

Where The **Wild Things** Are

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Endless white beaches can mean two things to a multi-stage first-timer: pain – and satisfaction. RW online editor **Amy Ebedes** experienced both at the Wild Coast Wild Run.

It was impossible to conceal my emotions as I crested the final headland and got a full view of the Transkei's iconic Hole In The Wall. The finish line was in plain sight across the wide river mouth, and I stopped to catch my breath and fully absorb the final few moments of serenity and magnificence that the last few days had provided. The lump in my throat ached as I began my final descent, and a tear fell silently down my cheek as the magnitude of my accomplishment set in.

My journey had begun three days earlier as 80 other runners and I lined up nervously at the start of the 2011 Wild Coast Wild Run.

The Wild Run is one of many events organised by Owen Middleton and his Wild Runner team. All their events are built around the vision of offering runners the opportunity to run through some of South Africa's most beautiful and uncharted regions.

The Wild Coast Wild Run is a journey through the Transkei, starting at Kei River Mouth and ending 112-ish kilometres later at Hole In The Wall. I say 'ish' as there is no designated route: runners are issued with a map and the instruction to keep the ocean on their right. Recommended routes and shortcuts are given verbally at each day's briefing, but ultimately it's up to each runner to find his or her way along the coast.

Follow the cattle

The most valuable tip was to follow the cattle tracks. Notoriously lazy creatures, cows always take the flattest, quickest and easiest path. This advice became somewhat of a mantra over the course of the three days, and those runners who dared to ignore it found themselves on some time-consuming detours. →

Day 1: Kei Mouth to Kob Inn

Distance: 44.7km

The first (and longest) day of the Wild Run began with a ferry crossing of the Kei River, the only river we weren't required to wade through or swim across.

The morning was crisp and our legs were fresh as we set off. We were advised to take it easy for the first five kays, as 'they were sandy', and we had three days of running ahead of us. Little did we know that the combination of massive swells and neap tide would lead to a long, hard trudge through two-thirds of the first day's journey.

Many senses of humour failed as hamstrings started to protest the added burden of running in deep sand. In an attempt to relieve our legs, my running partner (and navigator) decided to seek out a solid off-beach path. Ignoring Owen's advice of following the cattle tracks, we found ourselves deep in the middle of a date palm forest. A mild altercation ensued as I tried to convince him that neither man nor bovine had ever ventured here before. After wrestling our way through the thickets, a tiny path eventually spat us back onto the beach, not a kilometre from where we'd left it.

There was a mild celebration as my GPS watch struck 24km: officially the furthest I'd ever run. The joy was short-lived as we reached the next point, to see more endless, sandy beaches to tackle. With technical trails as my preferred terrain, the repetitive motion of running on the beach began to take its toll. Every muscle fibre in my legs screamed for reprieve and I had to adjust my mental framework to keep going.

This is all I have to do today: run along pristine, deserted beaches! became my mantra, and provided me with the psychological boost to motor on.

The river crossings were a refreshing change from the running, and we lost little time diving in – fully kitted. There was much satisfaction as I crossed the finish line in 6:59, to the sound of local Xhosa women singing joyously. Feet up, beer and food were the order of the afternoon, until I fell into a comatose sleep early that evening.



ENDLESS BEACHES
Following the front-runners' footsteps helps minimise the effort required to keep trudging.



BRIGHT-EYED
High spirits on the morning of Day 1.

KEI RIVER CROSSING
The only river Wild Runners have the luxury of being ferried across.

Day 2: Kob Inn to The Haven

Distance: 37km

I dragged my weary body out of bed and into my kit, tired but looking forward to the new journey. As I walked around, my knee started to niggle. A quick trip to the medic for some strapping, and I was starting to feel energised for the day.

Owen sounded the signal for the runners to start, and in slow motion the group meandered their way out of the Kob Inn parking lot. Immediately, with every extension of my left leg, pain seared through my knee, and within 200 metres I was limping and fighting back tears.

There's a fine line between pride and stupidity – and when embarking on the second day of the Wild Run, this line becomes slightly blurry. I refused to turn back, and vowed I'd make it to the 24km checkpoint. With every step, I winced and battled to keep going.

After an hour, I'd moved 5km and was wallowing in a pool of self-pity. During a particularly low moment, a pair of Comrades

runners came past and sympathetically issued me with a sheet of Myprodol. I know that taking painkillers to mask pain while running isn't advisable, but pride, stupidity and stubbornness prevailed and I swallowed one eagerly.

Twenty minutes later, the pain was a background throb and my personality returned. Revitalised, I cruised the remainder of the day's running on grassy headlands and hard beaches. A particularly beautiful section was through the Dwesa Nature Reserve. After stumbling across a short cut, we shaved 45 minutes off our time and crossed the finish line in 5:23.

An easy afternoon followed, with the entertainment being provided by the medics treating blister-ridden feet. A runner suffering from debilitating ITBS broke the course record for the longest time out on the field. The ever-chirpy sweeps, Roland and Rob, escorted the woman across the line in just under 10 hours.

ROLLING HILLS
The singletracks across the headlands provide (temporary) relief from the beaches.



TRANSKEI VILLAGES
The round huts of the Transkei dot the landscape.



