



EXPEDITION AFRICA 2014 TEAM RUSTPROOF

The sport of adventure racing could be adopted by the United Nations as a framework for how people with different cultures, languages and versions of where to draw the line of acceptable:insane can meet together and achieve a common goal and laugh about it at the end, hopefully with some fun along the way.

The 2014 edition of Expedition Africa was put together by an Afrikaans speaker, using the almost universal English in his race briefing. We would be going through an area of isiXhosa speakers with hardly a word of English understood. But that was the other side of the river, south of the border so to speak in another province as the staff at the start resort were mostly isiZulu speakers. We had 16 nationalities present, this was all probably hardest on the Russian team, who had to rely on one of the German speakers on a different team to use his best Russian to help answer their queries.

You have to travel far to get a sunrise like this one

This was the most 'international' race I've ever been too, and I'm happy to say it was the growing legend of this event that brought the international teams to a quality race in a deep, dark part of Africa we sort of call home. I have to call it that, because even though we are common citizens of the same country – the people cooking their self grown and hand ground maize meal inside their candle lit self made wattle and daub mud huts are almost in a parallel universe to my daily existence here in the city of Cape Town.

Bizarrely this concept still works, mainly because the maps are fairly good – contours lines are the same in any language, and the compass needle always points magnetic north. The race booklet/bible was meticulously planned and had nice pictures explaining the process just incase you got lost in the briefing. In fact the whole build up to the start was world class, we wanted for nothing and could line up on Port Edward beach fully prepared for what lay ahead.

Rustproof – Mark, Dom, Albert and Steve on the startline

“Africa is not a continent for sissies”

And line up on the beach we did, 40 teams of 4 members with a pair of Fluid Synergy kayaks each – ready to punch through the short line of surf to get out to sea and head down the coast. We went all the way to the end of the row, and when more came we picked up and went further – we did NOT want to sit in traffic and took the slight penalty of further to go once at the backline. We didn't survive the first wave of swell, came mighty close but ended up rolling back to the beach. By the time we had regathered ourselves and got ready for attack two we looked up at multitudes of teams in the same predicament. Second attempt got us out, but on the way we passed our team mates who were not so lucky. The ten minutes at the backline waiting felt like eternity, surprisingly we were not backmarkers but about halfway down the field...I pity those who got pounded again and again. What a start to a 500km adventure race, a ruthlessly effective way to split the field into little chunks.

Team high jinks on leg2 river scrambling

“Kapogo magwebu”(isiXhosa – up the mountain)

We had our Hollywood moment, Team Tecnu Adventures(4th in world rankings) did something basic like forget their GPS tracker at the first transition and had to paddle back for it. It wasn't too long before they were making their way back up the field. The true professionals they were, just brushed off all the snide chirps coming their way and then allowed us to navigate the way to the next transition from the smooth wave flowing off their sterns. Such nice guys, we would see them again at the finish. It was soon evident that the only legs of racing that had flat sections were the paddling bits – even the beach stuff made you hike up a headland now and then. We were quickly thrown up a staircase type hiking trail to crest the Umtanvuna river gorge. Early days in a multi day race are fun, with teams jostling for position – oddly despite the lottery of the beach start a lot of the guys we were now around would be the ones we yo-yo'd with for the next few days.

First of MANY river crossings

“Khawuleza bhuti”(isiXhosa – hurry up!)

We blitzed the transition, I had given my best headmaster's speech about 4 times now about how important it was to push all the way to the abseil early in this leg. The potential for big time gaps was there once it got dark and we did not want to sit in a queue if it could be avoided. We had the 4th fastest transition out of all racers here – a Rustproof record for any race with more than 5 teams. We got to checkpoint 8 in high spirits, potentially only 10minutes behind the very well ranked Team Cyanosis who we'd just run past. This quickly turned to despair, as the passport indicated a blank CP7. In the rush of transition I hadn't double checked the mapping – and there was an extra CP obscured by another team's map in plotting. Luckily we didn't have to go all the way back to the start as we were against the traffic on the beach. The only way to make up for this indiscretion was our first shopping break, at the sports club of the hotel complex – cokes all round. This mistake probably cost us about 90 minutes and we arrived to the abseil well behind the teams we'd been racing with, but with only about an hour's wait to clear it. This was a HUGE moment for Mark and Dom, but particularly Mark who hates heights. He survived, and we only had to put on headlamps on the way up the other side of the gorge.

