



words: Kath Bicknell  
photos: Kelvin Trautman, Kath Bicknell

# PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES IN AFRICA

*The Nedbank Sani2c*





THE IMPACT OF THE NEDBANK SANI2C GOES FAR BEYOND RACE DAY. RIDERS PARTICIPATING IN THIS THREE-DAY STAGE RACE FROM UNDERBERG TO SCOTTBURGH IN KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA ARE PART OF SOMETHING THAT IS SO MUCH BIGGER THAN YOUR TYPICAL EVENT.

#### **Sani2c: the largest of its kind**

In terms of participants, the Nedbank Sani2c is the world's largest supported mountain bike stage race. This three-day event, which was first officially run in 2005, has grown to accommodate almost 4500 riders, who are divided into groups that set off on three separate start days. Each episode has a different name – the Trail, the Adventure and the Race – and the atmosphere across these sub-events varies accordingly.

At one end of the scale, people sign up for a race, as the name suggests. At the other end, every rider is pushing themselves to new limits on the terrain, but not at the expense of breaks to take advantage of photo opportunities and the well-stocked feed zones. Or simply to look around and soak up the feeling of being there. Aside from a few 'special solo' entries, entrants enjoy the Sani2c as a pair.

A group of riders from Sydney invited Flow to send someone to join them for the event. These 13 riders, collectively named the Sani2c Oz Tour, had entered the Trail event. Riding with the Oz Tour crew sounded like a great way to discover South Africa.

#### **N is for 'New trails ahead!'**

I was paired up with Dave Youl, a first-time stage racer who got hooked on mountain biking at the Mont 24 in 2010. Enjoying

a once-in-a-lifetime journey through the dramatic African landscape was our goal and the Trail event provided the perfect framework for doing so.

On the first day of racing Dave and I started right at the back of 14 start batches, in group N, with the most of the Sani2c Oz Tour team. Batch A had been riding for two hours by the time we rolled through the start gate, and we were eager to find out what magic lay ahead.

Group N turned out to be a perfect introduction to a stellar three days. Dressed in the Oz Tour's easily identifiable Australian kit, Dave and I chatted with hundreds of paired up people as we followed the well-marked route. In the briefing the day before, we learned that if there were leaves on the track, we were on the wrong one. That piece of advice was an indication of the care and effort that went into all aspects of this event.

The fire roads were fast and smooth as they disappeared beneath our wheels, promising great things to come. Then there was the singletrack, which would often split in two to keep communication between team mates high and congestion at bay. Pumped full of adrenaline from discovering so much that was new, it was hard to hold back laughter as we took it all in: new trails, new views, new riders to chat to, new ways of running events, Africa.

Multiple trails gently twisted in a way that reminded us of the Sparrow-Kowen network used at the Mont. The Sani2c trails were as buff as is humanly possible and free of braking ruts because, while they get a heap of traffic during this event, usage is much lower for the rest of the year. The tall white gums that surrounded one section were stunning. I found myself bouncing off roots and obstacles because I

was looking up in awe rather than down and ahead at the trail to come. The iconic PG Bison floating bridge came at the 20-kilometre mark. It sat just under the water as riders wove across it, trying not to fall in.

The 80 kilometres of stage one – with 1350 vertical metres – went by so quickly that the distance feel like half of that. The bigness of the event had that kind of effect. We arrived at a sprawling tent village in Ixopo and walked down to an enormous bike wash area, and then had dinner at an oversized food hall. Then we discovered that this first meal was only lunch and that dinner was still to come. Photos and videos had been edited from that day's riding, and our extended crew gathered together to share stories from the journey so far.

#### **Getting there**

Despite most of the Oz Tour riders travelling together from Sydney for the Sani2c, many of them were still discovering what mountain biking is all about. We had a two-week itinerary planned, which included an extended holiday and some important charity work as well.

'That was a big clincher for me,' revealed Vanessa Post, who rode the 265-kilometre event with her husband Rod. 'I had to ride so I could do everything else.' Ness didn't mean 'ride' as in 'get through the race,' she meant 'learn to ride a mountain bike.' And she did so with gusto.

'We trained together,' added Rod. 'That was our pace. So I was happy to do that. I was really proud of Ness. To only start riding a pushie in November, and then knock out an event like that – I was just so stoked. And with every downhill she was faster and faster and faster.'

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#### *Giving back*

Before the race the Sani2c Oz Tour group spent two days painting a preschool in the Emseni community – a project they raised nearly \$50,000 to fund. Keep an eye on the Flow Mountain Bike website for an article exploring this other element of the Oz Tour crew’s South African experience.

#### *Reserve your spot*

Entries for next year’s Sani2c open in August; the event will be held in mid-May 2014. While many South Africans report waiting five years for a chance to do this race, spots are held open for international riders. The three stages of the Sani2c make up the final legs of the nine-day Old Mutual joBerg2c, which commences on April 25 next year.

#### *Photographer Kelvin Trautman’s bird’s-eye insights*

This year I photographed the Sani2c from back of a Robbie 44 helicopter. Buzzing over rivers, big forests, sugarcane fields, nature reserves, the many farmlands and the ocean was a treat. The route is beautiful from a bike, but seeing it all from a couple hundred feet up is just plain humbling. My shoot brief was to ‘capture what the Sani2c is all about,’ which gave plenty of scope for visual storytelling.

