

MAKING

HARD

HARDER

As if the 247km Trans Karoo up ride isn't tough enough, Steve Smith has a go on his cyclocross bike.

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ands, numb. Feet too, and bum. Back, stiff. It's -5°C, the gravel road is a corrugated hell, I've already been cycling for 12 hours and there's still another couple to go.

On the upside, it's a cloudless night above the Roggeveld mountains plateau and across the deep, black backdrop is a Jackson Pollock splattering of stars so clear and distinct that you can see the Milky Way arc overhead. Occasionally the red light of a fellow competitor will wink in the distance, but that and my bike light illuminating a few square metres ahead, is the only thing visible in the darkness.

It's the kind of beauty that moves one's soul. This whole situation, it strikes me, is other-worldly and surreal. And then I hit another section of

eyeball-rattling corrugation and once again take Matt de Jongh's name in vain.

Some 12 months earlier, shortly after he and Dorian Pretorius completed the 2015 Trans Karoo down ride on a rigid-fork, single-speed 29ers, this agent for Cotic bikes, my mate, and all-round nutter phoned me. Among promises of free beer and descriptions of the up ride as "very do-able on the CX" and "actually I think it maybe easier than the down ride", I somehow found myself starting the 2016 event on a cyclocross bike (I have since come to the conclusion that Matt was holding the route profile map upside down).

In its fourth year now, the Trans Karoo is a 247km single-day race between the towns of Ceres and Sutherland. It's a mountain bike race but given that almost all of the route is on gravel roads, it did look well suited to having a go on the cyclocrosser. What we would sacrifice in

comfort with our rigid forks, skinny tyres, and drop handlebars, we might make up in speed on the flat bits with taller gearing and aero-tuck on the drops. That, at least, was the theory. Besides, nobody has ever done this on a CX bike and that seemed motivation enough.

With the weather forecast a rather nippy 0°C at the 7am start, Dorian and I are at the startline dressed in pretty much all the cycling kit we own. Matt is not with us – a chest infection putting the kibosh on his race – but he has kindly volunteered to drive our support vehicle.

For the first 30km from the start at the Kaleo Guest Farm and along the Koue Bokkeveld plateau, the district road winds through epic Cederberg rock formations. Given the distance we were attempting – more than double I'd ever done in a mountain bike event – we're pedalling along at a pace most kindly described as moderate. The roads are fairly smooth and keeping an eye out for the best line, my Cotic Escapade is in its element.

"*Ne boet, wat maak julle op daai fietse?*" interrupts my reverie. It comes from an old bullet we pass bobbing along on his dual susser. "This

road is nothing, just wait. *Later gaan julle ouens afkak.*"

Turns out it is sooner rather than later and the next 15km are another story. Dropping 500m, the route takes us through a deeply rutted and rocky descent into the valley below. Sharp rocks are a cyclocross bike's nemesis. Even with our steel forks providing a small degree of flex, it feels like riding a jackhammer. Tyres are the bikes' most vulnerable component and I have to run my 700 x 40c tubeless at granite-like 4 bar pressure to make sure the small volume rubber doesn't pinch on the rocks. That also makes the bike twitchy as hell and Dorian and I pick our way down a route that would make an experienced 4x4 enthusiast think twice. Finally bottoming out into the Karoo plain, a wide stretch of gravel takes us to the first waterpoint at 51 km where Matt has laid out a breakfast of ham and cheese rolls. After replenishing water bottles and adding a splash of lube to the drivetrains – we won't see Matt again until the next support vehicle stop at 150km – we head through the Karoo Poort and into the heart of the Ceres Karoo. ➤

The Race TRANS KAROO

START: Kaleo Guest Farm, Ceres

FINISH: Jupiter Guest House, Sutherland

DISTANCE: 247 km

FORMAT: One-day endurance mountain bike event

WEBSITE:

www.transkaroomtb.co.za



BREAKING NEWS

Trans Karoo 2017 has been put on hold due to the lack of a title sponsor. There aren't many one-day endurance events like this in SA and it would be a great pity to lose it. Hopefully this feature helps inspire a brand out there to get involved.



ABOVE: The Sutherland escarpment and the vaunted Ouberg Pass await in the distance. **BELOW:** With the sun starting to dip below the horizon, temperatures quickly drop from a high of 10°C to -5°C at the top of the pass.



It's a challenging stretch. Although we are swinging north-east, it feels like a mind-numbingly straight road with a mountain range in the far distance that never seems to get any closer. A slight headwind isn't helping matters, but at least it's here that the CX bikes are proving their worth. Hands on the drops, finding a smooth line on the very edge of the road, and with Dorian tucked in behind, we make some good time hauling quite a few of the guys who had dropped us on the rocky descent.

There's a gradual altitude drop to checkpoint 3, and at 150km Saint Matt is waiting for us with a late lunch of steaming pasta, hot coffee, and out-and-out lies. "You okes are looking strong! You've got this! One last little climb and you're there!"

