THE MUNGA TRAIL – AN ODYSSEY OF ENDURANCE

Words are inadequate to convey the tale of 400 km in 5 days on foot over the most technical, beautiful, treacherous, scenic, brutal trail imaginable. More than two months later and the whole experience still feels like days and nights warped together in a whirlwind of total exhaustion, sleep deprivation, blisters, cramps, hallucinations, a myriad of emotions, frustrations and elation.

No photo, no essay, no report and no interview can truly convey the story, nay the journey, of the Munga Trail. It is a lived experience that changes those who dared to do it. Nevertheless, here is our attempt to reflect back on those 5 unforgettable days – noon until noon: 19 April to 24 April 2017.

How does one define the indefinable? 400 km had to be completed in 120 hours, using pre-loaded maps on GPS to find one’s way. The race was in the Highveld of South Africa at an altitude of between 1000 to 2200 metres above sea level. The vertical elevation gain over the 400 km was nearly 10 000 metres. The route ran through forests, traversed mountains, on jeep track, through gorges, virgin grassland, single track and the odd railway line.

All of this while carrying a bag weighing approximately 7kg containing water, food, batteries, medical kit, trekking poles and the like. It is a single stage race; you begin at the start and end at the finish, all on your own time, but within the allotted 120 hours. In between you are left to your own devices with regard to when and how you want to manage the race. There were 5 race villages (RVs) and 9 water points (WPs). The RVs and the WPs provided food and water. There were also places to clean up and have a lie down at the RVs and at some of the WPs. No outside help was allowed and competitors could only rely on the assistance of official race personnel.

Our entry of the Munga Trail was almost accidental. In fact, having never done a trail race of any kind, it was somewhat naïve to register for the inaugural Munga Trail Race. But having done Iron Man and Comrades and a few other insignificant races together, and with Riaan’s previous two top 10 Munga MTB finishes, the challenge of the Munga Trail could not merely be ignored. It had to be, at the very least, considered. Just in case we were going to do it we started training in December 2016 once Riaan finished the Munga MTB. Before we knew it we had told so many people about the race that we felt embarrassed not to do it. By January 2017 there was no turning back. We simply had to do it. Little did we know what was in stall for us during this epic challenge that awaited.

With race day approaching we were both relatively running fit and felt ever so nervous as we did not know what to expect or how our bodies would react, having never done more than 90 km on foot.
At 12:00 noon on Wednesday 19 April 2017, and with a prayer and a gong, we were off. The first part of the race was relatively easy running through Pine Forests. Every so often there was a fallen tree, water stream, barbed wire fences and locked gates that had to be negotiated. The enduring memory of this stage however was the absolute maddening black jacks. (Knapsekêrel in Afrikaans.) It was all over our clothes and we could simply not get them out of our socks. The first WP after about 28km was an absolute delight, well catered and well manned. As night fell matters became more difficult. The grass and vegetation was now wet because of the dew and mist. This caused our feet and clothing to become wet and hastened on the blisters that were forming on our feet. Navigation also became more difficult, in particular when the GPS tracking wasn’t 100% correct. The second WP at Morgenzon Farm reminded of an episode of Boer soek ’n vrou.
All the local farmers seemed to have come out to view the spectacle of the Munga, whilst having a braai, enjoying the best local music could offer. The spread wasn’t as varied as WP1, but the hospitality second to none.

We reached the first RV at Elandskloof Trout Farm just before midnight and grabbed something to eat whilst the battery packs and cell phones were on charge. After a quick shower and a nap we were off into the dark, wet night where we encountered the first serious mountain trails.
It was a tough old trek in the early morning hours to the next WP at the wonderful Verlorenkloof restaurant. Here we discovered the scary extent of the blisters on Riaan’s feet and we felt trepidation for what was laying ahead; well-founded as it turned out. After a circle route of about 10km we found ourselves crawling, climbing, and struggling up a steep gorge, the aptly called Verlorenkloof. By the time we eventually emerged at the top of the gorge we were quite exhausted and took some time to take in the spectacular views from the top of the mountain.