My day would start at 4:30am, with a lap around the race village to document camp life: the local community frantically preparing meals, the mechanics rushing to repair bikes, riders running around with their headlamps. The racing started at first-light, and I would follow by helicopter to capture the action out on-course.

Shooting from the helicopter let me do the scenery and the route justice. I could set tiny riders against big vistas, and capture the different shapes and textures of the vegetation and trail. Every so often we would put down and chase the riders on foot – usually early in the morning, when the light backlit the riders, turning dust to gold and trees into kaleidoscopes.

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While the Race and Adventure versions of the Sani2c offer more experienced riders the chance to turn up the intensity, the key to the success of the Trail is that it really is about getting out there and enjoying the distance at your own speed. This sense of enjoyment and experience is supported by an atmosphere that many events in Australia try to achieve but struggle to pull off as successfully as this one does. To see Ness’s confidence in her own abilities on the bike grow during the Sani2c was inspiring, to say the least.

Day one was the furthest Ness had ever ridden on a bike. As was day two, which was another 20 kilometres longer.

#### *Highs and lows*

‘Shova! Shova! Shova!’ The first 30 kilometres of the course on the second stage was lined with people from local communities. They were yelling the Zulu word for ‘cycle’. There was laughter, high-fives, and a long descent that switchbacked down a cliff into the Umkomaas Valley. It seemed to go for an hour, maybe more. ‘Look left!’ event director Farmer Glen had told us at the briefing the night before: ‘Don’t go left, just look left.’

Left was incredible. Cloud sat down in the valley. My eyes were overwhelmed with the lush tones of green mixed with the dark bark of tangled African trees. The singletrack rolled on and downward, but things would soon get tough.

At the beginning of today’s stage, riders were given a small beaded bracelet to wind around their stem or steerer tube. The bracelets had been made by people with a handicap, we were told. ‘So if you’re having a hard day, look at this and remember there are people out there doing it harder than you.’ A small loss in concentration saw me ride into a tree 20 kilometres in and break a finger. I looked at my bracelet quite a few times on day two. It helped reduce the hurt every single time.

Following the mist of the valley, the second stage featured a lot of pedalling, panoramic views and several creek crossings to cool the feet and remind us that we were on a journey to somewhere new. Many were motivated to persevere up the constant low-gradient climbs by the Nando’s chicken burger stop at the 60-kilometre mark. Fast, fun singletrack took tired riders to the second overnight camp.

Tents were pitched between rows of macadamia trees, the bar overflowed, massages were enjoyed and friendly faces from the trails were now familiar as we gathered around long tables in the food halls. Local bike shops worked through the night, replacing things like worn-out brake pads. The Sani2c gives them their biggest three days of business for the year.

#### *The wheels of change*

Day three was over pretty quickly in comparison to the tougher stages before it. This 85-kilometre ride went along several sweeping

roads through sugarcane fields and, like the other two stages, saw more altitude lost than gained. It finished on a floating bridge that moved with the surf at Scottburgh Beach, not far from Durban. While riders were quick to congratulate each other on their achievements, the thing most people talked about was how much this event gives back to the communities it passes through.

‘It’s communities along the 300 kilometres of road that benefit,’ says Andre Botes, an expat South African in our beaming Aussie crew. ‘They’ve managed to pull along all these farmers – and some of them have completely opposite political views. But they pull together. It’s a massive heap of people who actually benefit, which I think is tremendous for the sport.’

I found the sum of ways the Sani2c gives back so humbling it became hard to tell myth from fact – every rider had a story to tell about another way this event creates positive change. Andre described the impact of the event in a way that maybe only a South African can. ‘We saw the good things and we had glimpses of the tougher times. If we’re all pessimistic about how bad things are in South Africa, we won’t get anywhere. But we saw the hope we have to have to change things. It was good for me to see that change at a personal level, whether it’s at the level of helping other kids, or the way you internalise it in terms of how you see the Australian Aboriginal people and what their plight might be. So, at some level, I really hope that this experience has changed people.’

The Sani2c changed the lives of Andre and his team mate Martin Duplessis too. These two guys, in their mid- to late-forties, recently started riding in response to the constant nagging of friends. With the Sani2c as a goal, they lost a heap of weight and found a whole lot more energy and general motivation as a result – a story in itself.

#### *Looking back, thinking forward*

For me, sharing this event with a new group of people, and getting to know them along the way, gave this experience a special flavour on a personal level. It is also, hands down, one of the most well organised and multi-faceted events I have attended. I left wanting every rider and every event organiser I know to go one day, to expand their list of ‘possibles’.

The Nedbank Sani2c is a three-day ride that showcases Africa in its rawness, its beauty, its problems and its charms. The scale of it all provides a sense of excitement and a quiet sense of calm. Everything is taken care of for you, too. You can ride the trails with confidence, and rely on the feed zones for nutrients, laughter, caramel doughnuts and a break. Plus – because the attitude to riding is different in this country – you don’t feel like you have to rush. And the fact that it gives so much back to local communities? Well that part you should go and experience for yourself. 🚲

