

1. Pic3 = sunset
2. Pic1 = basecamp before we start, 2 hills
3. Pic4 = me and shiela
4. Pic44 = hot in the desert
5. Pic50 = feet in shade
6. Pic24 – me in riverbed
7. Pic6 = Ellie bluestripe
8. Pic8 = Adam race brief
9. Pic9 = Jenny in green
10. Pic17 = 3 muses
11. Pic11 = Simon + me
12. Pic 33 – me and Andy
13. Pic30 – heat and rock
14. Pic15 = me Jenny
15. Pic47 – flag

Desert Ultra 2023

This was hard. My mate Oli said “250kms across the desert, you’ve done that before”, but this was hard. Way beyond previous multi-day ultras – this was cleverly and deliberately designed to be punishing; soften you up with body punches in the early rounds with a knockout in the fifth. But enough whinging, let’s start at the beginning.

Into the desert

We’d arrived in Namibia, a long flight from more or less anywhere, and congregated in Arebbusch Travel Lodge in Windhoek. 27 nervous people, stressing endlessly about kit, a legitimate displacement activity so as not to stress about running long days in searing heat. Your kit is a large part of what might get you through this and it’s a trade-off between weight on the one hand and comfort and calories on the other. You can’t have it all. Katherine said her pack was down to 6kgs before water. This sent all of us with 10kg plus packs back to our room for yet another scrutiny; do I really need the second bag of Bertie Bassetts? (Yes!) Legend has it that last year Sylvia from Germany tried to run with a 22kg pack despite the pleadings of Adam, our ever-smiling, all-American Race Director. She’s back this year to try again, but history doesn’t record what burden she chose to bear this time.

They herd us onto a bus and we drive North West for hours to a carefully chosen spot in the middle of absolutely nowhere near Spitzkoppe Mountain, the start line and site of our first camp. It’s beautiful. Desert sands, mountains in the background, occasional pieces of scrubby vegetation. Jaw-dropping sunset. I adore this scenery. And there in the middle of desert we find Riana and her husband Nico. Riana is the first Namibian woman to give this race a go, and she makes us 28 on the start line.



Sunset, the evening before the race started.

First up is kit inspection; the medics who will try to ensure we don't die during the next five days go through the mandatory elements that we all wished were not currently weighing down our backpacks – bandages, swabs, green needles, razors, eight safety pins, large bandage, K-tape, hand sanitiser, etc etc etc. (Apparently you need eight safety pins to construct a makeshift stretcher, who knew?) The idea of making us carry the meds is that, while there are medical bags at every check point (roughly every 10 kms), at the particular point that you happen to collapse and a medic is rushed to you from the nearest checkpoint, the bag may be in use at that time, treating another hapless patient, so you need a minimum set of basics on you at all times. The answer is don't collapse.

Ready steady GO!

250kms and this is day 1 stage 1 and we are OFF! It's 07:30 and the sun's been up for a good hour or so, the temperature has yet to hit high, and we are all super-excited that finally, finally, finally, this hour has finally arrived.

We charge off in a cloud of dust. Adam's race instruction for this first day is more or less as follows. "Do you see on the horizon the gap between two large hills? Run to it any way you like. When you get to the gap you'll find Checkpoint 1 in 14kms. From there, the trail to the next CP2 will be marked by flags. All CPs from there on will be marked by flags. This stage has four CPs and the total distance is 51kms. Good luck".



Base camp before the start. The gap in the distant hills on the left was where CP1 would be

I start out running side-by-side with Ellie. Ellie is a large part of the reason I am here at all. Ellie lived with us on and off for a year or so, during which she took up running, did her first 10km race, then smashed the London Marathon. I would run with Ellie some weekends, and loved having her company around the streets and parks and rivers and canals of London. We sort of dared each other to do this, I'll sign up if you do, sort of thing. Then sign up she did, for her very first multi-day ultramarathon, so I followed suit and here we were. Running in the desert. Wow.

We have a lovely run together to that first CP1. We see a desert hare. We manage to lose sight of the two hills in a dip. It's no big deal, but you do quickly get the sense that should you become disorientated things could go pear-shaped fast.