The way to the next WP seemed never-ending. When we eventually arrived at Goolglyloch we were delighted to see the wonderful, professional Johan Raath, who together with his exceedingly able team were going to spend some time with our sore, blistered feet over the next few days. After a patch-up and some refreshments we were off. As night began to fall we were traversing some virgin grassland over mountainous terrain. A few navigation errors slowed our pedestrian progress. The railway line was more than uncomfortable under our sore feet, but at least we knew we were on route. After another steep mountain, cattle fences and some more virgin grassland we came to, what must surely have been the most dangerous treacherous part of the whole race. The crossing of slippery rock on a narrow slope above a waterfall, before descending down a steep slope with loose rocks and severely unstable underfoot conditions; all in pitch dark with only our headlamps to provide light. Our prediction that someone was going to be hurt here luckily proved to be wrong.
Coromandel Estate (RV2) brought some much needed rest, warm food and a bath. After an hour’s sleep and with our feet patched up, we set off again in the early morning hours. By breakfast time we arrived (earlier than expected) at Klipsool, WP5. Here we were entertained with sizeable boerewors rolls and frozen pomegranate, no less. We felt quite comfortable at this stage, but things were to take a turn for the worse shortly, when our tummies started to play up. Riaan had the worse of the affliction, and made a serious dent in our stock of wet wipes.

The route to WP6 consisted of undulating mountains and forests, passing the halfway point in the process. At long last we reached Mokobulaan Nature Reserve where Attie, not for the first time in his life, caught a nap on one of the church benches.
The worst of our stomach ailments seemed to have passed and we set off for RV3, Merry Pebbles Resort in Sabie. We were both in a lot of pain and the going was slow and the road hard and unforgiving under our sore feet. We struggled through the night at what felt like snail’s pace. At long last we reached Merry Pebbles. Although our clothes could not be washed because there were no tokens available and the showers were cold, we at least had a massage booked. Our feet and legs could not be more grateful. We decided to have a good rest and slept for 2 ½ hours. The new day brought new hope and as the sun rose on Saturday morning we left Merry Pebbles, not knowing that it would take us the whole of the day to get to the next WP. Towerbos climb followed and was as arduous, if not more, than Verlorenkloof. By this stage our ankles and feet were swollen and we felt excruciating pain with every step. Attie had a terrible fall on a slippery rock and scraped his shin badly, adding to an already painful leg. In some places we had to actually drag ourselves up the steep climb of Towerbos ravine, past the most beautiful waterfall and to the top. At least we had the pleasure of Misty Weyer’s company on occasion. We passed each other a number of times and despite the obvious pain and discomfort she experienced, she was always in good cheer.
As night fell we reached Hartebeesvlakte Hiking Hut. The hosts were most hospitable and offered us a bunker bed to put our heads down for a couple of hours. Having had curry vetkoek and Coke we felt revived and left, this time with Kerry Longhurst as company. A good job too as we needed someone brave when we had to face a belligerent bush pig, the size of a house, who seemed to be confused by our headlamps. At first it was running away from us on the mountain road we were on, before it suddenly turned around and stormed towards us. Luckily it turned away just a few yards from Kerry. We again caught up with Misty, who passed us when we were asleep at WP7. We slogged through the night towards MacMac Forest Retreat, WP8, which we reached a few hours before sunrise. An hour’s sleep later we were on our way again; this time without Kerry as she wanted a longer rest.
It was Sunday morning and we knew we had less than 36 hours to do the last 100km. Our feet and legs were swollen and excruciatingly painful. However, we didn’t consider the thought of quitting or not finishing in time for one moment. We had too much invested. Part of the route took us down and through a deep valley with a thick tree canopy as cover. It was rather tricky to navigate as the GPS didn’t connect properly with the satellite because of the thick cover. We were however lucky enough to get through it rather unscathed. Others weren’t as lucky. During the last 10 km to Graskop Holiday Resorts (RV4) we had the great fortune of our wives’ company who joined us on route.
Time was ticking and we did not have much time to spend at RV4. By this stage we also realised that the race was 413km and not 400km. We had a shower, the normal admin activities and a massage before we were off on the last 73 km. We were now becoming concerned about the time and whether we will be able to finish in time. There was some consolation in it being the last night of the race, but as it turned out it was also going to be the most challenging. We were absolutely exhausted from sleep deprivation and time on our feet, but knew that we did not have time to sleep or rest. The route was not as technical as earlier parts, but our tired and painful feet and legs made for a tormenting experience. At one stage we wanted to lie down to rest for a few minutes when we were set upon by all the mosquitos in Mpumalanga. We did not realise that we still had the energy to sprint away from these little blood suckers, but alas there was still life in the tired legs. It was another pitch dark night and we could not see what the surroundings look like. Somewhere on the route we became quite concerned when we realised that we were between two cliffs with the sound of baboons on both sides of us. We must have looked and smelled like them, as they let us be on our merry way with a happy send off.

