

Cycling
WEEKLY
FEATURE
AFRICAN ADVENTURE



Hot! Hot! Hot!

SOUTH AFRICA'S CAPE ROULEUR is the finest event of its type in the world, as Robert Garbutt found out

The group of champions.' They were my riding companions in the Cape Rouleur, HotChillee's answer to an international stage race for club riders, contested over four days in the hot South African sun.

In reality the grandly, self-titled 'group of champions' were group three, the lowest ranked riders after the prologue time trial. Tour de France, Giro and World Road Race Championship winner Stephen Roche gallantly volunteered to ride with us on the first stage, hence we instantly became 'the group of champions'.

What started out as a joke soon became reality as the combination of a particularly vicious stomach virus, the extreme heat and the long distances took their toll to a far greater extent than in the previous two editions of the Rouleur. And we 'the champions' suffered more than most — after all we spent considerably more time in the saddle each day.

Unfortunately, I can only claim to be two thirds of a champion, as the bug got me on the third day. I certainly wasn't alone; about 75 per cent of the 150 starters needed to visit the chemist and a few (including myself) needed the attention of a doctor. By the end of day three there were just 95 hardy souls still on their bikes.

Certainly my riding companions were made of sterner stuff. Many should have climbed off before the third stage, but somehow managed to struggle through. Very few had ever ridden more than 100 miles in a day, or ridden in such hot temperatures, so to take on a 206-kilometre stage in 37°C heat after clocking up some 280 kilometres over the previous two days was certainly a step into the unknown for most.

Franschhoek fortitude

Special mention must go to 67-year-old Mike Prior, who was voted the hero of our 'group of champions'. His other claim to fame is that he's the father of

ENTRIES BY COUNTRY

- UK 69
- South Africa 59
- Australia 6
- Ireland 3
- France 3
- Norway 2
- Barbados 1
- Bermuda 1
- Brazil 1
- Finland 1
- Spain 1
- Sweden 1
- United States 1



Mike Prior proved as tough as the parcours



Ride captains did a superb job



Franschhoek's hairpin slopes found favour



Medals fit for heroes...

TOTAL DISTANCE
602 kilometres

TOTAL CLIMBING
4,886 kilometres

most in the slightly easier first half to the extent that I started negotiating my place in the sag wagon at the lunch stop. I was talked out of such drastic action and, after consuming many energy gels, I found a new lease of life, particularly on the hairpin slopes of the Franschhoek pass, the high point of the Cape Rouleur and now officially my favourite climb in the world.

Things didn't go quite so well for Mike Prior that day. The heat had taken its toll and he didn't look great at the summit. But he had made it through the stage and he was still in the event, which is a lot more than can be said about me. I quit the next morning after spending a sleepless night in the toilet. Instead of riding I became a passenger in the lead car, and when we met group three after almost 200 kilometres, at the top of the 13-kilometre Franschhoek Pass climb, there was Mike again

"Mike was slumped over his bike. He'd done it, despite the illness, an inspiration to us all"

We rode together a lot over the first two stages. The first day's 130 kilometres would have been OK had it not been for the gale force block headwinds. Mike and I were eventually tailed off in a small group towards the finish, effectively creating group 3.5.

One down, two to go. Stage two was the mountainous one, 2,000 metres of climbing in 144 kilometres. Bizarrely, but quite predictably for me, I suffered

slumped over his handlebars. He'd done it, despite the illness, despite the backache, an inspiration to us all. Well done, Mike.

As disappointed as I was not to be able to complete the final stage, sitting in the lead car ahead of the elite riders in group one was an enlightening experience. Although the police cooperation at major road junctions was pretty good, the

rolling road closure wouldn't have worked without the fearless effects of the six motorcycle outriders who escorted each of the three groups of riders.

Captain fantastic

It's pretty much the same situation you get with a big race in Britain. The majority of drivers didn't mind waiting for a few minutes, but others took exception. Our outriders had to fearlessly put themselves in front of the vehicles to stop them to protect the riders, and in one instance that included having a car drive over an outrider's foot.

Another bunch of tireless helpers who were vital to the success of this event were the ride captains; four riders per group whose job it was to look after everyone else. The only problem came when the stomach bug hit one of the captains — there wasn't anyone to help them, the groups came first and it was their job to keep riding.

Virtually everybody was affected but Martin Markowski deserves a special mention for suffering above and beyond the call of duty on the final day. He was in one hell of a state with his stomach and the heat was taking its toll, but with group one in tatters he stuck to his task between a few frantic sprints to the bushes. Whatever HotChillee paid him, it wasn't enough.

Looking after elite riders was a lot more demanding than I had imagined. They were just as unruly as the rest of us and had the dubious honour of being the

only group to have riders disqualified for repeatedly crossing the central white line — with three thrown out on the first stage.

I also hadn't considered that this group would have problems with differences in abilities, probably even more so than the others. Karl

Platt not only won the general classification, he was a relentless driving force on the front of the bunch with only 18-year-old Nicholas Dlamini able to match his pace. Karl wanted to push on while the majority needed frequent hydration stops to fill their bottles, or simply sit in the shade for a few moments. This is when the ride captains' skill came into its own, keeping this



The proficiency of each group was commendable

BEST WOMAN
Jo Merritt

fragmenting group together, convincing the weakest to ride in the sag wagon and calming the over-enthusiastic at the front. Even so, group one did eventually need to be split into two mini bunches each with three outriders and two ride captains, lead and following vehicles. HotChillee had a plan for every eventuality, with Des McClelland and Bonte Edwards in the lead car deserving their share of the credit for making a very difficult day run smoothly.

