



Wild at Heart Safaris CC/2006/1603

Tel: +264 (0) 81 298 2759

+264 (0) 81 122 9342

Fax: +264 (0) 64 403701

P.O. Box 2435, Swakopmund, Namibia

Email: [kobus@wildatheartsafaris.com](mailto:kobus@wildatheartsafaris.com)

Web Address: [www.wildatheartsafaris.com](http://www.wildatheartsafaris.com)

VAT Reg. No: 4236045015

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## NAMIBIA ULTRA MARATHON

30 Participants from all over the world gathered at the foot of the Brandberg Mountain, Namibia, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2010. The day was spent acclimatising and then in depth briefings were held regarding medical issues, and route descriptions. 40

At 09:00 on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May the race started. The route started near the Brandberg, would follow a two-track road through the Messum Crater, and end at Mile 72. 6 Participants were to complete the marathon, 42 kilometres, and the other 24 were going to complete the Ultra marathon. I was part of the Ultra marathon group, and was going to see if I am able to complete 126 kilometres in 24 hours or less. Following is my account of this epic race.

Waking up at 05:00 on race day morning, the tension and expectations could be felt in the air. It was a live, vibrant feeling, and everybody could feel it. The eyes of the people around me were alive with fervour, and the nervous twitching of fingers and arms showed the signs of true tension. When the shot was fired to herald the start, realisation sank in, this is it, no turning back, do it now or forever regret it.

My backpack contained my food, cashew nuts, energy gels and perpetuum, medical kit, sleeping bag and warm clothing, GPS and various other survival tools and 2 litres of water. In total it weighed in at around 10 kilograms. This was to be carried all the way in order to support you during the race.

The first couple of check points were spaced 10 kilometres apart, up to checkpoint 6. From there the distance between checkpoints stretched to 12 and 24 kilometres apart.

The first 20 kilometre of the race took place in the veldt, meaning there was no track of any sort to follow, and one had to run around or over obstacles like rock and aardvark holes. The temperature was mild, with a slight East wind blowing. After the first kilometre the nerves started to settle as I got into rhythm. With me were Hentie Hough and Karen Nel,

from Namibia and South Africa respectively. We kept up a decent pace, and made very sure we did not start too fast.

At checkpoint 2 we were weighed as part of the continuous medical assessment, and it came to the fore that I have lost 2 kilograms already. Participants were only allowed to lose 2 % of their body weight during the whole of the race. If you lost more, there were always the potential that the medical team could pull you from the race.

Luckily for me I only lost about 3 kilograms in total over the whole distance, which is slightly more than 2 %, but the medics en route judged me to be in good condition, so I was allowed to carry on with the race.

At each checkpoint one had to fill up your water, and prepare yourself for the next part of the race. As I approached each checkpoint I had a kind of a ritual that looked as follows: I would undo my back pack and remove my pipe and tobacco pouch, and fill my pipe. By the time I reached the checkpoint I would remove my water and stuff to eat, and start filling the water bottles. During this process I would lit my pipe and have a few puffs from it. Usually the rest/preparing at the checkpoints did not take longer than 10 minutes, and during these stops I never sat down, as this could have led to cramping up of my muscles. At the last couple of checkpoints this was really tough not to sit down, but in the end, not sitting down during any part of the race had its benefits.

When I reached checkpoint 4, which was the 42 kilometre mark, I was really happy as this was the first ever marathon I have done in my life. After that the race really started for me. I entered the Messum crater as the sun went down, and what an amazing site. In total silence the three of us were walking in this eerie landscape. As the sun went down the huge full moon came up, and would be my companion for the rest of the night.

Checkpoint 6 was located on the rim of the crater as one leaves for the coastal plains. An ice cold South West wind was blowing, so I was shaking from exhaustion as much as from the cold. I put on a long sleeved shirt and a water proof jacket, but still the cold penetrated deeply. At this stage of the race I started having severe cramps so had to devise a strategy to keep my average speed up. This I did by walking 100 metres and then jogging 300 metres. Checkpoint 7 arrived suddenly, the strobe I have seen for a while now, but as I so well know, distances at night is very deceiving, so it came as a surprise when I came upon this checkpoint. Karen and Hentie left me, as they were much stronger runners and continued on. After another 10 minutes I was off again, and this time alone. I did not use my head torch as the full moon lit the way ahead. Before checkpoint 8 I passed 2 more contestants. I was about half way to checkpoint 8, when I started urinating blood. That is a relatively bad sign, but I countered it by drinking a lot of water, and it got better towards the end of the race. At checkpoint 8 another surprise awaited me. My wife has come out to see me cross the finish line, but has then

decided to meet me at checkpoint 8. That little surprise boosted morale hugely.

Checkpoint 9, or 102 kilometres into the race, was a tough one for me. I arrived 02:55 and left at 03:00. My legs were now really stiff and sore, and I could feel some blisters developing. This last stretch was 24 kilometres long, thus making it the longest stretch of the race. The route followed the coastal road past Cape Cross towards mile 72. Luckily the wind has died down by now, so I decided to smoke my pipe while walking. Several times I talked out loud to my legs, telling them to start jogging, even slowly, but to no avail. They were not responding at all, so I had to slog it out. By now my speed have fallen to around 4, 7 kilometres an hour. At long last I saw the turn off to Mile 72, where Steve Clarke was waiting for me. He walked with me to the finish line, and I crossed the finish line at 07:00 on the beautiful Friday morning.

What a race, and what a feeling to have done it. I felt absolutely alive, even though very tired. One thing kept me going during the dark hours, and it was the saying: "Run if you can, walk if you can't and Crawl if you must". I told myself I would finish and I did. Once again I learned that the longest distance in the world lies between one's ears.

Thanks to everyone that made it possible, and especially my family for their support.