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MUD, SWEAT &

True adventure racing is for the very brave and super fit only. Lifestyle sport, on the other hand, is a lighter and more accessible version that's fast gaining popularity. In both cases, the Garden Route leads the pack.

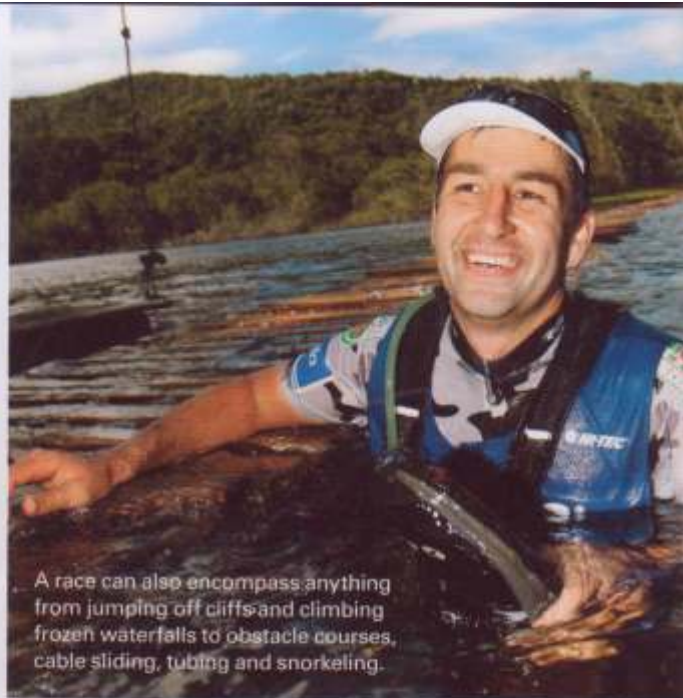


EXHILARATION

WORDS ATHANE SCHOLTZ PHOTOGRAPHS KELVIN TRAUTMAN, STEVE D'ELBOUX AND JACQUES MARAIS MEDIA COURTESY OF MAGNETIC SOUTH



Adventure racing most commonly includes trail running, mountain biking, paddling and climbing.



A race can also encompass anything from jumping off cliffs and climbing frozen waterfalls to obstacle courses, cable sliding, tubing and snorkeling.



What kind of person spends five to ten days racing on only three hours' sleep per night? Why would anyone want to run, swim, cycle, climb, crawl, paddle (and a whole lot of other outdoor stuff) for days on end in the most extreme environments on earth?

South Africa's first superstar adventure racers – Knysna brothers Mark, 41, and John Collins, 37 – claim the discipline can be soul cleansing. And they should know, having competed in almost every major expedition race in the world.

The first from this country to get international recognition, the Collins brothers have become respected names in the industry – these days also as adventure event organisers.

"There are certain things about yourself you can only answer while Adventure Racing. It offers individuals the opportunity to push the boundaries of body and mind. You can only really understand it when you have experienced that place of switch-over – it's a spiritual experience," says Mark.

Adventure Racing (AR), in its widest definition, combines two or more endurance sports and includes orienteering and/or navigation, which often means no set routes and teams have to find their way to check points using a map and/or GPS.

Varying from a "sprint of a few hours" to an expedition race of ten days or longer, AR most commonly includes trail running, mountain biking, paddling and climbing, but can also encompass anything from jumping off cliffs and

climbing frozen waterfalls to obstacle courses, cable sliding, tubing and snorkelling.

Typically, no rest times are designated – athletes can choose to compete right through the night and pick their breaks according to their needs and racing strategy.

Traditionally, AR has been a team sport with teams comprising four members, with at least one of the opposite sex, but recent races have seen fewer restrictions.

Mark is the first to admit that expedition style racing is not necessarily good for your health. "I got frostbite on my fingers while competing in the Swiss Alps and only regained feeling in my fingertips a year later. Extreme weather, rough terrain, poisonous plants and angry bugs are all part of the equation and not everybody's cup of tea."

