed up for the whole thing. The fact that I was living in London surrounded by flat tarmac, which was not exactly ideal training conditions, did not occur to me till it was too late. I figured that if I paced myself I'd be all right on the night.

The prologue was exhausting and brought me to my senses: a steep uphill followed by a knee-wrenching downhill; a beach run and wade to a rocky scramble; another blasted up and then down and a beach finish. At the race briefing that night, Mark Collins, one of the organisers, instilled even

deeper doubts: 'The route of the prologue was chosen precisely to give you an idea of what running the Otter will be like.' If we were under any illusions about the task ahead, they were shattered that moment.

But it's amazing what a short, bad night's sleep can do. By breakfast at 4 am the following morning, the doubts had passed. The forecast was good and what better way to spend a day than out on a trail? The first section of the route was described as 'technical' – read rocky, slippery and, at times, unrunnable. Wooden ladders and boardwalks aided the trickiest scrambles, but there were plenty of jagged rocks that you couldn't afford to slip on. Soon after the waterfall we hit the first hill, then it was up, down, up, down to the first huts. I really didn't remember the trail as having this many climbs! At each hill the front person in the group would ask if any one behind wanted to pass. Usually the grunts indicated negative – already people were trying to save breath and energy.

We passed the first cut-off point with half an hour to spare and I got my second wind. The views along the dramatic Tsitsikamma coast took my breath away even more than the exertions of the climbs. What a privilege it was to be out in this amazing wilderness and my leisurely pace gave me plenty of time to admire the views, the whales, the little flowers along the path and the unbelievable beauty of the rugged coastline. It was wonderfully varied. We waded through tannin-stained streams, boulder hopped, ran along green coastal terraces, swam across the infamous Bloukrans estuary (ably supported by safety kayakers and a rope) and enjoyed the banter and camaraderie with our fellow runners as they shuffled past. It was an amazing day out. Finally, after nearly eight hours on the trail, I saw the magnificent beach at Nature's Valley. The end was another two kilometres away at the De Vasselot campsite where we were staying – but there was a sting in the tail. The finish line was separated from the track that we'd just descended by an open body of water, which had to be crossed via a line of floating wooden pallets – the infamous Pennypinchers lily pads. The only way to successfully negotiate them was at speed, if you lingered they sunk and you took an unwelcome swim. Mustering everything I had left in my tired legs, I tried a sprint finish. But to no avail – my Otter Run

ended in an ignominious doggy paddle to the shore. As I raised my arms in triumph under the Hi-tec banner of the finish, I remembered Mark's warning the night before: 'Many of those who hike the Otter Trail arrive at Nature's Valley broken.' Those damned lily pads nearly broke me but I'll be back for more punishment in 2010.

In a nutshell: this has to be the most spectacular trail run in the world and the organisers thought of everything to minimise the impact on the natural environment and to make our experience as enjoyable and as safe as possible. But it's certainly not for sissies! ■



For full results and race reports, or to sign up for the 2010 Otter Run, visit www.southernstorm.co.za.

RACE STATS:

- >> **Overall winner** – Iain DonWauchope, 04:59:02
- >> **Fastest woman** – Sue DonWauchope, 05:58:07
- >> **Slowest finish time** – 11:22:16

126 of the runners finished the race within the original cut-off time of 9 hours



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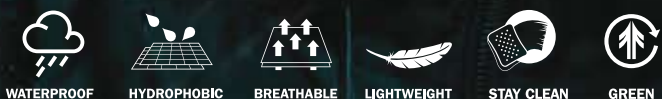
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Iain Don-Wauchope 04:59:02
Winner of the Hi-Tec Otter and
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