



Glorious Trails

HI-TEC OTTER AFRICAN TRAIL RUN, NEAR NATURE'S VALLEY, WESTERN CAPE, 25 SEPTEMBER

When it comes to iconic trail runs, there is surely nothing in the world to beat this new race that follows the route of South Africa's famous Otter trail along the spectacular Tsitsikamma coast.

One hundred and seventy-nine runners lined up at the Storms River rest camp ready for the inaugural run, a stand-alone event, but also the first stage in the Southern Storm duathlon – a 350km

mountain biking and trail running event from Storms River to the Ebb and Flow camp in the Wilderness section of the Garden Route National Park.

By some bizarre coincidence, the Otter Trail, normally a five-day demanding hike, is exactly marathon distance, but we had been warned in the race briefing that there weren't going to be any records broken on this technical course.

Adventure racer John Collins of

organisers Magnetic South posted a fastest time of 5:12 during the recce runs so the money was on anyone finishing within five hours to be on the podium.

The first section of the route was described as 'technical' – largely narrow, rocky, singletrack or over boulders that was at times not runnable, and on which passing was difficult, so the start was staggered with groups of four runners heading out at 20-second intervals.

Wooden ladders and boardwalks aided the trickiest scrambles, but there were plenty of jagged rocks that slowed the pace. Soon after the waterfall we hit the first hill, then it was up, down, up and down all the way. By the time the back runners hit the infamous Bloukrans estuary the pace was proving testing and the river was high.

STING IN THE TAIL

It was a cold, challenging swim but safety kayakers and a rope ensured everyone got across without problems. Not that we were home and dry even then. Anyone who thought they'd cracked it by Bloukrans was mistaken; there were still plenty of climbs and a seemingly endless stretch of clifftop before the magnificent beach at Nature's Valley finally came into sight.

The finish line was only 2km away at the De Vasselot campsite – but there was a sting in the tail. The final test was negotiating a line of floating wooden pallets that had to be taken at speed, otherwise they sunk and you ended up flailing in the water. The stronger athletes sprinted across with Iain Don-Wauchope dipping under the magical five-hour barrier in 4:59:02 while wife Sue bagged the women's crown in 5:58:07.

Only 126 out of the 179 starters finished within the nine-hour cut-off, but organisers sportingly decided to award every finisher a medal. They'd worked for it – but don't expect such generosity next year. Best you start training now. – **FIONA MCINTOSH**

SKY BLUE

Runners felt privileged to run Otter.

