

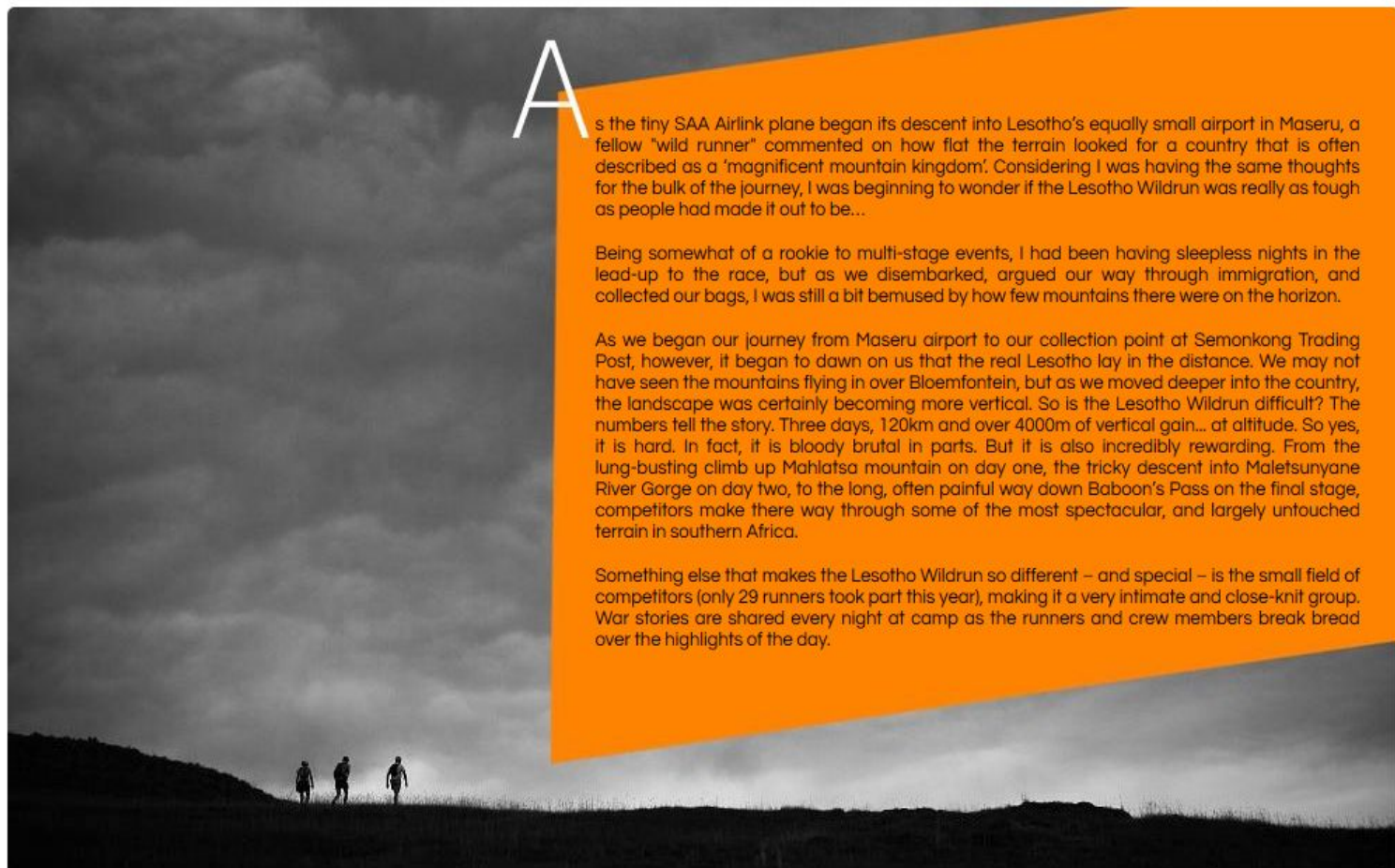


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RUNNING a mountain KINGDOM

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As the tiny SAA Airlink plane began its descent into Lesotho's equally small airport in Maseru, a fellow "wild runner" commented on how flat the terrain looked for a country that is often described as a 'magnificent mountain kingdom'. Considering I was having the same thoughts for the bulk of the journey, I was beginning to wonder if the Lesotho Wildrun was really as tough as people had made it out to be...