Having started the race at 07:30, towards 09:00 we are closing in on the CP, when I notice my hand won't close. And it's bright red. Oh sweet mother of mine, I went for a pee before we started and the bowl of detergent has washed the suncream off my hand. I pull my buff on like a glove and we keep running in. At the checkpoint Dr Pete reassures me and slavers my hands in dermatological sunblock. It's a salutary error, and scary to burn so quickly so early in the day.

Ellie and I leave the CP together and continue on, but soon enough she's pulled away from me, and this will be the only time in the race that I have the honour of running with her, she's got her race head on now and her legs are telling her to push it. Mine are telling me to do the same but my body's saying it's bloody hot so watch it boy. I keep to my conservative jog/trot-walk pattern. Run your own race, is the rule.

The temperature kept rising. The miles passed. Slowly and surely we moved through the ancient landscape of the Kunene Region or Damaraland.

We get to the last CP, having already run a marathon distance in some proper heat and it's 10kms or so still to go to basecamp 1. We hit a wide dusty sand road that continues on for ever. It saps the soul running through this late afternoon, the hottest part of the day, on a road. Finally, finally the flag to mark the camp appears and I peel off and collapse on seat to have water sprayed over me to get my core temperature back to something approaching human. I have had a good day out there, enjoyed it all, the time with Ellie, running on my own for most of the rest of it, but that last 10kms was tough. 52kms down, many to go.



Me, trailing behind Sheila

The few behind me filter in over the next couple of hours. Some, like Yuko, a Japanese lady with a permanent cheery smile, have had a walking strategy from the get-go. Respect to them, all those

extra hours out in the heat on your feet. It's a tough choice and for me running at least some of it is the only way to cope. And indeed with Yuko and her happy smile, that's it for the day, all runners are home.

Calvin is blinded

But already the heat has claimed some victims, and how. Calvin is a head chef, who's on his feet 12 hours at a time for his job. He's done a few of these multi-day ultras already and has even been training in heat chambers he tells me. All in all he's perfectly set for this race. But his body shut down on him in the extraordinary temperatures and – I can't believe I am writing this – he went totally blind. I cannot image how I would react, sheer bloody terror, losing my shit off any known scale. Calvin managed to message base for help using the brick we were all handed on the start-line, which is our tracker and position locator. He also managed to get to shade. But – being blind – he could not read the incoming text messages and so in the confusion two hours pass before help finally gets to him.

This is not a good start to the race.

By the time I have sat recovering at the finish line, sufficient to get up and wander over and join the general chat, Calvin has cooled down and rehydrated under close medical watch and has already fully recovered his sight. Clearly he's out of the race now, but opts to tag along as an extra crew-member and on future days he'll be shouting greetings at checkpoints and spraying grateful runners down as they hit the temporary shade of the next staging post on this long and traumatic race.

Day 2. And repeat.

This race is hard.

No let up, another **50+km** day today. It's a really daunting prospect. The classic marathon is 42kms and it hurts enough. The extra 10kms or so on top really hurts. It sure hurt yesterday, really took a toll on a lot of the runners, who have lost all of their previous start-line bounce. I am actually not too bad, enjoyed it, didn't pick up any blisters, just a bit of a raw back from something rubbing. My hand now looks like a hand again, that was a lucky escape.



Guess what – it's hot in the desert. Doh!

Three Two One Go! We run out for day two with the start cruelly shifted back 30 minutes to 08:00. Yesterday I got in at 16:30 with time to cool down, rinse my legs and body of salt, clean my feet, drink some tea, eat by freeze-dried meal and some more peanuts, drink yet more tea and collapse into my tent. Today I will have at least 30 minutes less in which to do all of that.

As the day unfolds I pass through CP1 and eventually CP2, occasionally chatting to people who come into my orbit, everyone is friendly and the brief snatches of chat pass the time and the miles. I spend a bit of time with Sherief, an Egyptian. In fact, I chat to him on and off during the five days of the race, but it's only days later that someone tells me he's not just an experienced ultra-runner, he's also climbed Everest. If it were me, I'd be telling EVERYONE.

I come to CP3 around 14:00 and it's stinking hot. Each CP has at least a couple of people, one being a medic, the other will likely be one of the BtU race staff, either from the UK side, or from the local team of Afrikaners who organise the tents and hot water. They always smile and cheer for you. They sit you down in the shade and refill your bottles. I am carrying three litres of water when I leave a checkpoint, to last for 10kms or so, i.e. a couple of hours in heat in the mid-40s. And I am drinking all of it, nearing empty as I reach the next CP and it's all repeated. This race is a process.

