

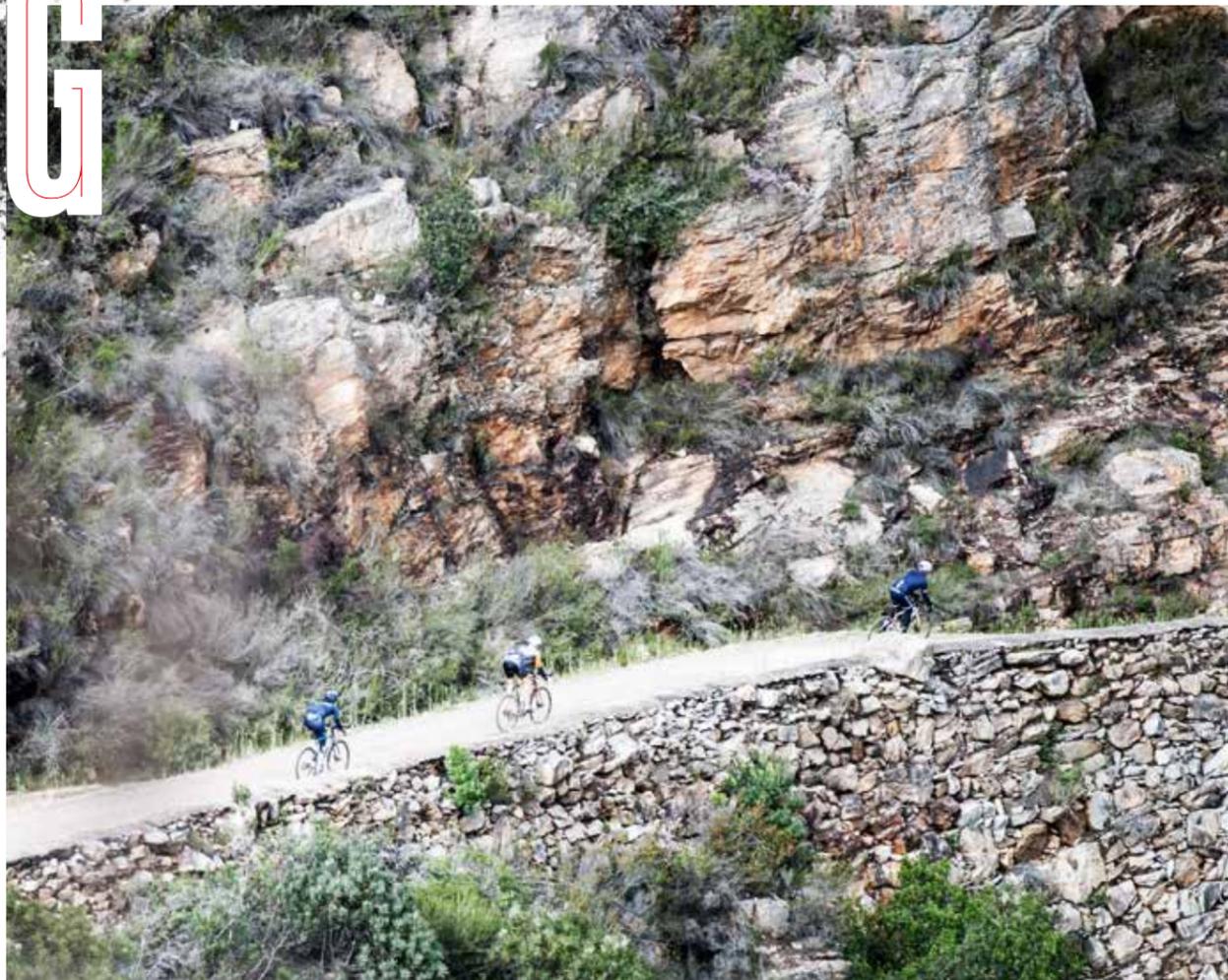


HOTCHILLEE ROLLERCOASTER

ROLLER COASTER RIDE

Having run its five-day, 600km Cape Rouleur event for the last seven years, UK-based event organiser HotChillee is unveiling another South African event for October 2018