So far the CX bikes – and especially my Vee Rail tyres – have held up remarkably well to the punishment with the only issue a broken bottle cage that's quickly replaced at the checkpoint. It's good to rest my back on a camping chair for 15 minutes and shove some hot food down my throat, but there looms 25km in the distance is a long line that cuts the horizon. It's the edge of the Roggeveld escarpment... and Ouberg Pass

Originally an old wagon trail, with an altitude gain of 820m in just under 10,5km, it has a average gradient of 1:13, with some parts at 1:5. If, like me, you're not that familiar with steepness ratios, let me translate... it means "very steep" and "&#\$*ing steep".

The closest thing I can compare it to is the famed Merino Monster on Day 2 of the Tankwa Trek. Except Ouberg is probably a bit steeper

and there are no tarred bits to aid traction. And, of course, you don't hit the Merino Monster at 184km. Or in the dark. Or when the temperature dips below freezing.

And it is indeed dark and freezing by the time we start the ascent. Weirdly though, I've developed something of a second wind (note to self: must eat more Knorr pasta-in-a-packet during races) and with Dorian's blessing I forge ahead. The climb starts with a killer little kicker that immediately has me out the saddle but thankfully it briefly flattens out... only to kick again. This time for good.

I'm on the bike for most of it, but in parts it's too steep to turn the pedals or maintain traction. Besides, my legs have sent my brain a load-shedding warning and a note to save every watt we have. Three times I get off and walk a good few hundred metres.

At this point, I'd love to provide you with a Wordsworthian description of the magnificent vistas from the escarpment's heights but it's so dark that all I can make out are the tiny red rear lights of those further up the road. It's also flipping cold – well below freezing – and although most of me is warm enough thanks to four layers of kit that includes a long-sleeve merino wool cycling jersey and a gilet, I can no longer feel my hands and feet, despite wearing two sets of gloves and merino wool socks.

To be honest, I don't know how long it took me to get up those 8,4 km... maybe an hour... but eventually I can hear the sound of music up ahead. A delicious aroma of braaiing boerewors snakes down the last 100 metres, hooks my nostrils, and hauls me to the summit. Several pieces of the best tasting wors ever and three cups of sweet, piping-hot Ricoffy later, I'm back on my bike for the final 47km.

Not really wanting to cycle this last bit on my own lest I have any mechanicals, I spot another rider leaving the haven of the final checkpoint's big bonfire and friendly local farmers. He is Viljoen Thom, a veterinarian with a practice in Kuils River, a family man, and a fellow Trans Karoo newbie. I know all this because Viljoen is a salt of the Earth type and a very friendly guy, and for the next 20km we ride together, chatting about everything from bicycles to our respective families and the demands and joys of fatherhood.

Despite the cold and the hills – because ascending a further 300m over the next 30km, there was still some work to do – we spend a memorable hour together beneath the magnificent night-time canvas that is the Sutherland night sky. Finally, though, with the road eventually flattening out and spurred on to finish this thing, I bid my farewells and cash in my remaining watts to time-trial it into Sutherland.

The Bike COTIC ESCAPADE

FRAME & FORK:
chromoly steel
DRIVETRAIN: 9-speed
Shimano Sora/SLX
WHEELS: Easton EA70
29er mtb
TYRES: Vee Rail
700 x 40 tubeless
WEBSITE: www.cotic.co.za



There are some sections of deep, hard corugations that even riding on the very edge of the gravel road can't escape. The one upside of frozen hands though is that they're so numbed, it feels like I'm holding the handlebars wearing baseball mitts. It makes changing gears via the road brake/shift levers interesting and I can only tell I've successfully swapped cogs when I hear the chain shift.

Much to the relief of my legs, and especially my bottom, scarred gravel eventually turns to smooth asphalt for the final few kilometres to the finishline. Except I can't see the finish line.

Bombing down the main road into Sutherland, there's no-one to witness my hugely impressive Cavendish-like sprint finish. Not a soul. Eventually I spot a flashlight further up the road and there's a marshal frantically signalling to turn right and pull into the Jupiter Guest House that marks the races official end.

Everyone's inside, warming themselves around a big fire. And who can blame them. It's 11pm and it's bloody cold outside. Utterly knackered and a little dazed – it's 15 hours and 55 minutes since the starter's gun and of those I've been cycling for around 14 hours – I can vaguely make out Matt bounding over to me. A big bear-hug lifts me off my feet a glass of beer is shoved in my hand.

What a race. Easily the toughest one-day event I've ever done. With the winner's time 1h15 min slower than the previous year, it's clear this up ride is significantly tougher than the down. Our conservative pace, an hour spent defrosting at the top of Ouberg, and a shortage of talent meant I ended 70th out of 77 finishers in the Solo Male category. I'll take that though... because I comfortably won the men's cyclocross category. 🏆