But this CP is more than just a process. As my temperature slowly normalises and I eat a few more peanuts (calories, salt, protein, excellent), I suddenly notice Jon Shield on a bed in the shade behind me. This was not in the script. Jon has been the winner of various other BtU ultramarathons, and is a Big Name on the circuit. Jon was in first place at the end of day 1, and everyone expected him to be in first place at the end of day 5 too. Yet here he was, laid out by the heat. Turns out he's a man, not a running-machine, after all.

I get up to go, and to my complete astonishment, so does Jon, on his way to CP4. He's probably 500m in front of me when I leave, but after 10 minutes I catch him up. This too was never in the script. I ask if he's ok, and he says he is, and explains that the team here know him and what he's about and it's all ok. He is coherent and walking in a straight line, so I wish him all the very best of luck and go onwards. I later hear from Ellie the medics walked him into CP4 and basically saved his life, but he had the grace to withdraw himself rather than by medical fiat. Chapeau. Like Calvin, he'll return to the race as crew, helping out, and kindly donates his now spare electrolytes so I gratefully grab a couple of packets.

Another whose race ended that day in the heat was Sara, an Irish runner who sat down for 5 minutes in the (rare) shade of a tree somewhere out of CP2. When the medics drive up, they ask her how long she's been there. 5 minutes she says. And the medics tell her that her tracker hadn't moved for 45 minutes, and the conversation ended with another withdrawal.

Every runner turns up aiming to finish, no one aims to fail. Everyone has trained, everyone has done the miles, everyone has stressed over the kit, everyone has paid their race fee. Everyone dreads the DNF. Did Not Finish. The acronym that signifies runner hell. And Sara did not deserve the DNF, neither did Jon or Calvin or any of the others, but heat – overwhelming omnipresent crushing heat – doesn't care. Heat that starts at 30 degrees when we set out, rising to the mid 40s by mid morning, and rising. Relentless. Shadeless. At least there's a breeze, even if it's a hairdryer.

I finally got in at 17:30, so it took me 9.5 hours, 30 minutes longer than the previous day's 50. Ablutions, supper, and other bits of personal admin all seemed that little bit more rushed. And so to bed. I headed for my tent and found my tentmate was already flat on his back recovering from his day's exertions. Craig is a lovely fellow, who tells me he's a gardener but with a family interest in a car manufacturer. This is his first ultra. I could not ask for a better tent mate, he was delightful company and clearly a strong runner as he'd been in well before me on days 1 and 2. However, neither of us slept well as it was still very warm at night, all night, and I would lie in just a silk sleeping-bag liner and gaze at the miraculous star display above.



Shade, good companions, prone, feet up;
happiness in the desert is the small things

Day 3 – 51 degrees or more

Blessedly day 3 is a bit shorter, at 42kms. Just the standard marathon then. Should leave more room at the end of the day for personal admin as it's euphemistically called; the process of getting salt and dirt out of all the crack and gaps, nooks and crannies, ensuring your kit is ship-shape, etc. Failure to attend to personal admin in a race like this means almost certain failure.

Hot water is on from 06:00, so Craig and I arose at 05:30 to start the ballet of rolling down sleeping bags, inflatable mattresses, pulling on your race clothes – yuuuegch, beating your socks into some form of flexibility and so on. Ablutions and then breakfast, which for Craig was in powdered form and for me was a large bowl of salted porridge followed by a large bowl or two of tea.

Then from 07:00, it was the Medics' Clinic. James came to see me, and this time I did have some blisters on the underside of my foot that he gracefully agreed to patch up. He is a paramedic in real life, and has a great air of calmness and authority about him. Turns out he was a cricket nut as a boy, to County level, but played so incessantly that his knees had gone (he was a bowler) and so there would be no question of him running one of these one day, but he'd done a good number as medic. On the other hand, Alastair (or Magic Al as Ellie christened him after he fixed a dodgy leg muscle or perhaps because he's rather fine to look at) had got prior as an Ultra Runner, having DNF'd the Ice Ultra, cold being every bit as unforgiving as heat.

