

# KINGDOM ENDURO

# AFRICA'S MOST BADASS ENDURO

PHOTO: DOMINIC BARNARDT

"AFTER A LONG DAY ADVENTURING THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS, PUSHING MY SKILLS BEYOND WHAT I BELIEVED WAS POSSIBLE, THERE WAS NOWHERE ELSE I WANTED TO BE RIGHT AT THAT MOMENT."

Lesotho is a majestic place and the scenery improves once you're on a bike. Regular writer **KATJA STEENKAMP** spent a couple of days flying at the Kingdom Enduro event.

The adventure started with a 15-hour road trip from Cape Town to Lesotho intercepted with a quick overnight stop in Nieu-Bethesda, a quaint little artist town in the Eastern Cape. The moment we crossed the border over to Lesotho, the landscape started changing and so did the weather. Welcomed by heavy rain clouds it wasn't long until the heavens opened, and dusty roads turned into red clay. Our destination was Roma Trade Post, a place that has its origin in the early 20th century where John Thomas Thorn started trading commodities and later added a guesthouse for the passing tradesman. The perfect base camp for a mountain bike event with loads of space to accommodate 40 odd riders and bikes.



Hike-a-bike in the rain was tough.

PHOTO: DAROL HOWES



Mountain views for days.

PHOTO: DAROL HOWES

Waking up to the smell of the mountains and fresh rain was rather special, and after a hearty breakfast we were ready to roll, neatly wrapped in rain jackets to keep dry. After our bikes were stored inside the trucks and riders split amongst the mini-busses we were on our way to the first stage of the day, the Pressure Cooker. Apparently, it is part of the Roof of Africa route and defined as a very rocky trail with basalt rock, baby heads turning to flowing sandstone at the bottom. Four kilometres long and 480m descent.

We arrived in the middle of the mountains, were given our bikes and started climbing towards the direction we were pointed with the help of our GPS. It was consistently drizzling and with only a few pedal strokes I started to collect black clay-like mud. We ascended immediately. I felt strangely exhausted at the top of the first climb until I remembered that we were at altitude. Totally mesmerized by the sight of the highlands around, I thought that even if I crash right here, the trip would have been worth it. Arriving at the first stage, everyone was sent off in enduro style, with a 15-30 second gap in between. Before I knew it,



I was pacing along a narrow rocky trail gasping for air, searching for red/yellow tape, getting lost, finding my way again, skidding along over rocks and drops hoping to stay on my bike somehow. I was totally overwhelmed with the task at hand. At some point, the rock garden line turned into a kind of clay tunnel. I didn't find traction and slid along into the finish.

"Quickie" was the next destination, a steep and fun downhill run (2,5km, 300m descent). It was indeed a quick fun run with some very steep and tight turns and sandstone rock-rolls at the end. From there we made our way to the next village and were treated to sorghum porridge, a traditional local meal and other snacks to fill up the tank.

The heavy rain forecast for the afternoon had the organisers cut out one stage to get back on time and so we were on our way to the last stage of the day, Lesothosaurus (1,6km, 130m descent). The transition was about 45 minutes long with some hike-a-bike ascents. By the time we reached the top and the head of the last trail, I realised that I was totally covered in mud.

The next day proved to be a lot dryer and sunnier. We were shuttled to the top of our first stage, "God help me" .. Up in the highlands we were once again treated to some amazing views. The first stage was sweet and flowy until the river crossing. From here the trail traversed to the finish with a few punches that brought the heart rate right up to its max. I had my first sidewall cut which saw me run for about 800 meters to the end with the bike on my shoulders. We were shuttled back to Bushmen's Pass and entered the next run, rather steep and tight with some interesting rock drops which were too complicated for me to see a rideable path. The trail tail led through bush tunnels fast and flowy. Me running again with the bike on my back due to sidewall cut number two.

Transitioning to stage three included a very steep hike-a-bike up the top of a ridge to the next stage, "XXX". It started off with a very impressive ridge ride before dropping into loose and rocky terrain. I lost my way a few times not seeing the tape and ended up in a small village before I back-tracked my way to the actual course. This run was fittingly described as "Hard on the body and easy on the soul." We carried on to the lunch stop and had some sorghum porridge goodness, sweet treats, and water.

A 60-minute hike-a-bike followed to the top of a crazy steep uphill. Without a bike it would have been a hard climb, with a bike it was a proper painful experience. Children joined us up the hike and kept us entertained all the way to the top. "Loveit" was a great trail to round off the day. As steep as the uphill was the downhill coupled with tight switchbacks, the trail head was super challenging.

Pedalling back to Roma Trade Post we passed some remote village and while watching the commotion along the road I felt a great sense of accomplishment and joy. After a long day adventuring through the mountains, pushing my skills beyond what I believed was possible, there was nowhere else I wanted to be right at that moment. I felt blissfully alive and wanted to freeze time.

Paramedics look on as a rider flies past.



PHOTO: DOMINIC BARNARDT

One of the trickier river crossings.



PHOTO: MICHAEL ALLEN PHOTOGRAPHY

Katja navigating the mud in Lesotho.



PHOTO: DOMINIC BARNARDT

We arrived in Roma late in the afternoon and had just enough time to clean up bike and rider before dinner was served. Again, we were spoilt with a braai, a variety of vegetables and sweet deserts. The briefing revealed that we had to expect strong rainfall for the next day. It was hard to believe sitting under the blanket of stars on a warm summer's night.

We were not only greeted with strong rainfall but a proper thunder storm the next morning. Safety took priority and the race day was cancelled. I made my way straight back to bed and was delighted with the gift of extra sleep.

A handful of riders braved the weather and made their way to a run called "Free Fall" (1,5km, 260 m descent) later that morning. It was the hardest trail of the event and consisted of off-camber gnarly rock trail, with twisty drops and a 200-odd meter rock garden. The trail carried on snaking through trees and the odd rock gardens before we dropped into a sandy donga. The route back to the car took us through a hip-deep river.

The Kingdom Enduro promised badass riding and delivered just that. Whether you were a novice or experienced rider, everyone enjoyed the outing. The full route would have been 125km, 3 600m climbing with 5 600m descent which proves that skills and fitness levels were equally tested.

The Lesotho Sky team has certainly created a fantastic event format for the gravity seeking mountain biker with a longing for an adventure off the beaten track. **fs**