We arrived at WP9, Boskombuis, later than either our hostess or us expected. She at least had the company of our wives and red wine as she awaited our arrival in the early hours of the morning. We quickly grabbed something to eat, slept for 30 minutes, and then we were off again. It was not far to the last RV at Bourke’s Luck Potholes and we were determined to leave ourselves with 6 hours to cover the last 20km from the last RV to the finish. Matters did not become easier when a heavy downpour caused us to scramble for our ponchos. In addition to everything we were now also soaking wet. We reached Bourke’s Luck to a tumultuous welcome and hearty cheer from all the staff. We were very grateful for the spread and the support, but was unfortunately too tired to show our appreciation.
After a 20 minute shut eye we left on the last 20km stretch. The underfoot conditions were difficult and uncomfortable as a substantial part of the route consisted of uneven tufts of grass and loose rocks of various sizes. There was one more scare when we thought that we were running out of time. However, with about 4km to the end we realised that we were going to make it in time and we had the luxury of taking the last few kilometres easy. We were now able to savour the moment and talk through some of our experiences as we finished the last few tired steps. With about 1 hour left we arrived at the finish line with the beautiful sight of our wives, the Three Rondawels and a Munga Medal each. We could not be more tired, sore, humbled, grateful and satisfied.
The lessons we learned as part of this incredible journey consist of planning, camaraderie, friendship, endurance, persistence, pain and being organised. We summarise it as follows:

- We are stronger when we work together.

The Munga Trail is a single-entry only event. We nevertheless decided that we were going to stay together, no matter what and, if possible at all, finish together. What a blessing it was that it turned out that way. When one was weak, the other was strong. When we were both weak, we encouraged each other. We helped each other up the cliffs and down the ravines. We shared our food and water. We planned and discussed all the race issues throughout, such as when to rest or sleep and whether we on the right route. And we laughed at and with each other. (Crying was kept strictly private.) Being able to compete together helped us to complete together.

- You can achieve the extraordinary.

The Munga Trail is an extraordinary event. Ostensibly it is only for the toughest of the tough, those at the top of the tree. Yet, two perfectly ordinary chaps were able to participate and successfully complete the challenge. It only took hard work, dedication, planning, sacrifices, determination and toughing it out. Everyone has Mungas in their lives that may appear on the face of it to be impossible to achieve or conquer. We have learned that Mungas can be conquered. It only asks that you take on the challenge. The alternative is that you don’t, and then you will never know.
Never even think about giving up, because then you will.

Failure is a cruel mistress. She can turn on the dime with the smallest mistake. She is always searching for the weak place in your armour.* Like letting your guard down when you consider quitting. If you think about quitting, it becomes an option. To us it never was. To go faster or slower, walk or run, rest or sleep; those were all options, but not quitting.

If you planned well, do what you believe is right, without compromise, and never blindly follow the crowd.

We believed that we planned well for the race and that we had a game plan that would help us succeed. When we started we were slightly in awe of some of the other participants and were concerned that we may need to follow their race plans. We however decided not to, and with hindsight we are grateful that we didn’t, as we now realise that we ran the perfect race – for us. If we followed other people, or adapted our plan to theirs, it would in all likelihood have led to failure.
The final word must be about the Click Foundation. We were honoured to use our participation in the Munga Trail to create awareness and collect donations for this wonderful Foundation. We continue to support the great work that they are doing in the education of many underprivileged children in South Africa. We hope to have made a tiny contribution with our efforts. Thank you also to all the generous donations of so many people. It is greatly appreciated.

Attie Heyns & Riaan Potgieter
Ceres, 26 June 2017

*With apologies to The Grind