Shorter today, Adam cheerfully announces at the race briefing before we set out, but no easier. You'll be running through soft sand up a dry riverbed for the first 15kms. He tells us this with his usual massive smile. I feel less than fully cheered by this happy news, I had been looking forward to a slightly less punishing day. Not to be...

As it happens I start with Craig, and for the first couple of hours, it's ok, there's some thin cloud cover and the shade is a complete blessing. We run. Eventually Craig gets more used to the sand and outpaces me. CP1 passes, and so do the clouds. Now the heat is crushing and there's not a whisper of wind. It's harder and harder to breathe. The trail finally comes away from the riverbed and meanders uphill. Every time you get to the crest, it's a false summit, and upwards you go. For ever. No wind. I cannot begin to tell you how hard that segment of the race was. I get into CP3 finally, and collapse into a seat. The wonderful Dr Hattie (Fellow in Paediatric Surgery) sprays me with mist, fills my bottles, and I sit. And I sit. It takes me a whole 45 minutes just to get my core temperature down to something close to the human range. Manu (sometimes just Mu) is with me. A Frenchman

(actually Emmanuel), one of the few runners older than me (61), he also sits. We sit. He looks at me from hooded eyes. Putain, he says quietly. Putain, I reply. No further conversation is needed. We have said it all.

I hear about the fate of Sylvia (she of the 22kg pack last year). It seems that approaching CP2, Nico noticed she was struggling and was out of water, albeit with less than a km to go to the CP. She was wobbling and by the time the medics got to her, nearly unconscious. Another victim of the heat. Hattie and Zoe had the hospital ready back at base camp, and with fluids and rest all was well, but it shows the value of a roving pair of eyes at the back of the race, as without Nico's vigilance and the excellent medical support, it could easily have been different.



Me, running in the river-bed before the clouds burned off

Elephants

Eventually, hours and hours later, I get to within 100 metres of camp and I hear an Afrikaner voice commanding me to stop. Gert. The old fella who runs our basecamps, along with his wife Alda. Gert says there's elephant nearby, so stop now. I stop. I am desperate to get to the shade of the camp. He says ok, go slowly, I will follow, if I tell you to get in the car, do so immediately. I nod. We set off. And finally, finally, finally, I make it to the others who are reclining on mats in the shade and who cheer me in, as I will cheer in those who are behind me.

I am told it hit 51 degrees that day. I believe it. Some of the crew say it was 53, but whatever, it was the absence of any breeze whatsoever that did the real damage.

As I recuperate and wash my feet and legs, I hear Muriel in conversation with another runner. Muriel is an amazing Belgian runner. Ellie pronounced her a Warriar Queen and it's spot on. Tall and elegant, with a unique head-dress and braids, with tattoos and a blue stripe of surfer sunblock under her eyes, eyes which look straight and unblinking into yours as she tells you of the particular added difficulties of running during her period, she could perhaps be a bit unsettling, but her eyes are kind and her voice is gentle, and she's followed an extraordinary career path, having initially been a vet (whose work on freezing cat sperm has been used by my vet friend Ellie, small world), then having switched to become a doctor, she's now a pathologist lecturing in anatomy. And a mother of two. And currently running 3rd woman in this brutal race. So back to the conversation. A runner, I think it was Dutch Robin, a soldier, was complaining of a tweaked muscle ... my gluteus maximus here, he says, pointing. That's not your gluteus maximum, says Muriel quietly, it's here. No it's not, says Robin. Muriel looks him in the eyes and softly says "I cut people up for a living". Ah. Point taken.

In fact, head medic and old friend Doctor Pete had noticed both Ellie's background as a wildlife vet, and Muriel too, and had asked them if they could help the medical team in an emergency situation. No problem says Ellie. Muriel: "But I only deal with dead people". OK, says Doc Pete, we might come to you towards the end of the care pathway then. Graveyard humour indeed. Love these people.



