

RACING THE CAPE PIONEER TREK

Known as 'that other' 7 day-stage race, but does that make it a bad thing? **Erik Kleinhans** tells us more.

PHOTOS BY ZOON CRONJE

The Cape Pioneer Trek is a gruelling 7-day stage race which runs from Mossel Bay through the heart of the majestic Karoo.



the eighth edition of the Cape Pioneer Trek can almost be described as a bit of a rebirth of the seven-day stage race in the Southern Cape. It has always been a great event organised by salt-of-the-earth individuals in an amazing part of the world, but did they find their perfect stride!?

Two major changes shaped the event that, like last year, started with a beautiful prologue route along the point of Mossel Bay, the oldest town in South Africa, but instead of traveling every day to a new destination in a tour format, the event would visit Mossel Bay for three nights, George for two before heading into the Karoo for three.

This change to have only three host-towns seems to be a trend in many stage races, making traveling and unpacking less, however it will also always be a debatable topic with some adventure seekers looking for the journey and to experience more places, while others relish the more technical, exciting stages made possible by visiting the same town instead of constant transition stages.

The mountain bikers that had the privilege of riding some of the earlier editions will remember the name Katot Meyer, a legend adventurer and tough bugger that made the routes monstrous! Another change to the event was the "easier" stages, set in motion already last year, but with less transition stages, this was even easier to achieve and I can definitely say, it was the year I saw the happiest faces and biggest beer consumption ever at the Cape Pioneer!

Mossel Bay is a lovely town and we were highly surprised by the growth of their coffee-

shop culture, something most cyclist keep a fine eye out for, adding to the pleasure of the days before the race and our time there with the slightly more free time at hand. As mentioned, the prologue route was a winner, followed by stage one to the Gondwana Big-5 Reserve where numerous animals were spotted, especially the famous giraffe running with and entertaining some Belgium racers. Not so much climbing for the day, some slow, technical sections, but it was the final hills and wind hurting the legs at the end of the day.

On stage two we headed to George. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the beach ride was cancelled due to high tide and it was relative fast going before heading up the Outeniqua Mountains to follow the contour roads to George, a beautiful day. George had the privilege also of the 'play-day' on stage three with the Witfontein and Saasveld trails keeping riders fully entertained in a much shorter stage.

Oudtshoorn and the Karoo was our host for the final three stages. With milder temperatures on the coastal side of the mountains, the change always happens so sudden after crossing the Montagu Pass where sweat quickly gets swept away, leaving only salt crystals on dusty kit. Especially on stage four where close to forty degree temperatures were recorded. Must have been a blast for all the international riders!

Stage five was a great new stage with a long district road warm-up section before some never-been-riden-before, pioneer spirit, rocky and exciting routes back to the ostrich capital of the world. Obviously, everyone has their favourite type of riding terrain,



Naturally all types of wildlife are seen while riders conquer the more than 500km route.

but I believe the organisers left the best for last on the final stage on Chandelier farm! Yes, there were six rather tough climbs, but you were always rewarded by a fun trail or jeep-track, before a fast run into town with a glamorous finish right in the centre of Oudtshoorn.

Even with the route catering more for the social aspect of riding, it never means the racing is any less aggressive! I teamed up with Matt Beers and after winning the prologue, lost a lot of time due to me picking up a bug, but we bounced back to win four stages and placed third overall. Undoubtedly the most consistent team was Team NAD of Nico Bell and Gawie Combrinck and it paid off with them winning the overall title and two stages along the way.

Other teams that impressed were the CBC team of Konny Looser and Daniel Gathof who placed second overall for almost the whole tour until a bad mechanical on the last day moved them to sixth. James Reid and Julian Jessop riding for Team Spur also put up a strong fight for an overall podium, but were also denied it due to a mechanical on the final stage. The Dutch duo of Erik Groen and Jeroen Boelen managed to secure second overall and Estonian pair

Peter Pruus and Peter Tarvis managed to claim one stage win.

In the ladies race it was a one-team show with Mariske Strauss and Cherie Redecker winning all the stages and the overall title! Catherine Williamson and Leana de Jager placed second with the final podium spot to Hannele Steyn and Katja Steenkamp.

Being part of the furniture from the first Cape Pioneer Trek in 2009 and seeing how it changed through the years, I'm impressed with the metamorphosis and steady growth to what seems to be a winning formula now. The Southern Cape is a beautiful area and you cannot go wrong with organising a stage race there, with especially the three stage towns each having its own special characteristics, from beach-town and hills to city and mountains to warm and dry Karoo.

The people from the Southern Cape are also heart-warmingly friendly and you can see it everywhere from the 'tannies' dishing up food to the very last marshal on the route. It is one big community project which always promises a feel-good experience.

With all this the organisers get a few things right, Oliver Munnik and his live tweeting from the motorbike is incredibly informative, funny and a treat for everyone sitting at home. The photographers, Zoon Cronje, capturing all the action from the race horses, while Oakpics document the stories and tumbles in the back of the field. The daily pancakes always available is so good, but be careful not to over-indulge!

And lastly the biggest treat of the week is the people that participate in this event. Even if you are a racer, it is at the end of the season and with all the other Saffas it is a very casual and laid-back energy all around with every table filled with empty CBC beer and wine bottles. There are also plenty of international riders stretching their summer a bit longer. Migrating to the south, they are all on holiday-vibe and it adds to the fun.

Now I'm eager to see what the Cape Pioneer have in store for us for 2017! Hopefully some Nutella pancakes, less aggressive giraffes and super fun trails! **fs**

Erik Kleinhans has joined the specialist marathon racing team of **Topeak Ergon**, but that doesn't mean you'll be hearing any less from the **Lion King**. Follow him on Twitter: **@erikkleinhans**, or visit **www.topeak-ergon-racing.com**.