NAVIGATION SKILLS
Keep the sea on your right and use the map as a guide... don't be surprised if you detour!

TOP TIPS FOR MULTI-DAY EVENTS //

1 TEST ALL YOUR KIT beforehand – and we mean *all*. Running with a sock that slips below your heel will result in a frustrating day's running!

2 PREVENTION is better than cure. We got this tip on Day 2 of the Wild Run (a little late): Lather your feet in Vaseline in the morning to prevent blisters. Failing that, tape blister-prone regions with Micropore tape.



3 QUICK-DRYING SHOES are invaluable. You lose time and risk cutting your feet if you remove your shoes for river crossings. Opt for quick-drying trail shoes such as the adidas AdiZero XTs (my choice): they're light and minimise having to run in water-logged, squelching takkies.

4 FIND A FUELLING PLAN that works for you – and stick to it. Perpetuem (from Hammer Nutrition) provides sustained energy if used as directed. Mix correctly, sip frequently and don't eat anything else during the run.

5 DON'T UNDERESTIMATE the value of a sports massage and compression gear. The combination is essential for keeping your legs fresh(ish) for consecutive days' running.

6 PACK YOUR GEAR and backpack the night before. Sure, you're tired, but you'll (initially) feel worse when you wake up. Having your kit and bag ready to go gets your day off to a calm and organised start.

PLAN YOUR RACES //

LESOTHO WILD RUN

Three days, 120km, and up to an altitude of 2 700m through the mountains of Lesotho. Runners are issued with a GPS to guide them through the network of mountain trails. This remote and spectacular Wild Run is not for the faint-hearted.

www.lesothowildrun.co.za

KALAHARI AUGRABIES EXTREME MARATHON

250km covered in 6 legs, this is South Africa's Big Daddy of multi-day events. Runners are expected to be completely self-sufficient, carrying all supplies, food and survival gear. Temperatures vary from mid-forties to single figures. Extreme ultra-racing at its best.

www.extrememarathons.com/augrabies

PRONUTRO AFRICANX

Spend 3 days tackling 95km of terrain in Kleinmond, Western Cape. The race follows a cloverleaf format, with the same start and finish each day. An ideal 'entry level' multi-day event.

www.stillwatersports.com



NAMIB DESERT CHALLENGE

Spend 5 days tackling 228km through rugged terrain, Sesriem Canyon, and the highest dunes in the world.

www.namibdesertchallenge.com

SOUTHERN STORM

The Race of the Gods, the Southern Storm is a 6-day, off-road duathlon (mountain biking and trail running). The Storm follows a new path every year and traverses oceans, rivers and mountains.

www.southernstorm.co.za



In My Bag

3-litre bladder

Basic emergency kit

(including space blanket, gauze, bandages, painkillers)

Anti-cramp

Wild Coast Wild Run map

Food supplies in case of emergency (jelly babies and trail mix)

Perpetuem (endurance fuel from Hammer Nutrition)

Sunscreen

Baby bum cream (or Vaseline).

Micropore tape and Elastoplast for blister intervention

Buff

GoPro camera

Dry bag

adidas shell



Day 3: The Haven to Hole In The Wall

Distance: 35km



LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Crest the final headland and meet this magnificent final view.

Waking up knowing that it's the last day of the Wild Run is bittersweet. There's a great sense of relief knowing that it's the last day you'll have to squeeze your tender feet into damp takkies, but the realisation that there are only a few more hours of solitude on the magnificent coastline is heart-wrenching. Yet the mood and enthusiasm was significantly more upbeat as we lined up to tackle our final day.

As soon as we hit the first beach, however, my running partner melted in agony: ITBS. No amount of ibuprofen could dull the agony, and we were reduced to a walk interspersed with the odd jog. A third of the way in, the beaches finally ended and we were on the rolling headlands that are synonymous with the Transkei. Slightly more comfortable on solid ground, we slowly made our way through aloe forests, around cliff faces, past donkeys, and through round-hutted villages.

A detour around a headland gave us the rarely-seen side view of Hole In The Wall: a sight that made me catch my breath, as it hit me that I'd almost finished. All that stood between us and the finish was (by our estimation) one monstrosity of a headland.

With renewed energy we soared up and cruised along the crest, waiting for the first finish-line sighting. As the horizon slowly revealed itself with each step, I anticipated the surge of emotion I knew was inevitable as I saw... another monstrous headland.

This one seemed steeper, higher and more brutal than anything we'd encountered before (it wasn't). I slowly trudged my way up: head down, hands on quads for support. I resigned myself to the fact that, after 114km, my ability to gauge distance was faulty. I trotted around the next corner and stopped abruptly as the

panoramic view of the finish line and Hole In The Wall smacked me head-on. Stunned, I waited silently for my partner, and basked in the glory of the view.

The descent was far too quick. Three days' worth of endorphins and an overwhelming sense of achievement washed over me. Suddenly I wanted to go back: back to the solitude and beautiful magic that embodies the Wild Coast.

I paused for a final moment before diving into the river separating me from the finish line – achieving my longest run, completing my first multi-day event, and deepening my addiction for adventure. **T**



FINAL MOMENTS

Catching our breath as the finish-line endorphins kick in.