“Voertsek!!”(Afrikaans – go away)

With a moonless night descending on us and the rush still on, we chose to go the beach route to simplify the navigation. Keep the waves to your left and count the rivers you cross. We found a local lady (or she found us) who had a much better idea of where to go than our map and compass was showing. I tried my best, “sifuna eLwandle – we want the beach”. She seemed to know, and was in a hurry to show us the way – clearly we were not the first group of four people in black and yellow bibs to come past that day. We went past a few huts and a dog came out barking ready to attack. She used some proper Afrikaans to teach him to back off – we employed this technique over the next few days successfully. This brought a youngster who had probably done some sort of schooling and his English was better than my isiXhosa. He warned me of Enyameni/river. This was part 1 of my game of broken telephone – my vocab did not have the word 'river' in it, and later the map showed that the name of the big river that we would have to wade through at knee height was called the Enyameni River.

“Tequila is on the house!”

I first met Russel from Mtentu River Lodge when I spent a night of my honeymoon there. It was 11pm, he was keen to go sleep but teams kept on coming at CP10 demanding coke from his bar. I don't think he got many takers on his tequila offer. This was just one of the many places that the darkness did not do justice to – but click on this [Mtentu River Lodge](#) and try tell me it is not somewhere you'd like to spend 5 days (rather than 5 minutes) at.

Albert posing against the countryside (don't forget the government issue longdrop)

"Just look up at the stars" – Heidi Muller pre race briefing

The race was scheduled on new moon, which to the constellationally challenged is another word for NO MOON. So it was dark that first night, and it never got any brighter. The significance for us, was that we had to balance sleep schedule over the 5/6 days – and it's always an experiment with first timers and never quite goes according to plan for the rest of us either anyway. New moon also means that the tidal range is at a maximum. We made good ground across the Mtentu River and caught up to teams that had been ahead of us and were walking faster too. We would spend roughly the next day in and around Namapenny lite – the three teams who would merge, split and emerge through the course of this monster leg.

We had some really slow going on day 2, team morale was low but we kept on picking good nav routes to cut down the distance. It also helped to see some other teams who have been in this game for a long time also taking strain – the blisters were not selective in who they attacked.

The road is L O N G

"and then it's just a short 10km kloofing section" (Author..somewhere on leg 4)

The plan was to get to T3 and sleep on night 2. And despite our trudgingly slow day(in the 11 daylight hours we only did about 35km...with most of it on roads,), we were on course for that just getting to the start of the kloof in the falling light. The race bible said top teams would take 5hours to do the 10km. Seemed a bit conservative, how bad could it be?!

The kloof from hell, in the daylight

It was bad, you've probably read other stories but incase you haven't it was very slow going at night. We caught up to other teams and got slowed down at sections where we were jumping boulders, helping each other down etc. We were getting irritated with each other 40 hours into the race with not a wink of sleep. We had to take stock, and the altimeter really told the story. We had to drop 260m of altitude on this section – we had taken 3 hours and only dropped 50. I couldn't believe it as it felt like we were going well. We spent the next 45minutes descending looking for a good place to sleep at, I was really worried about temperature inversion making the river cold but a nice clump of trees got us a flat, quiet and comfy bed.

This turned out to be an excellent option in hindsight, we overtook almost all the (bar the Russians) teams who pushed on here by the end and maybe the 9hour break gave our feet the break they needed. We got a bit lazy and woke up with the sun, which was a blaring error on my part if only to delay our eventual arrival at transition.