Fortunately there are less extreme, more accessible forms of the sport which can be enjoyed by the whole family.

Michael Meyer of Stillwater Sport & Entertainment in Stellenbosch is behind the hugely successful annual XTerra Knysna race at Pezula golf resort, which takes place during the Knysna Oyster Festival.

Michael, originally from George, says his company has moved away from the term "adventure sport", preferring "lifestyle sport" to describe shorter multi-disciplinary off-road events for the health-conscious, family-orientated sportsperson who likes the physical challenge but still wants to enjoy the race.



The Garden Route offers an unequalled combination of varied terrains.



COSTS

- Off-road and true adventure racing can be pretty expensive. Equipment, food, transport and medical bills, not to mention steep entry fees, are par for the course. The longer and more complicated the race, the higher the cost.
- Entry fees range from R2,000 for a one-day local event, R8,000 for a local expedition event and up to \$15,000US per team for international races.
- Minimum equipment requirements include three or more pairs of running shoes (starting at R500 a pair), a mountain bike (starting at R4,000), water craft (starting at R3700 new) and climbing equipment (starting at R1,000 depending on race requirements).
- "Breathable" clothing for all weather conditions run into thousands.
- The remote locations of outdoor races have major cost implications in the form of flights and long distance, off-road driving. Flying overseas with a bicycle requires a bike box (about R2,500).
- It is essential to eat continuously while racing long distances, even if you don't feel like it – by the time you are hungry it is too late. Energy bars, hydration packs and bottled water are just the start.
- First aid and safety kits can also cost a pretty penny.

"This type of racing is growing phenomenally in South Africa, mainly because it offers an outdoor lifestyle without taking up huge chunks of time required to practice for a true adventure race," says Michael.

The Garden Route hosts several top notch endurance racing events, the most demanding of which is the six-day Southern Storm, introduced by the Collins' outdoor events management company, Magnetic South. Dubbed "Storm Racing", the event offers the "unexplored wilds" aspect of an expedition competition, but with defined trails, rest periods and access points for the media.

The more complicated the route, the more expensive the event, which means that sponsors have to be guaranteed good media coverage. Since expedition racing is often in inaccessible places where media coverage is almost impossible, sponsors are more difficult to secure. "Storm Racing allows better access for photographers as well as better action, because the rest periods ensure that participants perform better and compete more aggressively, which makes for better footage," they say.

Held late in September, Southern Storm takes the form of a trail running and mountain biking event, with a little bit of *kloofing* (canyoning) and swimming thrown in for fun.

"There are certain things about yourself that you can only answer while Adventure Racing."

It starts in Tsitsikamma with a 42km run along the iconic Otter Trail, following a new path every year, and ends in Wilderness. A separate Otter African Trail Run is also held in September – won last year by Ian Don-Wauchope from KwaZulu Natal, who broke the record and the five-hour barrier (4:59:07).

The first Southern Storm was acclaimed by competitors, with some calling it one of the most difficult in the country. The trail run's veteran category was won by legendary Iron Man and multidisciplinary racer Nick Bester (5:33.04), followed closely by respected racer Iain Morshead (5:43.13).

Says Morshead: "The Otter Trail is a yardstick, a common unit of measure between trail runners and the thousands of people who have walked it. I have never experienced such interest in an event from non-runners, few of whom will ever walk a 21km, marathon or ultra and therefore have no understanding of what they entail. But the Otter is different, they have suffered and slogged over exactly the same terrain and can therefore have a very real appreciation for what is involved. The joke is that my running mates can't believe that I took so long, while my hiking mates don't believe that such a time is possible."

The Merrell Eden Duo in Wilderness in October is the ideal event for people wanting to explore their aptitude for adventure racing. The race is organised by Still Bay-based Jan Heenoc of 24-7adventure.

Heenop says his events have changed format to incorporate different levels of athletes, all in one race. "True adventure racing is a very small sport with only a few hundred participants countrywide. However, the off-road triathlon is becoming increasingly popular. The Eden Duo includes a true adventure racing category of about 200km, an off-road triathlon of 150km, and a family fun event of about 15km."

