

Race Report - Run the Berg28 September 2024

run the berg

Where do I even start? This race left me longing for things that don't have words to describe them.

It all started with packing for the race the night before. A bit of self-doubt creeping in here and there because I was packing a bit of extra weight, knowing that I won't have additional outside support along the route this time. It was only my second mountain marathon, so naturally I wondered whether I'm not over-packing, but then I reminded myself that I am not an elite athlete, and it was okay – rather be over-prepared than under-prepared – and you never know if someone along the way might need help.



The full kit packed.



Hand crafted finisher medal

In previous long runs I would perhaps leave out my salt potatoes and Bovril sandwiches (which helps me with nausea), just to get to an aid station without any of it, or I would pack too little water, just to find myself running out and dehydrating – not this time!

Focussing and getting into the mental headspace for this race was difficult. It would be self-navigated, which would be a first for me, and even though I set up a pace-pro plan for 08:40:00, I really wasn't sure what challenges the terrain would bring, and how long it will really take me to get to the finish.

Let me be honest here, that pace pro plan and all the other fancy features my Garmin Enduro has, except for the map, and the eat and drink alerts, was completely useless during this race. Most of the time I had no idea what my heart rate was, how long I have been running, what my average pace was, how much accent I have done, how much distance I have covered or how many climbs I still had left. My screen was on the map 99% of the time just trying to figure out where I needed to go.



Trying to focus and breathe.

The cow bell was rung, and off we went. I knew the first 10km would be fast as we only had two hours to get to the first cut-off point. From there we had a massive climb for 5km to the next cut-off point, so the faster I got to the first one, the more time I would have for the second one, and from there I would be able to relax and take it easy.



Off we go.

First checkpoint done about 40min before cut-off, so no more stress, right? Just breathtakingly beautiful mountain running from here on. Little did I know what I was about to face for the next 10km: pure and utter hell!

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the gully

About 2km after the checkpoint, I met up with Bianka and Irene, whom I met during the run, and off we went trying to figure out where we needed to go. It must have been around 14km when the wind started getting very strong while walking along a small path on the edge of a mountain, and this is where things started getting scary.

Suddenly Irene pointed at people climbing that looked like little ants. At this point, and with the wind, I figured it was safer to put the poles away. We sat down to gather ourselves, and I checked my watch to see what the elevation was for this 1km we had left before the checkpoint: 276m. I made the call that it would be safer to crawl up on our hands and feet with the wind blowing so strong. I am not usually someone who gets scared of heights, but we were so high already that I could not look up or behind me. Looking down and grabbing every piece of burnt grass patch for grip until I get to the top was the goal here.



Irene was brave enough to look back.



View from somewhere climbing up the gully.



Irene, Bianka, and I.



At the top.

Finally, we saw some orange vests waving at us. It was the marshals for checkpoint 2. Thank goodness we were at the top.

What was supposed to be a breeze from here, just got scarier as we went along.

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navigating the berg

The wind was blowing so strong that we couldn't walk straight and had to yell at each other. It was only mountains and nothingness around us. We had no idea where to go and our watches' little arrows that were supposed to show us where to go, seemed to be blowing in every direction, just like the wind. This meant we had to stand still many times trying to see if it would just stabilise in the same direction between the three of us.

I remember us running along and suddenly it looked like we were going to fall off the edge of the mountain if we took one more step. Walking closer slowly, all we could see was a very steep downhill and more steep mountains up ahead. The wind was blowing so strong from the front, it knocked me on my bum. I remember sitting there, so scared that I started crying, and just wishing this was all over.



The wind getting the better of me.



Our saviour - Mr. 925, and the dreaded climb ahead.



Heaven help me!

Out of nowhere, Mr 925 (his race number – apologies for forgetting his name) appeared, and helped us navigate through this whole “in-the-middle-of-nowhere” story. At this point, I had no idea how long I've been running or how far we had to go until the third aid station. We were running along ridges in gale force winds, which was everything but fun. Sometimes it felt like if the wind just got a little stronger, it would knock me right off the mountain. I remember looking ahead and I saw we had another massive climb, but if I just looked down and crawled up, it won't be that bad. This is exactly what I did, until I made the mistake of looking up to see how far I still had to go. It was at this point that I was scared out of my mind. I took a deep breath and just missioned on to the top on my hands and feet. I had grass splinters everywhere in my hands, but that was the least of my worries. When I got to the top, I just sat down and waited for everyone else. I just started praying that I would get down the mountain alive and that I will be okay.