Ellie adopts Muriel's surfer-chic

The elephants were indeed around. That evening, just at last light, they appeared at the far side of the dry riverbed, silent, majestic, all the old cliches, but they're true. Alas I saw none of it, as someone persuaded me to swallow a magnesium pill that induced a specular gag reflex and I lost most of my evening meal. Valuable calories in the sand. James came over to sit with me, got me to drink a load of electrolytes, eventually pronounced me fit to continue in the morning. I was peeing all night as result, on the hour. Tedious. Which makes it all the more extraordinary I managed to miss the drama; all Craig and I heard from our tent were the elephants trumpeting loudly at midnight, they seemed to be right outside the door. Bit close says Craig. They never trample tents, I said rather more confidently than I felt. Sleep well. Turns out Marie-Louise had gone to the toilet block and a very large elephant had made it clear that she would do no such thing, so she quietly retreated. I would have been scared out of my skin, an elephant that close in the dark looming above you. Marie-Louise is clearly made of different stuff. She'd turned up on the start line with, of all things, a reindeer skin strapped to her backpack to lie on at night. Made an extraordinary sight. She christened it Priscilla (Queen of the Desert, geddit?) and her furry mascot made her immediately recognisable on the course. And at the end of the race, she gave it to a wee boy, one of the crew members' sons, which was a sweet gesture.

The short day, ha ha.

Adam chirps around the start line, perfect hair, perfect teeth, smile fully glued on. In fairness, he's not just the Race Director, he has also run it and actually holds the course record. Bet he smiled throughout that too. Unreal. "We'll start at 11:30, only 23 kms, gently upwards for the first half, then flat(ish), good luck." 11:30. It was 51 degrees yesterday by then; today, it feels hotter if anything. Oh boy.



Adam smiling vigorously at those about to suffer

At least the late start gives me a chance to stuff in extra calories to make up for the ones I vomited out, and that I can do so is thanks to the wonderful and exceptional Andy, a Brit who lives in Spain, and who is, incredibly, running this race **6 weeks after an operation to remove prostate cancer**. He's only 48, and found it sort of by chance during a medical, and now he's toughing it out in the desert, only his second Ultra. If anyone deserves a medal it's him. He's a lovely guy, who seems to manage to be cheerful even though he's clearly having a bit of a nightmare, the first day having really kicked him hard as it did for so many others. He's brought 4,000 calories a day (compared with my minimal 2,200). He's actually not getting through it so he bequeaths me a couple of packets of beef noodles. I have one for elevenses. It's bloody fantastic. I could cry with gratitude.

I am rapidly falling in love with Andy and all my fellow runners. I am already hopelessly in love with all the medics. This is a fantastic brutal terrible race.

3-2-1. The first 2 kms are soft sand, then up it does indeed go. Up and up, on and on. No wind again. Jeezoo. No one said this was going to be easy but... Why whinge, I knew this was going to be hard, I feel fine (if dog tired).

I get to CP1 and it's clear a lot of people are really struggling with this short, so-called easy stage. I have a decent break as I am in no rush and head out. It blows hard around the crest of the hill, but away from it the wind mysteriously disappears. No wind. Heat in the high 40s. The desert shimmers.

I see a figure in pink and white in front of me and it's Katherine, a friendly chatty lass from the northeast, who's been a little ahead of me most days. She's stock still a little off the path and it's clear sommat's up. I head over. She's a bit tearful. I am having a panic attack, I can't breathe, I have tried to send a message on the tracker, but I can't see how to work it. I tell her it's ok, she's with friends, she's going to be fine, take time, take a drink, breath slowly. Jules, an airline pilot with a nice dry wit turns up. We wait together while Katherine's breathing normalises. Then, like a miracle, Nico's car appears on the horizon and he's with us in minutes, out the car and showering Katherine with water. The effect is miraculous. She cools down, straightens up and heads off. Jules and I walk with her to CP2. She's off out of there long before me, for the final 3kms into the basecamp.

As I recover in CP2, getting my heat down again, Jenny appears from the desert. Jenny's another one who had a really really tough day 1. It's her first Ultra too. She's a round the world yachtswoman, and I know her from other BtU races as she's a key member of that wonderful team, and she's been "persuaded" to run one of her own races, this one, and what a race to choose, the hardest multi-stage race I have ever attempted. Jenny is always smiling, she's got a smile that takes kilometres off a

race, but there's been something rather subdued about her smile in this race. And – marvellously – as she comes into CP2 to join me – I see that the proper Jenny smile is back. She's finally on an upwards trajectory and starting to enjoy it, going from strength to strength. I am so glad, and I am in no way surprised, she's as strong as she's lovely. Go Jenny!