"beware the tokoloshe"(local 'leprechaun' sort of – better explanation [here](#))

We all know about the sleepmonsters, those patient animals that come creeping up on you at snooze o'clock hour in a race when you're half past way beyond your normal bed time but still trying to stay awake and ride and navigate and be a team with morale. Well it just seemed obvious to me that the Transkei version would be the Tokoloshe, who comes to haunt kids at night – the best defense is to put your bed on bricks to raise it out of reach (they are short). We had no bricks (or beds) in our gear list, so the next best option is to limit sleep.

The smile of a team that has just found a rough hiking trail to get down the mountain

And that is what we did, especially since we had that luxurious 9 hours banked away we chipped away at 7/8 teams on the 120km mtb leg as they all slowed down. The highlight of the leg was the stop in Lusikisiki to hit the petrol

station 24 hour store – the stock of pies was almost gone by the time we got there, later teams must have just been happy with simba chips.

We were not in great shape, but the team was gelling well. We just had a final short tricky section to negotiate and then it was onto the boats. The two feasible options were descend a rough trail into a valley, cross it and then climb onto a ridge to get down to the river OR ride further before turning off and hike a bike 150m down steep terrain to get to that ridge. We took plan A, and it was a dodgy but fun hiking trail at first light once we had walked past all the loose shale. We saw bike tracks too(looking back on the tracker history we were following a route option taken by top contenders Merrell and Tecnu the night before) and revelled in the early morning activity – mainly kids walking to a school miles from where they lived up big hills!

Steep steep ROADS

Team morale hit a real bummer when a)almost signing off for the leg I sent us down to the river a ridge too early[only EA team to visit that school!] b)there was a massive road coming down the hike a bike option (but not on the map). So the Tokoloshe got us in the end, we made some great gains on the leg, but then still ended up in transition with a huge bunch of teams as we all came together.

We came from there in the distance

“paddlenapping on the uMsimvubu river”(unreleased folk song)

Apart from the forementioned surf sections in the start of the race, the importance of the paddle legs had been nullified by low river levels cutting this leg from 67 down to 20km. The hardest bit was definitely getting the boats the 1km down to the river (I think a local employment opportunity was missed here). Not being a paddle focused team this was not of major concern to us, I was more worried about staying awake as it gets very gentle paddling in calm conditions and the rhythmic motion is just so sleeeepy. I saw three cows swimming next to us, sipping the water. Told Dom to watch out for them and then realised that verbalising my hallucinations was probably not a good way of installing confidence in my steering capabilities. Around the next bend there was a truck sized piece of earthmoving equipment half submerged in the middle of the river (or did I imagine that too?). Ultimate highlight was the final bend, and seeing the twin cliff faces of Port St Johns come into view...really a special sight as it extends to the ocean.

The kick ass transition at Cremorne/PSJ

“Ncinane”(isiXhosa – small (normally to indicate my level of conversational expertise)

Ah, the short hike. At only 40km it was to be a wee stroll up the coast. Yeah right. Word around the transition was that the first checkpoint was a bastard to get in the dark, so we wolfed down our STEAK, EGG AND CHIPS(damn they were good) and headed off from [the Cremorne\(yes click it\)](#) resort straight up the mountain. Finding the checkpoint was akin to taking candy from that baby, it was on a beacon. Finding the route FROM the checkpoint was the real problem. We found a brilliantly clear path just as it was getting dark, there was a cow near it, it went through a forest and the people the cow belonged to could be heard in the distance. 3 hours later and we are about to turn back to transition and take the long road around, having moved about 1km in multiple attempts at finding a route down. Our last throw of the dice is a scattergun attempt to bash through the extremely dense forest till we find the/a path. A combination of luck, determination and stubbornness finds us a path only 20m further. We don't even know where we are once we punch out the other side either.

Dusk on top of the mountain

We get the idea that we've blown this one a bit, and are quite drained from the ordeal – surely Penny Pinchers have overtaken us since we last saw their lights 2 hours ago. Turns out later, that they returned to transition - an option it seems almost every other team that did it at night had to resort to.

We're playing chicken with tides again – we need to cross some rivers and get around headlands whilst it is low. Some real fun here...wait for water to recede and run to the next rocks before they all disappear under the next round of foam. Looking at photos this was an amazing section in the day that we'll be hiking in the dark. We get almost all the way through this section before all needing that big sleep stop.