BEST AMATEUR
Nicholas Dlamini (UBS/EJAF)

Lead car one also had the task of keeping some 30 or so very hot riders hydrated. Discounting the lunch stop, a further 124 litres of water were supplied by Des and Bonte, plus ice for the bottles and a further 30 cans of Coke. Even in a large 4x4, that was a very packed boot!

Unforgettably unique

And so, finally group one made it to the very final assault of Franschhoek Pass with the tail enders from group three just visible in the far distance, several hairpins higher up. My former riding companions were just climbing off their bikes and collapsing as the elites cleared the summit. Ultimately everyone in both groups was as exhausted as the next rider. Bike riding can be a very levelling experience.

Group three had been on their bikes for 12 hours, needing lights in the early stages as they had started in the dark. The elites had started eight hours earlier. Just about everybody with the exception of Karl and Nicholas was a spent force.

Only the six-kilometre descent back to Franschhoek remained,

the twisting hairpins hiding a couple of final surprises. A dozen or so baboons were at the sides of the road with one very large and aggressive male standing his ground right in the centre of the tarmac. To the side was a completely wrecked car that had crashed trying to avoid his hairy clutches. The riders weaved their way through the mayhem, expertly guided by the ride captains as always with the leaders exceeding 90kph (55mph).

And that's riding in South Africa for you. It's certainly very different from what we're used to in Europe, but it's something that I'd recommend, particularly if you were going to book a place on the Cape Rouleur. The event offered so many different experiences, including the final 110km 'Festival' ride from Franschhoek down to Cape Town with a full police motorcycle escort for the final half through the city before a drinks celebration on the waterfront.

If you were ever looking for a truly unique riding trip, then this is for you. In essence, it's a multi-day sportive, but with various timed race sections on each stage making it a full-on race for the more competitive. With at least three groups you can be sure to find other riders of a similar ability and then there are those ever-vigilant ride captains to keep the groups together. It's like having your very own team of domestiques. Whether you need pacing up a hill, a push now and again, or somebody to sit on the front into a block headwind, it's all in a day's work for these tireless trouperes. It's no wonder they got the loudest cheer at the end of the ride celebration.



"It always seems impossible until it's done"



Not all blood, sweat and gears...

RACE STATS

- Starters 150
- Finishers 95
- Percentage of women 19
- Oldest male 72
- Oldest woman 62
- Youngest 17
- Oldest finisher 67

Sun, sea and smooth surfaces



If you want to feel like a pro, ride the Rouleur!

I need to thank Susannah Osborne, David Thomas, Dan Lawrence, Ian Lobley and David Bryant for helping me and the rest of group three throughout the Rouleur. Mr Bryant, better known as 'the Bull', was particularly helpful pacing me back to the group after I was dropped on a descent on stage two. However, I've still not forgiven Ms Osborne, Sussie to her fans, for dropping me on the Franschhoek Pass.

Then there was the out-on-the-road motorised support. With a lead car, those motorcycle

BEST PRO
Karl Platt (Team Bulls)

"I can't think of anything HotChillee could have done to create a better riding experience"

The ever-smiling Stephen Roche



outriders and the police in support, the route and traffic control were all taken care of. There was no need for maps, GPS, or direction arrows. A rolling road closure really did mean there were no traffic lights or junctions to stop at. It was a full-on 'ride like a pro' experience, only slower in my case. We were even escorted along a section of the N2 motorway at one point, which as you would expect, was a huge deal for the local riders.

Lunch, usually in an upmarket golf resort or restaurant, was included and it was a chance for a massage if you couldn't wait until the end of the ride. On day three it was the turn of the five star Arabella Hotel and Spa to host lunch where bemused guests were entertained by riders diving into the pool in their riding kit. Only helmets and shoes were removed.

Although the lunch stop was an opportunity to top your bottles and replenish gel supplies, the lead car stopped as often as necessary for hydration needs. And if all else failed, you had the medical and mechanical support vehicles with each group, plus there was even a seat in the sag wagon if you needed to sit out the rest of the day, or just one particular climb.

Surreal experience

Something I wasn't expecting was a helicopter to be hovering over the bunches to film the Rouleur each day. It certainly made the event feel like a major league promotion, although it was also a little scary at times, particularly when the helicopter appeared from below road height on the coastal route up from Gordon's Bay.

I can see why this stretch of road is claimed to be one of the most scenic in South Africa and here we were with a bright red helicopter hovering ridiculously close above our heads. Local drivers just didn't know what to make of it and we were also a little concerned that the force of the down draught was making riding a little too difficult for group one. It was a surreal experience courtesy of Team Oryx, who seized the chance to loan their bosses' helicopter to Eurosport to film them winning the team prize. That's one way of getting on TV.

On the ground, even in the air, I reckon HotChillee had it covered. I really can't think of anything more they could have done to create a better riding experience.