Being somewhat of a rookie to multi-stage events, I had been having sleepless nights in the lead-up to the race, but as we disembarked, argued our way through immigration, and collected our bags, I was still a bit bemused by how few mountains there were on the horizon.

As we began our journey from Maseru airport to our collection point at Semonkong Trading Post, however, it began to dawn on us that the real Lesotho lay in the distance. We may not have seen the mountains flying in over Bloemfontein, but as we moved deeper into the country, the landscape was certainly becoming more vertical. So is the Lesotho Wildrun difficult? The numbers tell the story. Three days, 120km and over 4000m of vertical gain... at altitude. So yes, it is hard. In fact, it is bloody brutal in parts. But it is also incredibly rewarding. From the lung-busting climb up Mahlatsa mountain on day one, the tricky descent into Maletsunyane River Gorge on day two, to the long, often painful way down Baboon's Pass on the final stage, competitors make their way through some of the most spectacular, and largely untouched terrain in southern Africa.

Something else that makes the Lesotho Wildrun so different – and special – is the small field of competitors (only 29 runners took part this year), making it a very intimate and close-knit group. War stories are shared every night at camp as the runners and crew members break bread over the highlights of the day.

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The camaraderie of Wildrun is unique and very much a signature of the event. It is something the crew encourage through their own interactions with the runners, led by experienced trail runner and Wildrunner boss Owen Middleton and his partner Tamryn Jupp. But what really makes the Lesotho Wildrun such a spectacular, and undeniably brutal race, is the route.

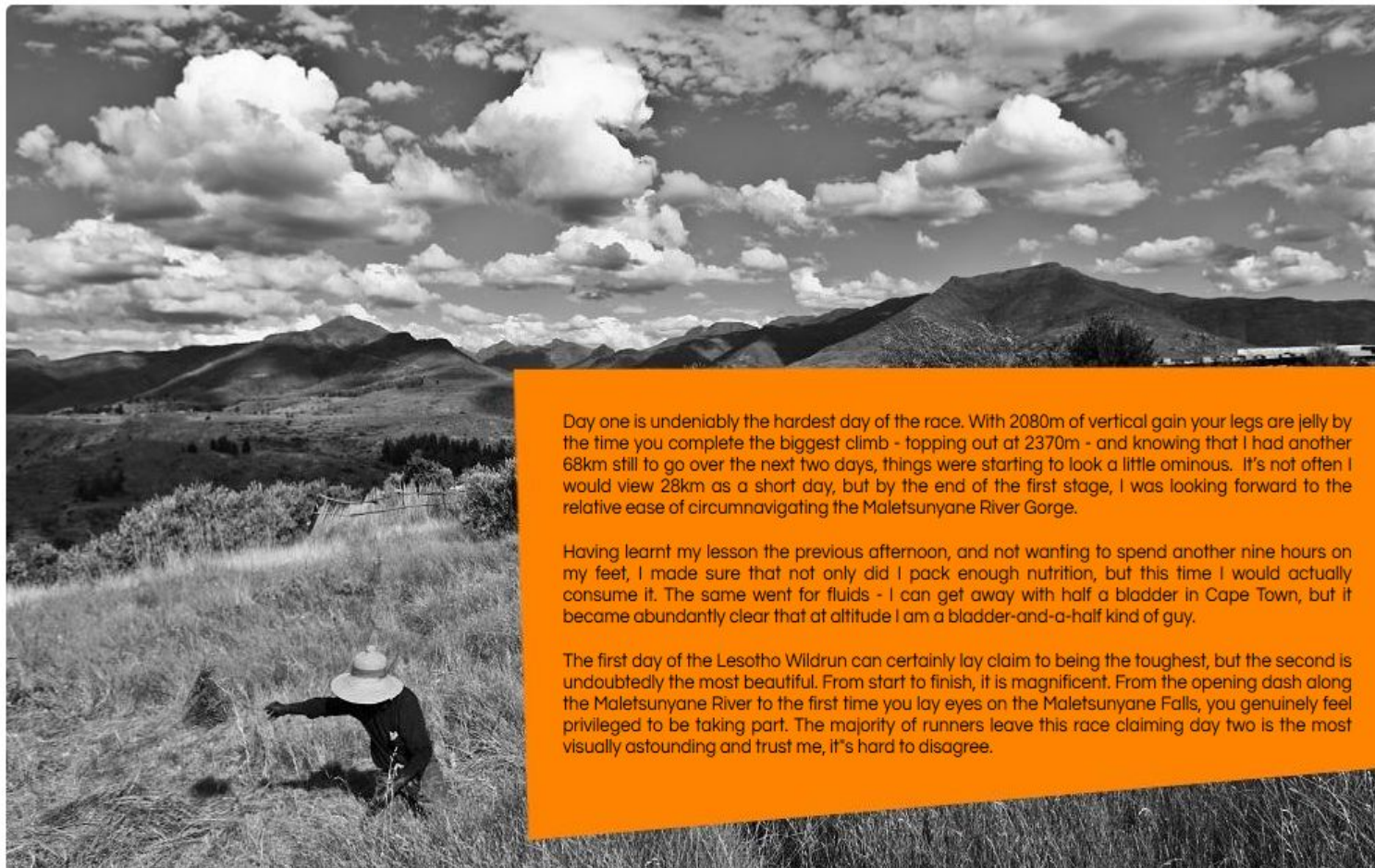
It is not often runners are shuffled out to start the first day on the slopes of a mountain, but that's exactly how the 2012 edition of the race began... on a climb. As the village school bell rang in my ears, I started off at a rapid pace, my excitement perhaps getting the better of me, but it didn't take long for the altitude to come into play. With my breath rasping in my ears, my dash was slowed to a jog, and finally a walk as the leaders marched off in the distance, leaving me very much in the middle group.