Standard view, scattered houses up and down roads, never straight!

It's very hard to guess from the map which rivers are flowing or lagooned up with a spit, we've done quite a few now it definitely doesn't correlate with the length/size of the watershed. We get the next one a bit wrong(the famed Mntafafu, which was reportedly ankle deep at spring low if you were there). Our decent sleep means that we hit the river a bit past hightide, the worst case scenario. It's flowing out strongly, the big waves are coming in and it's at shoulder height. It's also 5am, which puts it right in the centre of Dom's discomfort zone. Mark almost ends up in the bay during a recce across, but we make it over without too much incident. Albert adopts the kalbal technique.

We regather our thoughts and clothes, and look for the way up. After moping around the vacant but very well kept ramshackle uMcingi holiday cluster we decide to stay on the beach till Lujazu village. We got a real red herring looking for the trail – there's a recently used car track which just stops – once we find the boat jetty and the army type tractor vehicle we realise that there is no road out and everyone comes in via boat and puts their stuff on the tractor (wonder what barge they used to get the truck and building materials in)!

It's a funny dynamic that only on leaving the coast you start hitting civilisation. It's hard to grow mielies(maize) on the beach, and the cows don't care how pretty it is. It is thus some very isolated villages/settlements we pass through, but smiles are all around as we walk past their huts.

Why are these crazy mlungus all buying cokes?!

The thoughts are now starting to drift towards the end of this hike, which brings with it the final leg – that monster 230km mtb ride. We fiddle a bit with the final CP that's just out of place and get going up through the valleys that will take us to Mbotyi for the second time this race. We get adopted by a gogo(granny) who shouts out to someone in the distance – she will show us the route to [Mbotyi](#). As we cross a clearing in the indigenous forest a young girl appears, Neliswe will show us the way. She must be 8 or 9, still in school uniform and her little brother Lusapho must be 4 or 5. We haven't asked for help, but we're probably in the footsteps of other teams so by now they know what's happening. There isn't a car road for miles so everything is brought in on foot, and the best route is probably the one they travel not our interpretation of a more direct one on the map. We pick up a middle brother playing at a friend's house in the next valley, even more join along the way. They walk much faster than us too! To think they do this trip 12km (24 if they miss the bus) each day to school, rain or shine - must be the real heroes of this here story.

“Makhulu”(isiXhosa – BIG)

Ahh, the big ride. We'd been laughing about this one for a few days now, nervously. The race book had indicated it as 230km, 1200m or something climbing. We knew it would take a while, and were just hoping that if we ran out of food we could find some shops. We set off without really planning a strategy, we would just take it to the next checkpoint.

For starters we had a beach ride to hit at low tide, this was not a coincidence as it meant a really short break at transition. This went off well, with half the team riding barefoot and piggybacks to cross the small rivers. The climb out the other side was not fun, a real scramble over rocky grassy stuff that took the wind out of our sails. We didn't

get that much further before we pulled up short in a tea field. Tea fields are incredibly tightly packed so were great for shelter, but it must be really hard picking the tea leaves!

Another day another killer sunrise

We got going in the knowledge that if things went well this would be the last day. That stat of 1200m of climbing in this leg was laughed off as false pretty quickly, we probably scrubbed that amount in the first quarter. Sunrise was lekker, we pulled into spaza #1 for a quick coke – the choking smell of paraffin burners was hard to bare for even a minute, so we decided not to hang around for some mielie pap.

We're going down down down, below the clouds.

We took the ridgeline down to the uMsikaba gorge, and a donkey track that took us down to the river itself. It was pretty hectic going after a few days on the road and not much sleep, Dom showed us boys who's the singletrack boss by only dabbing a foot down once. Going up the otherside we came upon a communal type dip operation where it seemed every cow in the region was getting taken through (mandatory stop and stare occasion for a team like ours).