Now, in the midst of all of this, I had to remember to eat and drink. Usually, I have a plan for the first three hours where I would take a gel every 40min with big gulps of water, and two sips of my liquid nutrition every 10min. After three hours, I would change to some solid food snacks every 20min and a gel every hour, keeping the liquid the same, but now, not having a quick view of how long I've been running, time was a relative thing. The eat and drink alerts seemed to be going off every 5 seconds, but really there was no time or space in my head to think about food.



Finally!



Where are we even?

Finally, we started going down and hit some flat trails with no edges of mountains in sight. All of a sudden, I saw this beautiful white horse standing on top of the mountain, with its mane blowing in the wind, just looking at me with such peaceful eyes. I am quite scared of horses, but here on this mountain, it made me feel at peace, and as if everything was going to be okay.

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the 5-star hotel

Seeing and hearing cheers from those volunteers in the cave at the third aid station at 24km, was like meeting angels. They immediately started asking how they can help and what I needed. They assisted me so nicely with filling my bladder and my bottles. I sat down, ate some potatoes, my Bovril sandwiches, and the oranges they served on a plate as if it were a five-star hotel. All I had to do was sit there and relax, which was a necessity after the traumatic three hours I just had, and having spent six hours on my feet already. I am not sure how far they had to walk up and down all day to fill the buckets with ice cold berg water, but they truly deserve a medal for their service!



Those sandwiches were good!



The awesome people giving us food and water at the cave.

Getting to the fourth checkpoint was a breath of fresh air. Some people cheering and the loveliest volunteers. I took out my Red Bull and a soft flask for some coke. While trying to empty my soft flask for the coke, I ended up spilling most of it all over myself, but at this point I was so dirty that it really didn't matter. The jokes and laughter from everyone were a welcoming relief.



One of the best moments of my life!

Right, on to checkpoint 4 at 30km. Usually I would work on hours for such long runs, but since I had no idea what time it was or what my pace was, I just didn't have the energy to figure out how long it would take to the next point. Managing the few kilometres in between checkpoints seemed more bearable in my head, as I at least got split alerts in between the navigating. I would break everything down from here in the little distance in between checkpoints, and not think about how far it still is to the finish.



I still can't believe that they had ice.

Suddenly, the volunteers offered me a glass with ice for my Red Bull. I was flabbergasted. I don't think I have ever had such a big smile on my face. They must've seen the disbelief on my face, and while I kept repeating "really?", they just handed it to me. I walked around and got comfortable on the ground, and there I was, sitting like a queen in the middle of nowhere, sipping ice cold Red Bull and eating biltong. This gave me a big energy lift to continue the next 7km to the last checkpoint.



Who wouldn't smile after all of that?

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the last stretch

The last checkpoint was a little bit cruel (in a joking manner). We could see everyone, and then the map took us in a little 1.5km loop to get to them through some random woods. Now, tired of coke and everything sweet, I gulped down some Game juice and filled a bottle with it for the last 5km. I ate some more biltong, stretched a little, and took my last cramp assault gel. I am not one for cramps, but my calves were dead after traversing the mountains. Since I couldn't use my poles for most of my climbing, I thought it best to take them out to assist my legs through the endless flat fields of farmland.



Back to where we started.



Really?

Just when I thought the steep descents were done, there was a nasty little surprise at 41km, and a sign saying 3.5km to All Out Adventure. Here I was on a small edge of a mountain again, telling myself to not look too far ahead, or to the side – just look down and take small steps forward until you reach the bottom. The last bit was all a mental game. You couldn't hear or see the finish line until about 200m away from it.

At the finish line I was greeted by the nicest local lady with a choice of coke or cream soda in a cup, and our special hand-crafted stone medal. Again, is this a five-star hotel? These are the nicest people I have ever met!



Tears of joy and a very proud mom. Emotion at its best.



A well-deserved medal and treat.

My mom came to greet me, and I just started bursting out in tears, so relieved and grateful that I was able to finish the race. I sat down, calmed down, and drank my well-deserved beer, taking it all in, including the absolutely amazing support that was everywhere along the route and the amazing volunteers. They made the terrifying hours spent on top of the ridges feel like a distant memory.

One thing is for sure, those mountains humbled me, and I know this journey has changed my life forever.

Next stop ... Addo 50k. My first ultra.