Jenny appears from the desert, getting stronger by the hour

And she too is out of the CP before me. I finally totter off, still in no hurry today, and soon enough come into the final basecamp before the Big Day, the dreaded Stage 5.

The chat that evening is all about what lies ahead tomorrow. 92kms. What's your strategy, Sheila asks me. Sheila is from Iran, by way of Sweden and then Paris, now living in Edinburgh. She's currently 2nd woman and I am very flattered she's asking my opinion, she's miles ahead of me. In fact, my friend Ellie, in her very first multi-stage Ultra, is FIRST WOMAN. It's incredible. The girl is born to it, I knew that, but FIRST! The "only" Ultra she's previously run is the Two Oceans in South Africa, 56kms total, a day race. There's nothing she's done that would say she would obliterate this race. She's beyond exceptional. Sheila's in second, Muriel third. As for the men, with Jon out, Steve from the UK is in first, and kiwi Shane is 10 minutes behind him. Third place is wide open. What indeed will tomorrow bring?



The 3 Muses. From L to R; Muriel, Ellie and Shiela, the first women of the desert

The Grind, they call it

I will say it again. 92kms. A standard marathon is 42. This is more than double. We're all tired, some are carrying injuries, everyone's in calorie deficit, it's forecast to be high 40s again, and we have to run one mother of a long way. 92kms is an Ultra all of its own.

I wish Ellie good luck. I wish Craig good luck. I wish everyone good luck and they do the same. Andy's a bag of nerves, Christ, we all are, and we wander over to the start line together.

It's 04:00. Adam's smile is brighter than his headtorch. It's a 92km grind. There are 8 CPs before the line. You MUST be clear of CP7 by 19:00 or we will pull you out and you will be a Short Course finisher. Only those who make the cut get to go on and try to complete the Long Course and get an official time. It's up a sand dune for the first 5.5 kms. Then it's broadly downhill. Good luck.

Thanks Adam.

Andy and I set off together. He tells me all about his cancer treatment as we run. He really is astonishing. In no time we are at the top of the dune, we can see the car headlights shining out from CP1. We make it easy and run straight through. We are making really good time. We are really running, making use of the comparative cool of the night (only in the 20s).

Somewhere between CP1 and CP2, Andy drifts forward from me, or more like, I drift back from him. I head down a beautiful canyon past some cliffs. I later hear that Max, a fierce looking Italian, all muscle and bone and tattoos and beard, but with soft brown eyes and a gentle manner about him, did battle here with some baboons. The baboons stole one of his running poles. You've got to laugh. Thankfully he wasn't bitten, that would not have been funny anymore.

On through CP2 again, no pause, running well. And here I see Yuko, the Japanese lady who is all smiles and no English, who has walked every step, been out longer than all of us, not been able to join the chat, and who (it occurs to me) really ought not to be ahead of me. But I shrug and smile and wave at her, and keep on running. (Turns out she'd somewhat accidentally pressed the red button and has therefore been disqualified, but the BtU guys felt sorry and drove her forward so she should at least be able to walk the most scenic bits of this most scenic of days.)

CP3. Getting seriously hot now. And seriously uphill, what was with the "You'll be dropping down" nonsense? What's worse, my Jelly Babies have fused into one enormous sticky blob of arms and legs and unidentifiable body parts like some roiling hot Jelly Baby orgy. Still taste good though.

No wind now. Incredible heat now pressing down. Nico has told me he'd gotten a phone message from Simson Uri-Khob, the boss of SRT (Save the Rhino Trust) in Namibia. He's going to meet me en route, say hello. And sure enough, out of the shimmering heat, there he is, all smiles and hugs and handshakes. It's all I can do not to break down crying. We walk together into the next Checkpoint, about 200 metres away. Then he's off to find Ellie and say hello. It's so kind, he's taken a day off to support us, a privilege none of the other runners have except for Riana, who has the wonderful Nico cheering her on. Simson gives me such a boost. And I see him again, on the way back from Ellie. By now it's roasting and I am struggling, so I beg some water and he gives me – whisper it – a drink from a bottle of COLD water. The BtU guys try their best to keep the water at basecamp and checkpoints as cool as possible, but it's been days since I had anything actually cold. It's bliss. I bounce off, the impact is immediate. God Bless Simson.