When not navigating, steve would inspect cattle to keep his mind active

It seemed like we were going ok, but we were still a few maps short of the finish. We also hit a bit of a speedbump that would hassle most teams at some or other time of the race – the dreaded Pondo belly. Spend a week living on your feet in rivers, fields, grassland with cows doing their business next to lots of people doing their business and eventually even the strongest constitution caves in – your water bottle gets all this dirt, and often gets filled with water that needs a tablet, thirty minutes and a little prayer before it can be drunk. Never mind the fact that you're not exactly washing hands yourself and it's really hard to keep your system A1.

Luckily there has been a public works program implemented in this region recently (election year maybe?). No matter how isolated a homestead is, it seems they all have a brand new pit toilet. We can all make a snide joke about who got the tender, but there are prefab concrete outhouses with bright shiny metal doors everywhere. They look very awkward and are incredibly out of character with the rest of the housing/scenery but get visited a lot by our team on this leg.

We cleared out the stock of bananas just before school was done for the day

"Are we there yet?"(English)

This leg needs two sections, it was that big and it felt like that drive to the holiday destination when you've been in the car forever and dad says we're only halfway. We haven't seen a team on the course since Cremorne (T4) almost two days ago. I think mentally it takes the sense of urgency off the team, you almost forget that you're still racing. Without really planning this final leg we were just going from cp to cp, and mid afternoon we needed to reassess our situation.

Firstly we were not going to finish that evening, and we didn't really have much food in reserve as this was such a big leg. We also didn't actually have that much money and it didn't seem like spaza shops take plastic. I turns out we are going terribly slowly, something silly like 90km in 18 hours since starting the leg.

A best case/worst case scenario was drawn up, we ended up pretty much maintaining our best case scenario to the finish. Partly because we promptly got overtaken by the Argentinian team as we sat there – they were riding FAST, as

had left about 8 hours after us! This got the RACE mood back into focus. We were also probably at the highest point of the leg altitude wise, and had therefore done a large portion of the tough riding.

Some quick km followed, and we rode through the night with two short catnaps to recharge. We got a little bit tempted by the raucous wedding we rode past (this was 11pm on a Friday night now!), but chose to keep the crazy stories to the route only. We emerged at dawn pretty much past all the tough stuff and on the final CP. Once located there was the small matter of 26km to the finish, but all fast. Downhill and mostly tar. I'm not sure why you become a closet roadie after all those km on exciting gravel, but Dom's inner Mercxk emerged on this final swoosh home (we had to ask her to slow down after killing us in the big ring for too long).

Team selfie. Got that final CP

"Life would be boring if it was easy"(Author)

Things got a little bit emotional crossing the finish line after 7 days of racing. We had all been pushed very hard, challenged beyond our comfort zones but now it was over like that. There was even more joy on the news that somehow we had overtaken a snoozing Black Diamond to move into 11th place. We would have been comfortable with a top20 finish so this was well above expectations.

Team Rustproof finishes....eventually, all smiles now!

You need four people to do this race, but the fifth person becomes the animal that is the team itself. This was our first race together and the fifth person really grew in character over the week. We had our moments, ups and downs but came through it all feeling rather drained physically and mentally. It's what makes AR the ultimate team sport for me – there are no heroes in the team, you all just sacrifice everything for each other. In that respect it all worked out quite well, I'd do it all over again. Thanks to Heidi, Stephan and the Team [at Kinetic](#) for another kickass event, may it continue from strength to strength

- Steven Burnett (draft version safely tucked away for 2 months before being finished in September 2014 – at least the blisters have all healed now)

The TEAM would like to thank their teams at home, who seemed to have almost as much fun on whatsapp and the live tracking

Albert Rust – Mr fixit, trek navigator, pack mule. 3rd EA [check all those ants behind us!]

Steven Burnett – Team joker, bike nav, clock watcher, 3rd EA

Dom Provoyeur – unflappable, only complains when asked why she's not complaining. Can ride a bike for days and days and days on end. 1st EA

Mark Pritchett – carries food like Obelisk carries big rocks, just incase. Keeps on plodding on even when his feet start looking like wet nougat. 1st EA