— Nick Cook — Nick Muzik, Glenn Murray



You only have to be in Cape Town for the weekend of the Cape Town Cycle Tour in March, also known as the Cape Argus, to realise the passion for cycling in South Africa. Referred to as the unofficial “Sportive World Championships”, South African born former pro Robbie Hunter holds the record for the 110km course, other notable past entrants include Miguel Indurain and Jan Ulrich. Attracting over 35,000 riders, it’s a festival of the sport.

For British riders, South Africa is an ideal alternative to the more traditional warm weather riding locations of southern Spain, Majorca or the Canary Islands. Although the relatively long flight time might not make it practical for shorter riding breaks, for trips of a week or more, the climate is far more predictable, there are no jet-lag issues, regular affordable flights and, once there, it’s far cheaper than Europe.

BUILDING A ROLLER COASTER

For HotChillee founder, Sven Thiele, who was born in and spent the first 20 years of his life in South Africa, building on the success of the Cape Rouleur, the company’s five-day 600km tour, by creating another event there was an obvious choice.

“You’ve got all the benefits of the great weather, amazing scenery and no time

difference. Also it’s a cycling-mad country and the locals, including the police and tourist boards, are incredibly amenable to putting an event on,” says Thiele.

Opting for a seven-day point-to-point gravel stage race was definitely a left-field decision but Sven was an early boarder of the gravel bandwagon.

“The first seed of the event idea came at EuroBike 2014, where a group of us were chatting about the emergence of gravel riding, especially in the US. It was clear gravel and adventure cycling was about to take off and, as an event organiser, I felt I should be investigating great areas to explore. I’d done plenty of mountain biking in South Africa so knew that there was a network of perfect tracks and trails. I was really keen to make the event point to point so riders could experience a real journey, the changes in scenery and the local hospitality,” he continues.

Despite knowing the Overberg region of the Western Cape well, piecing the route together has been a labour of love. “Over the last two or three years I’ve ridden versions of the stages in both directions on multiple occasions, came out last year for a preliminary recce and have just completed a dry run recce with a group of riders. The route is pretty much nailed down now.”

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

We flew from Heathrow to Cape Town via Nairobi with Kenya Airways (kenya-airways.com). Offering daily flights from £484 return, this includes two pieces of luggage, one of which can be a bike up to 23kg at no extra cost when pre-booked. My 60cm frame bike, in a VeloVault 2 bike box, came in bang on weight.

RIDE IT

The inaugural HotChillee RollerCoaster will take place in October 2018. There will be options to race as a pair or to simply ride and experience the route, guided by HotChillee Ride Captains. The route starts with a 20km Prologue in the Bontebok National Park, followed by six stages ranging from 60km to the 150km Queen stage.

Full pricing is to be confirmed but there will be a range of packages available from your race entry only, standard camping, luxury tents and, for approximately £1400, including race entry and food, a VIP option with a roof over your head every night. For full details visit hotchillee.com.

“One farmer has even built a path across his farm so we could avoid a major road”

Sven Thiele

It hasn’t just been about riding though, as important and crucial to creating the perfect route has been the engagement of the local community.

“Whenever you put on an event there’s a whole lot of boxes to tick. At the first level there is permission and clearance from local councils, mayors, police and emergency services to hold a race in their area. Heading off-road, you’re in a situation where you’re dealing with farmers who can be harvesting and have concerns about being delayed by an event. Building those relationships and reassuring people has been vital and, because of that work, we’ve secured access to trails over private land that you’d never normally be allowed to ride. One farmer has even built a path across his farm so we could avoid a major road,” Thiele explains.