Simson and me.

CP4. CP5. The temperature is up and up. The gradient too keeps up and up. What on earth was Adam's "it's downhill" all about? BtU distance and topography is a law unto itself. CP5 to CP6 turns out to be the killer stage for many runners. It's up and up and steep with it, it's mid-afternoon, we are all terrified of missing the 19:00 cut, the pressure of the heat and the time limit are oppressive, there are no runners in sight (as usual), and it's all I can do to look up and admire this formidable landscape, draw some strength from it. My mantra is I am enjoying this, I am enjoying this. My feet are really falling apart now, but I am damned if I am stopping for blisters, it's too late, this is the last day, just get there. On and on. It's a long leg, 10kms, feels like 100. Suddenly I see the gazebo of CP6. I am more-or-less out of water, but it's going to be ok, I can make it that far. This is the third time I have run dry, drunk a full three litres between CPs. This race is hard.

I collapse into CP6. Andy is there, with Jules and Katie who is ex-military and has marched this race as fast (faster) than I can run it. AND she has a chest infection. She is an inspiration, a model of power and discipline. She's barely able to whisper, and yet on she goes at her usual fierce pace.

Zoe, who is a nurse back home (A&E and also Intensive Care), is trying to manage a lot of people on the very edge of heat collapse. She does so magnificently. Andy is posted into a car to sit in the AirCon. I am soaked with cool water. Everyone slowly comes round. Riana turns up, and tells us that Manu is lying in a tiny patch of shade some way back, didn't the medics know? No, they did not. Zoe's on the radio, and Doctor Pete speeds off in a car. (Turns out Manu had tried to call for emergency evacuation, but hadn't quite managed to fully depress the button. That's why he was there for 2 hours. Doc Pete revived him with water, and because technically he hadn't hit the red button, he was allowed to continue under medical advice. He had no way of hitting the cutoff, but at least could and did get to CP7, thus completing the "Short Course" and earning himself a brilliantly well-deserved medal.

I stay at CP6 as long as I dare, leave with Andy, and I hope to run the rest of it with him. He's struggling to comprehend how the big cushion of time he built running the first few sections has evaporated. I knew it would be thus. I try to reassure him but, regardless of that, there's only one thing to do, and it's march as well as we can, it being way too hot to attempt running now. CP7 is 12kms away. We have time. We've got this.



Andy and I. Fun in the sun. Oh yeah.

Katie's in view for most of that long, long section. Andy and I plough on and on. We chat a lot. He's setting up a Coaching business. He established a running club for people who've given up alcohol. He's simply very likable, and I am deeply deeply grateful for his company. Nico pops up and soaks us with water. Saint Nico. Would not have made it without him.

At round about 18:10 the longed-for CP7 comes into view. We get there at 6:20. 40 minutes to get clear. I eat Andy's other spare beef noodles. Bliss. We **have** got this.



Hot doesn't even come close. Heat reflecting from every rock. Total meltdown

18:55 and Adam's twitching about, smile looking a bit more frozen. Get going, is the message. I heave myself up, everything feels so rushed, I am dreading this last 22kms. It's 19:00. We're out. The sun has gone down, last light, and finally it's a little little cooler. Andy and I actually manage a run, or what passes as a run. Coming away from a CP now my feet scream at me, the pain is blinding, but I know that after 400 or 500 metres it will reduce to an angry ache. That first half km is like Frankenstein's monster, not like any kind of super-human athlete. I am barely recognisable as human. But then it loosens, and then I am actually running with Andy, and we quickly catch Riana, who'd left a wee bit before us, and the three of us head to the last CP, 10kms away.

It passes pretty quickly, Riana is a thoughtful runner, who with Nico organises races in Namibia in aid of SRT, which makes her a hero to me, and explains the connection with Simson Uri-Khob. She could make a big deal of being the first Namibian to finish this race, if we finish, surely we are going to

finish, but she doesn't want the attention, this is her race, and she'll process it in her own time. She's very inspiring.