Having being warned of the effect the high altitude would have on a coastal boy like myself, I anticipated some problems, but because I had never actually run in a race outside of a coastal area, I was not exactly sure how I would react. The answer came soon enough on day one as every climb seemed more brutal than those that came before it. One intake of breath, seemed equal to half of that. Every time we moved up, I felt like my lungs were being squeezed in a vice.

Altitude was not my only problem. The Wildrun has no marked routes and every competitor needs to carry a GPS to navigate from start to finish. I had one, but considering this was the first time I was using it, it meant sticking with other runners was vital to my cause.

Thankfully I managed to do exactly that, but after mismanaging my fluid and nutrition intake on the first day, I endured a punishing time of it on the opening 42km of the race, leaving me contemplating my survival on the remaining two legs.

"Every time we moved up, I felt like my lungs were being squeezed in a vice."

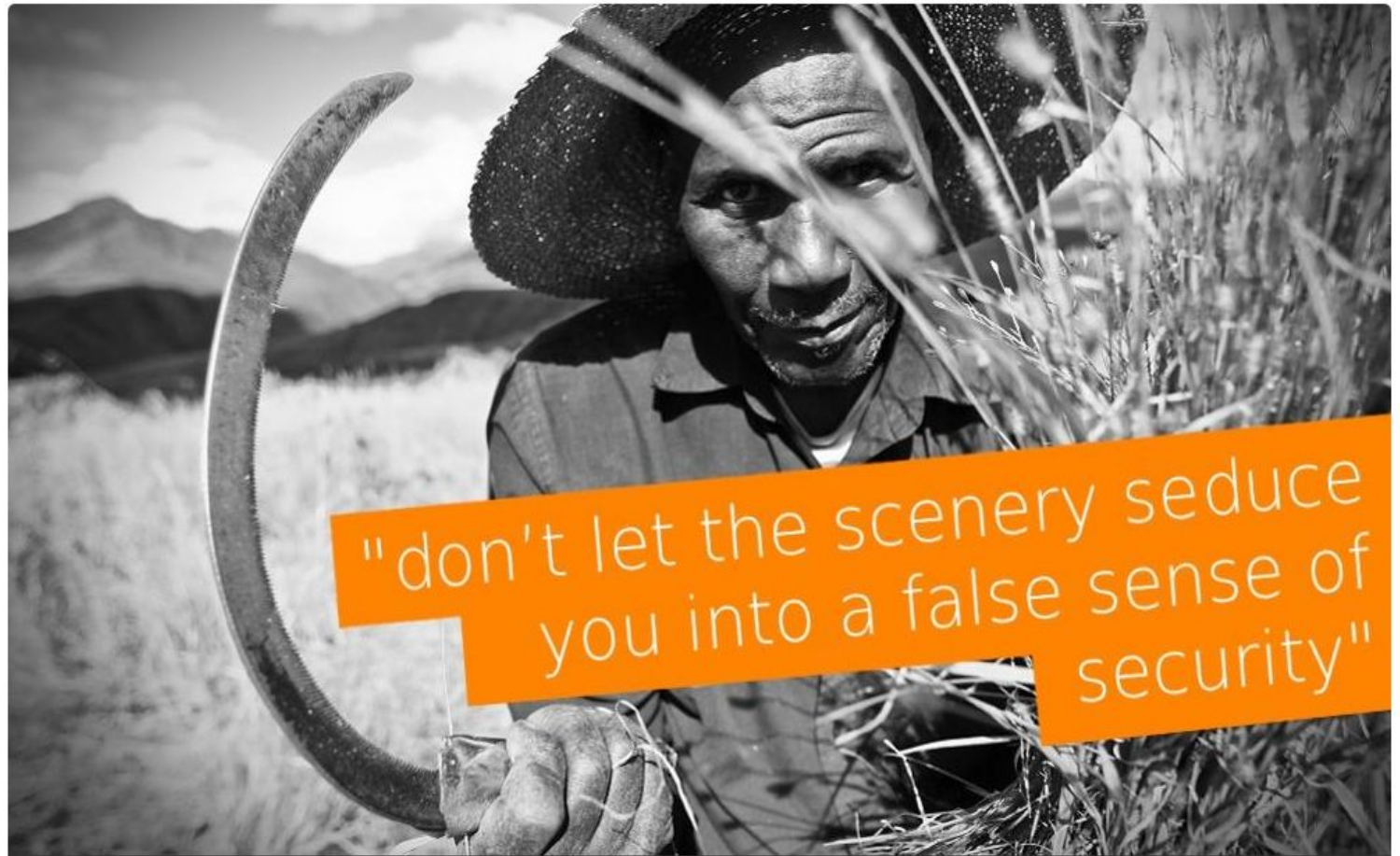


Day one is undeniably the hardest day of the race. With 2080m of vertical gain your legs are jelly by the time you complete the biggest climb - topping out at 2370m - and knowing that I had another 68km still to go over the next two days, things were starting to look a little ominous. It's not often I would view 28km as a short day, but by the end of the first stage, I was looking forward to the relative ease of circumnavigating the Maletsunyane River Gorge.

Having learnt my lesson the previous afternoon, and not wanting to spend another nine hours on my feet, I made sure that not only did I pack enough nutrition, but this time I would actually consume it. The same went for fluids - I can get away with half a bladder in Cape Town, but it became abundantly clear that at altitude I am a bladder-and-a-half kind of guy.

The first day of the Lesotho Wildrun can certainly lay claim to being the toughest, but the second is undoubtedly the most beautiful. From start to finish, it is magnificent. From the opening dash along the Maletsunyane River to the first time you lay eyes on the Maletsunyane Falls, you genuinely feel privileged to be taking part. The majority of runners leave this race claiming day two is the most visually astounding and trust me, it's hard to disagree.





