

Running Wild with Whales and Dolphins - Wildcoast Wildrun® 2016

- September 22, 2016

“The north-easterly wind pushes us back, whipping up the sand and the sea spray, we lean in, squinting up the beach towards the next river. We pull our dry bags out for our backpacks, leaving our shoes on - there are too many rivers to cross and we don't know what we might stand on in the water. The tide is going out and the current tugs us as we aim for the opposite bank, we drift over, further downstream and stumble onto dry sand. We run on, dripping, shoes squelching, the waves rushing up the beach to greet us. Mussels, cowries, conches, oyster shells and dry seaweed crunch underfoot, rock pools glisten and beckon, the remains of wrecks disintegrate into ghosts marooned on the high tide. The sand softens and our gait slows to treacle. Ahead, past a cluster of lazing Nguni on the beach, a steep grassy hill marked with a single bush, looms. We clamber over rocks, and seize our legs on the climb. We gaze down from the top, the hill rolling down onto a rocky cliff, the ocean pounding its base. We run on, past Aloes and Euphorbia, looking out beyond the waves to Southern Right whales breaching and blowing plumes into the wind and pods of Bottlenose dolphins catching the swells. On far hills, turquoise huts with DSTV dishes, sit amidst women bent into their washing, men gathering and the endless rush of children, dogs, goats and small black pigs.”

Running the Wildcoast is a bucket list experience, and South African trail event organisers Wildrunner, have captured the essence on the Wildcoast Wildrun®. Starting in Kei Mouth and ending at Hole-in-the-Wall near Coffee Bay, the three day, 112 km race, held in September every year, offers runners a heady mix of incredible coastline scenery, rural life and remote beach running.

This year the Wildcoast Wildrun® was split into two departures, a Race for serious competitors, and a Journey for the more scenic, social runners, with the daily distances over the three-day event ranging from 34 - 44km. Mark Middleton won the race in 11:39:33 and Jenny Janisch was the first lady home in 14:31:05.

According race organizer Owen Middleton, the event format is simple:” Each day, the runners follow a general route, northwards, but have the freedom to choose their own path, keeping the sea on their right and only signing in at the checkpoints.”

“The terrain includes beach running, narrow cattle trails and grassy headlands, rocky coastline and some jeep track - With river mouth crossings of varying depths so runners have to be able to swim to participate in the event.”

Middleton describes the route as challenging but rewarding, “Endless cattle trails have created some of the best trail running pathways, and runners will enjoy long sections of contouring trails that crisscross the coastline. The spring low tide gives way to hard golden beaches and open rocky reefs.”

Day One starts at Kei River Mouth and ends at Kob Inn. It includes a 10km section of tight coastline (beach and rock) before the runners can climb up onto the grassy

cattle trails. Highlights include crossing over the iNxaxo River and Qora River Mouth.

Day Two starts at Kob Inn and ends at The Haven. It includes more hills interlaced with beach, a section through Dwesa Nature Reserve and crossing the Jujura River.

Day Three starts at The Haven and ends at The Hole-In-The-Wall. Runners cover mixed terrain, including beaches broken up by rocky points and grassy headlands. Highlights include spectacular cliff views of the coastline, indigenous forest, wide hard-packed cattle trails on the hills above the ocean, and an elevated view down to the finish at one of the most spectacular natural wonders in South Africa - the Hole-in-the-Wall near Coffee Bay.

“The children relentlessly shout ‘Sweeets!’ and follow the Pied Piper dance of the runners. The last eroded track carves up through the grass, curving around the hillside, with the ocean crashing heavily against the rocks below. As we step over the last rise, the landscape opens up before us, and tiny yellow flags beckon next to the curious hunched shape of Hole-in-the-Wall. We run eagerly down steep grassy slopes, finally slipping onto rocks and into the water for the last crossing to the finish.”

The event is fully supported and participants sleep in the local seaside hotels every night, enjoying the legendary Wild Coast buffets, and the option of daily massages. Paramedics are available to treat injuries.

“Physios massage out knotted spasms and tight muscles, while the paramedics sit armed with syringes and strapping - runners hobble in blistered and aching from the long sandy beaches. Needles puncture toenails syringing up the liquid beneath. A shot of methylate into blisters disinfects, burning fiercely, sweat beads on tired faces.”

The Wild Coast is a section of coast in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, stretching from East London in the south to Port St Johns in the north. Set in an extremely remote and rural area of South Africa, the rugged coastline is largely untouched and unspoiled by modern civilization. It is a breathtaking natural environment, comprising of long white beaches, crystal waters, rolling grassy hills, indigenous forests and deep-cut ravines typical of the east coast of South Africa.

The 2017 Wildcoast Wildrun® will have one departure and is limited to 80 participants. To find out more about this awesome running experience, please visit: <http://www.wildrun.com/event/wildcoast>