We hit CP8. Magic AI welcomes us in. I wanted to go straight through but I can't, I have to sit a minute. We attach glowsticks to our backpacks, headtorches on full beam and we head downhill, for this bit actually is downhill (thanks Adam), down the most spectacular canyon, down to Ugab camp and the finish line. Ugab is one of my Happy Places. Cathy and I spend wonderful weekends there with Bernd and Erica Brell back in 2011 when we were in Swakopmund on sabbatical working for SRT. It's a stunning spot, although now it's in the pitch dark. I reckon we might get there around 22:30.

We walk, energy and conversation ebb. Riana presses on fastest and eventually I lose sight of her glowstick. Andy's a little behind me. The silence is total, like the darkness, stars above, half a moon. On we go. 22:30 passes. 23:00. 23:30. Slower and slower. Occasionally I wait for Andy but there's no talking now, we are in our own heads. 23:45. Will this ever end? I'm falling asleep on my (aching) feet. At midnight I hear Andy behind me shouting Happy Birthday. I smile for the first time in a long time. A weird way to turn 56. At 10 past I see one of the BtU crew, Dean, who says "Nearly there now". Rather uncharitably I say something grumpy about "Nearly is a failure". He says just around the corner. I can see no light, hear no party noises. I block him out. I move on slowly. I am really struggling now, feet in a total mess. Finally, I see a couple of lights, and wait a minute for Andy. He's been delayed by a half-foot drop, trying to work out how on earth he can step down it without collapsing totally. We are definitely on our last legs.

We walk in together, at 00:15. I more or less collapse into Jenny's arms, hug her while I sob it out, finally recover some composure and try to find Andy to hug him. He's lost in a scrum somewhere. Someone, Adam I think, hangs a medal on me. Jules offers me a beer. All I want is to crawl into bed. Or, in fact, my tent. I stagger over without screaming, which is some achievement, seized up solid, and find Craig dozing. Turns out he was 3rd man. Steady running every day means he's 3rd fastest man, fourth overall on his first ever Ultra. He looks like he's been for a stroll in the Cotswolds. He's some man.



We did it. Jenny and I share a moment on the finish line.

28 started. 19 finished the Long Course. Three more finished the Short Course. 6 DNFs. 28 heroes; far more including the medics and crew. 19 out of 28 is the highest proportion of finishers BtU has ever had – testament to how closely the runners bonded and helped each other – as we had the hottest temperatures BtU has ever seen on this race.

In the end, Ellie is **first woman and 3rd overall**. On the podium on her first Ultra. It won't be her last. It might be the hardest. The next day she signs up for the Comrades. Go Ellie!

Post script 1

We didn't see any desert-adapted rhino on this run, although Simson told me there was a cow and calf nearby. Extraordinary they can survive in this place, their ability to sniff out tiny little fresh springs is the stuff of legend. I was once told that this population has the longest life-expectancy of all wild rhino, despite having arguably the harshest environment. How so, I asked. Because, came the reply, they have adapted to being able to eat some of the succulents that cling on here, and you can eat these even when your teeth are knackered, so when other rhino fade, these keep going. Truly amazing. I am, as you probably know, a Patron of Save the Rhino International, and very proud of it. I have a small fundraising page here; my firm will generously match donations, so if you can find a few quid to put to the cause of protecting these incredible ancient beasts, I would be really touched.

<https://www.justgiving.com/page/kenneth-donaldson-namibia2023>

Post script 2

Craig's Jelly Babies also formed a big hot sweaty orgy.

Post script 3

My liquorish allsorts, however, held out beautifully. So the definitive desert trail mix is Two parts spicy cashews, one part allsorts, and a sprinkle of haribo tangtastics and raisins. Keep you happy and fuelled for hours.

Post script 4

After the race, I was joined by my lovely Cathy, plus Dr Jo Shaw (the new CEO of Save the Rhino), Dr Ellie Milnes (wildlife vet and newly minted first woman of ultra-racing), and Dr Pete Aitkin, head medic. We headed off for remote corners of Namibia, and we did get to see a desert-adapted rhino, and elephants and lots of other wonderful creatures. I love this country very much.



Step right up, follow the flags, what could possibly go wrong?

Post script 5

Photo credits... not sure, sorry. Some are mine, some Ellie's, some I scraped from other runners off WhatsApp, and I think probably a good many were taken by Nico in spare moments in-between sneaking us a bit of extra water between checkpoints (lifesaver!). Thanks to all.