"don't let the scenery seduce you into a false sense of security"



Day two has its challenges, none more so than the descent into the Maletsunyane Gorge and back out again. The route profile might show a sharp descent, but with loose sand and rocky terrain, the way down is slow going. The way up, of course, is even more so with a monster climb presented to you after crossing the river.

With the climb behind them, competitors then wind their way down some fast trails before catching sight of the Falls at around the 25km mark and it is one of the enduring images of this race. There would be little point in running this race if you did not allow yourself some time to let it soak in and with the final checkpoint on the day just happening to be placed at the best view of the Falls, you do tend to linger before moving on to the finish.

The final day of the race runs from Semonkong to the Ramabanta Trading Post via the famous Baboon's Pass. The start is the quickest of the race and despite tired legs, the bulk of the group went out rapidly. The first 15km flew by and it was only when we reached the summit of Baboon's Pass and the highest point of the day that I began to run out of juice.

Having traversed over 80km of Lesotho's terrain it was bound to happen sooner or later.



But Baboon's Pass is certainly no remedy for tired legs. The long winding downhill and rocky jeep track test the knees and quads vigorously and before long I was making my way down through a combination of walking, jogging and something in between...

It was slow and it was painful. With no landmarks to reveal just how close – or how far – away the finish line is, the last 10km can be a pretty lonely place if you're struggling. After covering over 100km, when you finally catch sight of the Lodge from across the Makhaleng River, it is enough to drag you home.. but not before one final climb.



It makes perfect sense, of course, that the journey ends on a hill, because really, how else could you finish a race across a majestic mountain kingdom?