

# ROCKY MOUNTAIN

The 2016 Rocky Mountain Festival lived up to its promise of adventurous, high-altitude mountain-biking madness at Afriski in Lesotho's Maluti Mountains. Shane Quinell was there.

# MADNESS

Photos by Jaco Ferreira, Mike Rassman and Shane Quinell.

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ocky Fest 2016 started with a bang on Friday 4 March when the riders and their Afriski hosts rocked up and geared up for the valley ride. Intended as the warm up for the weekend,

the ride started in the Northern 'lowlands', close to the Caledonspoor border post, which comes registers a mere 1 600m altitude.

The event's tag line 'This is Altitude' rang true as the festival was held above this, with the highest point reaching 3 322m.

The warm-up quickly progressed and dwarfed all expectations as the ride leaders followed small cattle paths up the Sandstone Mountains. The higher they got, the more epic the views became as the valleys dropped away and the horizon extended to the incredible landscape.

The skill of the riders showed early as some of the guys popped wheelies for nearly 100m while riding along the fairly technical sandstone. It was something to be in awe of and aspire to.

The track continued to wind through the small villages, which much of the local population call home. Riding past and through traditional settlements it was as much a lesson in culture as it was on riding.

The thatched huts and walking butchery were a reflection of other personal experiences in countries that have maintained their traditional heritage and way of life, like Papua New Guinea and Peru.

The local Sotho nearly always had smiles on their faces. Upon hearing the raucousness they waved and cheered the riders along.

### BRING YOUR A GAME

In places, the ride was relatively technical and steep along the side of large ravines. Fortunately there were ways round most of the overly technical sections and for those that couldn't be ridden, except by the racing snakes, the walking

option was always readily available. The altitude was definitely noticeable as small hills stole more breath than they deserved... and this was in the baby hills.

Some of the riders, including myself, got slightly lost as they escaped the dramatic sky which was building dark black in the background.

Finding themselves on tar, mountain biking was soon forgotten as the whizz of wheels was deafening and the small group pelted down hills at 80km/h-plus. According to the oracle Strava.

While the first group of tar-sneaking mountain bikers sat contented, steadily working through the beers and waiting for their missing comrades, there was another battle raging in the lowlands. The remainder of the riders tackled the challenge of the mountains and passes in the 10ish kilometres that the first group missed.

Some of these riders returned looking a little haggard and slightly worn but super stoked as Lesotho's lowlands showed their teeth.

Tales of the ride were shared over cold Maluti Lagers with an air of suspense as the group started thinking about the lowland hills' rather large friends waiting for them at Afriski.

Afriski's Sky Restaurant provided a nonstop service of amazing food and locally brewed Three Triple Two craft beer, named after the altitude at the top of the pass near Afriski. Fashioned after an Austrian Ski Station, Sky has an amazingly homely feel and way of comforting bodies aching with self-inflicted adventure pain.

There was little doubt in my mind that Sky would be a busy place on this particular weekend.

Those who were awake enough to attend had to tear themselves away from Sky's warmth and comfort as they embarked on a short night ride into the mountains surrounding Afriski.

Met with warm cinnamon-infused gluhwein, a giant bonfire and a star-spotted sky which screamed of freedom, the sacrifice of comfort was well worth it for those who attended. For those who didn't, bed never felt so good. →

**THIS PAGE:**  
Orange is the new black as Sean Badenhorst rocks on Instinct, up the sandstone. Shane follows close behind.

**OPPOSITE:**  
Worth the ride: the dramatic view off the Drakensberg escarpment.





### INTO THE BREACH

Day two started with a buzz of excitement as breakfast was wolfed down along with coffee that Cape Town barristers would drink, quite a feat for 3 222m in the mountains. Riders were faced with the tough choice between the semi-gruelling but extremely rewarding ride to the escarpment or the incredible trails at Afriski. They had an even tougher choice between the insanely awesome demo bikes that the Rocky Mountain Bicycle crew had set up outside the door. A choice which by Day 3 was almost non-existent as the riders queued to test the high-quality componentry and snapped up any bike that was available.

Most attendees ended up with some serious temporary upgrades as they selected from the group of shiny 2016 models. Whether they ended up on the Thunderbolt, the Element, an aptly named Altitude or any of the other models present, everyone ended up with smiles on their faces, seriously considering how they could afford the luxury of a Rocky Mountain bicycle, and how they could hide it from their wives.

I was lucky enough to pedal both the Thunderbolt and Element over the weekend and, though I am far from a professional demo rider, I found the improvement in ride quality incredible. The difference in weight between their carbon fibre physiques and the aluminium brute I'm used to was astounding, but weight was only one part of the amazing experience the bikes offered. I don't know what the pros would cook up about it, but to me riding the bikes was just a huge amount of fun.

The 32km-return escarpment ride lived up to its reputation of being remarkably amazing and badass at the same time. The 3 300m altitude gave the riders exactly what it promised, high altitude training and sore lungs.

Un-manicured by anything other than the occasional 4x4 tyre and more common hoof and footprints, the ride was exhilarating in its level of technical challenge with interesting rock features and breathtaking scenery. →

**ABOVE:** Into thin air... the best feeling on a bike. Even better when the ride up is for free. **BELOW:** This million dollar landscape is just another view in the mountain kingdom that is Lesotho.