Another popular format for adventure racers is the "stacking" of separate events to form one mega-race. The Knysna Oyster Festival this year introduced the "Big Five", in which athletes could compete in any five of selected on and off-road run, cycle and paddling events over the ten-day festival. The Sabrina Love Ocean Challenge in Plettenberg Bay in December follows a similar format. Seven different swimming, running and mountain biking events take place over two days – with a "Sabrina Triple" offered for the multi athletes.

No matter what level of intensity, event organisers agree that the Garden Route is one of the best places in the world for adventure racing.

The Collins brothers, who have raced some of the most spectacular places on the planet, believe that the region offers an unequalled combination of varied terrains. "There are very few places on earth where you can easily access mountains, ocean, river, forest, plantations and even semi-desert all within quick reach of each other. Because so much of the routes are in protected nature reserves, the quality of the experience is second to none, especially since many of the areas are not open to the general public under other circumstances," says Mark.

John and Mark still compete in adventure racing, and several more racers have emerged in the region over the



Rough terrain poses a different set of challenges than road races.

MAJOR MULTISPORT EVENTS ON THE GARDEN ROUTE

The Southern Storm in September, a six-day trail running and mountain biking event with a little bit of kloofing and swimming thrown in. Starts in the Tsitsikamma with a 42km run along the Otter Trail, and ends with its final stage in Wilderness. A separate Otter African Trail Run is also held in September.
www.southernstorm.co.za

The Merrell Eden Duo in Wilderness in October. The perfect entry level race with various difficulty categories, including a 15km family fun event. The main event takes place over 24 hours, encompassing 150km of running, biking and paddling.
www.24-7adventure.com

The Sabrina Love Ocean Challenge in Plett at the end of December. Participants can compete in one or more of seven events involving ocean and river swimming, running and mountain biking. There is also a kiddies event.
www.magneticsouth.net

The Knysna XTerra at Pezula's Field of Dreams in July – a so-called "sprint" offering run and bike events over 3km, 7km, 12km and 25km.
www.stillwatersports.com





John and Mark Collins
running on Robberg

past few years, most notably the core members of the McCain Adventure Addicts team, led by Knysna's Graham Bird. The team achieved its best ever result in May, placing second in the harrowing XPD Cairns 2010 expedition race in Australia.

The Pennypinchers Adventure Racing Team, led by James Stewart and made up entirely of Garden Route locals, has achieved impressive results since forming in 2005. In their first ever race together Pennypinchers took fourth place, and in 2008 finished a credible tenth out of 50 in South Africa's premier adventure race, the Bull of Africa. The Bull has not been held since due to financial constraints.

Mark says adventure racers naturally progress from road duo and triathlons to off-road events, some eventually trying

out true adventure racing. "There is a mental barrier to be overcome for most, mainly because of the rough terrain, which poses a different set of challenges than road races."

He advises beginners to start on a trail run as an introduction to uneven terrain and changing environmental conditions. Mountain biking and paddling or swimming are the other skills mostly incorporated in these events.

Off-road competitors are on average much older than their on-road counterparts. "This is particularly the case with expedition type adventure racing, which requires mental strength, maturity and a deep knowledge of your body and its capabilities." ■

www.ar.co.za

www.adventureracing.co.za

www.gomulti.co.za

EQUIPMENT

A standard equipment list for adventure racers may include:

- Climbing harness and helmet
- Leather gloves, descending and ascending device for mountaineering
- Lifejacket
- Wetsuit
- Mountain bike and helmet
- Headlamp
- Ropes
- Emergency blanket, sleeping bag, tent
- Backpacks – different sizes for different disciplines
- Compass and altimeter

- Strobe lamp, distress flares and smoke bombs
- Whistle, signal mirror, locking blade knife
- First aid kit
- Food and drink for the entire race
- Water purification tablets or a filter

Teams also have collective gear that may include:

- Support vehicle
- Roof rack for mountain bikes
- Gas lamps, flashlights
- Cooking equipment
- Water and food containers