Even from our final recce, lessons were learned, contacts made and the final pieces of the jigsaw put in place. “You learn so much from getting out and riding a route with a group. What the terrain is really like, how dark it is at 6.30am, what the weather’s like. Although we had a lot of fun, some of the trails on the second and third days were probably a bit too technical, so we’ve tweaked them. Fortunately, and this is why you can’t beat just getting out there, one of the farmers, who happens to be a keen mountain biker, was outside a restaurant we were at and, by chatting to him, we’ve found alternatives.

“We’ll be using this first running as a setup event, limiting it to about 100 riders, so there will be a really intimate atmosphere with great camaraderie. It’s a truly unique event and the journey you’ll experience is unrivalled. Over approximately 500km you’ll see desert, rainforest, deciduous forest and pristine white beaches, I can’t think of another event that offers that.”

THE QUEEN STAGE

On most cycling trips, you’re normally woken up by the snores or early morning ablutions of your roommate but, before my alarm sounded for a dawn start of the



157.91km Queen Stage, something far larger is stirring outside my tent. Creeping out, phone torch barely penetrating the pre-dawn gloom, I disturb a hippo enthusiastically enjoying its breakfast. Fortunately, despite being only a few metres away, it’s safely on the other side of a large ditch but still definitely an exciting start to the day.

It’s Day 6 of our gravel odyssey and, with a prologue and five stages already in our legs, 150km-plus of predominately off-road riding is going to be a test. There’s also the “Sven Tax” to consider; a running theme of the trip so far, this refers to the 10-15 per cent of “bonus kilometres” above and beyond what Sven had described in our itineraries.

Rolling out of the game park, there’s a chill in the air but, rotating through our small peloton, an opening 13km on the road soon gets my legs spinning and generates some warmth. Turning off the tarmac, it’s onto one of the numerous gravel roads that crisscross South Africa and, cresting a small rise, a spectacular desert landscape opens out.

The gravel road forms a red ribbon across the desert, rising, falling and disappearing over the horizon. With a constant headwind, we try taking pulls on the front but a combination of the rollers and the everlasting gravel rider’s quest for a smoother line make working as a group a challenge. Impromptu ostrich racing sprints, far more interesting than town-signs, spice things up but don’t help with our group’s cohesion.

After about 30km and, having gained a couple of hundred meters of elevation, we leave the desert and the scenery gradually transforms from desert to verdant rain forest. For the first time in days we feel our tyres squirm on mud and, climbing steadily

for another 30km, we crest Montagu Pass. In the far distance, we can just about make out the sea, our end destination for the day. A thrilling descent, briefly interrupted by a coffee stop at a former toll house, takes us into the town of George and, with 75km ridden, the halfway point of the stage.

Ahead of us is the Seven Passes Road, 60km of gravel and tarmac and constant undulations. The passes don’t refer to distinct peaks but the river crossings at the bottom of each valley we plunge into. Although the climbs aren’t big, typically 200m of gain, and never that steep, between each are non-stop rolling climbs and descents, like a roller coaster. The lush indigenous forest provides a distraction but there’s no escaping the sting of fatigue in my legs. With 130km ridden, we cross the final river and steel ourselves for the climb out of the valley. It’s a brutal final kick but a blisteringly fast and flowing gravel descent down Phantom Pass gives a much-needed adrenaline and energy boost.

Crossing the distinctive red iron bridge over the Knysna River, we’ve covered 147km and, in October, this is where the stage will end. However, with the “Sven Tax” to pay, we still have 5km along the coast and then, as a final bonus, a 5km climb up to the Simola Hotel Country Club and Spa. Far from sparing ourselves the pain, we race up the climb and collapse muddy, exhausted but exhilarated into the luxurious clubhouse bar, to the obvious concern of some pastel clad golfers. Never has a cold beer tasted so good and it, along with the view, makes the final effort and paying the “Sven Tax” more than worthwhile. I’ve been fortunate to ride all around the world but, as I watch a troop of baboons making mischief on the golf course, I realise that I might have just completed the ride of my life. [gus](http://gus.com)