Reaching the escarpment was a worthy reward as the dramatic Drakensberg cliff line brought Lesotho to a stomach-dropping close and South Africa stretched into the distance. According to our Afriski guides and companions, the Tugela falls, the highest waterfall in Africa and arguably the world, was only 4km south of where we were and, with enough time we could have easily got there from our return point. Sadly, we didn't have time but that did provide another reason to return.

Despite only having ridden 20km at the escarpment, the altitude, terrain and pace had taken its toll and the group was clearly nervous to start the trek back. Fortunately one of the amazing Afriski staff and Armand, a semi-adopted Pretorian Racing Snake, had brought some sustenance in the form of protein bars and electrolytes provided by Pure Nutrition. These were soon devoured by the hungry riders and quickly gave them a new pair of legs. Unfortunately there were no lungs available in the substitution.

Back at Afriski the downhill junkies were hitting massive kickers and flowing trails without having to pedal thanks to the ski lift operating on the slopes. This is something that happens on the last weekend of every month in summer and given that it is the only mountain bike T-bar in the entire continent of Africa should be a massive drawcard for anyone who loves riding.

During the Rocky Fest, The T-bar saved so much time and energy that some of the riders were able to hit more than 15 runs in a day. More fun, more air and more awesome aerials. Even those who returned slightly broken from the escarpment couldn't help but get involved.

The spectators watched the riders tearing down the hills in awe and respect and some took off for their own adventures in 4x4s and on motorbikes to the beautiful Katse Dam and beyond. The kids were catered and cared for by the staff, specifically the ones who drew the short straws. Their parents excitedly passed over their little tyrants.

All of these activities and more (like quad biking, fly fishing, motorbike and endure trips and paintball) are part of the relatively unknown gem that is Afriski in summer time, and a reason that I am fast falling in love with the adventure centre in the mountain kingdom.

Word on the slopes was that people couldn't get enough of the awesome trails. Only sundown, eventual fatigue and the scent of a mouth-watering spit braai lured everyone back from the mountains. There were war stories aplenty and a few battle scars to brag about as each rider had a tale of at least one 20m jump with triple summersault (and a ride to Johannesburg and back straight down the Drakensberg escarpment) - maybe slightly exaggerated, but awesome nonetheless.



**ABOVE: A perfect example of the Rocky Fest smile on the T-Bar up; one part ecstasy, one part insanity and the rest pure stoke.**

This explains one of the biggest attractions at Rocky Fest; in addition to the epic landscape, amazing rides and trails, it's the people who make the festival and experience.

From the staff at Afriski and Rocky Mountain to the multitude of people who arrive seeking adventure – everyone is amazing to talk to and the vibe infectious.

You can't help but leave feeling more motivated than ever to ride amazing trails and live a life a bit closer to the one that they imagine.

Sunday, the final day of the Festival, greeted the early riders with slightly slushy trails. even though the majority were spent from the previous days' excesses, the allure of the free ride up the mountains and the fast ride down on machines generally much cooler than their own was too much for most riders.

Most of the Rocky Mountain bikes were pre-booked as riders tried to get their hands on their new-found loves. The justification "it's not cheating if she's inanimate", came to mind.

By midday all the human riders (there were a few super human specimens in the group) were worn out and they grudgingly returned from the slopes to reluctantly hand over their short term loves.

The festival was done but the spirit will live on in those who attended, and encourage them that all the early morning rides on the Spruit are worth it, if for nothing else other than the opportunity to get involved and keep up at Rocky Fest 2017. 

**ENTRIES OPEN FOR ROCKY FEST 2017 ON 29 APRIL 2016**



[www.afriski.net](http://www.afriski.net)  
[www.facebook.com/resort.afriski](http://www.facebook.com/resort.afriski)



[www.hullabaloo.co.za/#!/home](http://www.hullabaloo.co.za/#!/home)



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i.e. laps of 2km

International Medical Services will be on duty

**The Day:** The day will start with a training section for all the riders from 8:00 to 10:00. Special obstacles will be constructed to teach the learners the skills required to master these obstacles.

Racing will commence at 10:00.

- 6:30-7:45** Registration
- 7:45** Welcoming
- 8:00-10:00** Skill Development
- 10:00** Nippers (9-10 Years)
- 10:45** Sprogs (11-12 Years)
- 11:30** Sub Juniors (13 Years)
- 12:30** Prize Giving



**7 MAY 2016**

**4 JUNE 2016**

**6 AUG 2016**

**10 SEP 2016**

**John Vorster**  
**Hoer Tegniese**  
1072 Meyer St,  
Pretoria

**Hoërskool**  
**Wonderboom**  
Voortrekker Road,  
Pretoria

**Midstream**  
**College**  
1 Ashford St,  
Centurion

**Hoërskool**  
**Randburg**  
183 Malibongwe Dr,  
Johannesburg

**The Rules:** All riders are to wear helmets and no barefoot racing will be allowed. Only the sub-juniors are allowed to wear cleats, the other age groups must use flat pedals.

Heinrich Moldendenhauer 0125431992 between 18:00 & 20:00 | [heinrich.moldenhauer@gmail.com](mailto:heinrich.moldenhauer@gmail.com)