

# MOUNTAIN BIKE

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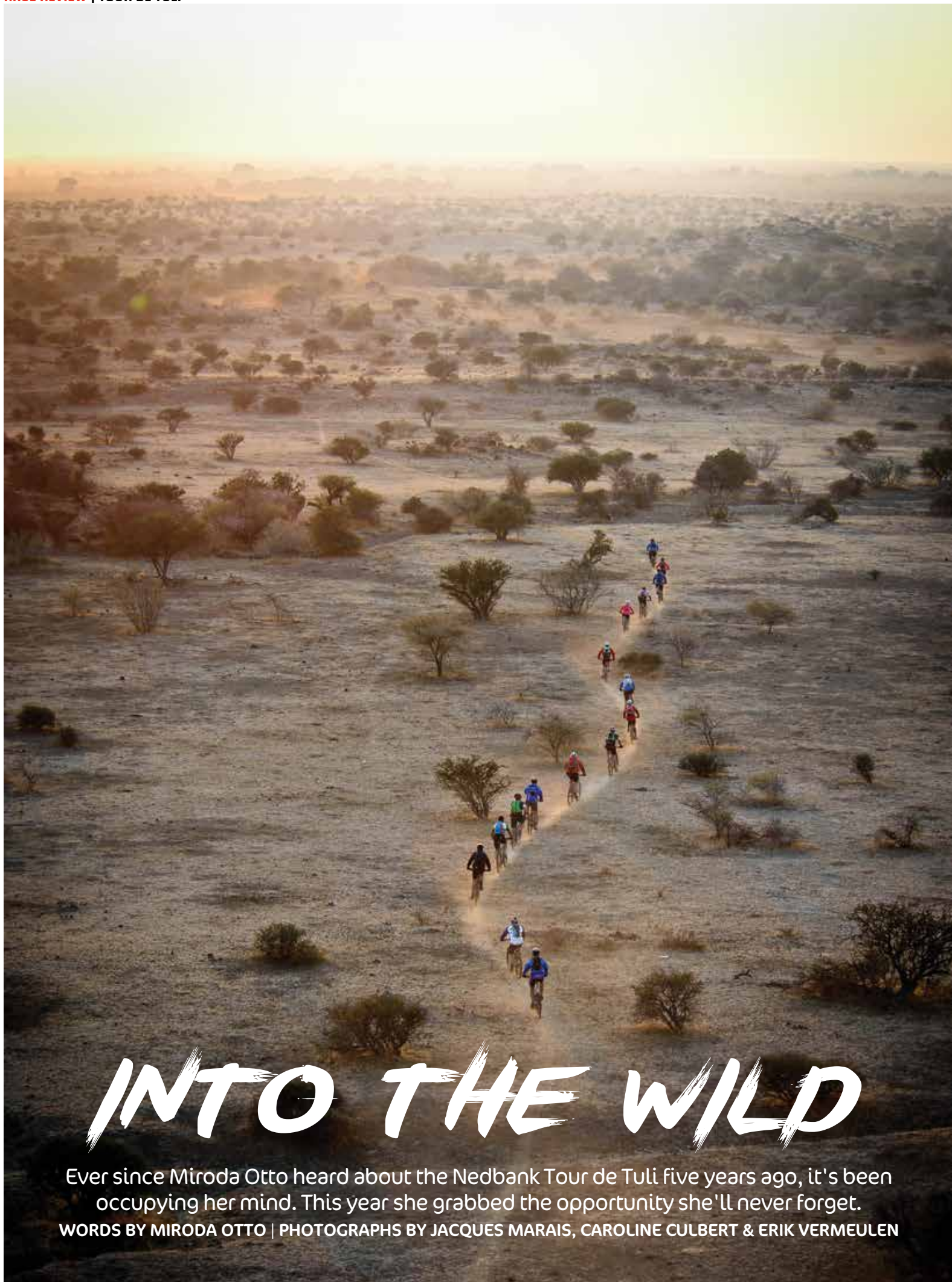
**RIDE IT MY**  
**CHINA!**

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# INTO THE WILD

Ever since Miroda Otto heard about the Nedbank Tour de Tuli five years ago, it's been occupying her mind. This year she grabbed the opportunity she'll never forget.  
WORDS BY MIRODA OTTO | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACQUES MARAIS, CAROLINE CULBERT & ERIK VERMEULEN



didn't know what to expect until the day I actually left for Botswana where the race starts. All I knew was that one had to make sure you have your passport, enough slime (sealant) in your tyres and also enough warm clothes for the cold morning starts.

**ODD ONE OUT**

Tour de Tuli starts from the Limpopo airfield in the southern part of Botswana in the Mashatu Reserve. You cycle around the area for two days and then cross the border to Zimbabwe, with the ride ending in South

Africa. Like most other multi-day events, it involves a bit of logistics to get to the start and back home from where the ride finishes. When you enter you can choose between the different transport options, from bus rides to direct flights. I opted for the direct flight from Durban. I met the group that I was travelling with at international departures where we had to clear customs first for a two-hour flight to Limpopo Airfield in Botswana. Upon arrival our group was informed that we will be the leading group. This involved staying ahead of all the other groups in order for them

to follow our tracks. I was the only girl so I definitely felt the pressure, thinking to myself: "Surely all eyes will be on me now ... will I be able to keep up, I better not mess this up." The race briefing later that evening didn't go well for me, as I arrived late after falling asleep in my tent. Now I really put the spotlight on myself, with fellow riders asking me about previous races I've done and where we placed in Epic. I wasn't too sure if it was to try and find out if I'd be able to keep up with the group or out of general interest. I got even more worried about the pace of our group in

the morning. It was quite fast indeed but I managed to stick with them, and my confidence picked up. By the time we got to the first water point I was a lot more relaxed. A few kilometres on, there was a really steep downhill section and most of the riders ahead of me walked down, so I decided it was my time to shine and I rode down it. That's when I think my group realised that I am not too bad at riding a mountain bike.

**SPOTTING WILDLIFE**  
Our group formed such a dynamic bond over the four days and everyone's personality

contributed to something special. Till indirectly became the bike mechanic, with his German precision at fixing just about 90% of everyone's bikes or tyres somewhere along the way, and our two Capetonian friends kept on wandering off during the ride or arriving just before the start, which for a change made me look like I was on time. As my usual riding partner, Annie, can tell you, I'm terrible at waking up in the morning, so I skipped breakfast every day to get up as late as I possibly could, and I was thankful for all the coffee Andrew brought me to get me going.

On the second day I spotted a hyena walking on top of the one ridge. The guys initially thought I must have seen something else, but because I was so adamant they said we could walk up the hill and go have a look. As we were walking I started doubting myself, and the thought crossed my mind that I have now sent 16 men on a wild goose chase up a mountain. It was quite a climb and I was just about ready to admit it must have probably been a dassie or something else, when the hyena suddenly came out further up the hill. I don't think that I will ever be so happy to see a hyena again in my life as I was at that moment.

The environment was spectacular. We traversed grasslands and mopane tree "forests", sped past beautiful rock formations and saw giant baobab trees. When crossing the border into and out of Zimbabwe we also went through the widest sandy river I had ever seen – having to push our bikes through it probably contributed to it seeming an extra 500m wider.

As much as I'm not a morning person, it was great that our group started early because we got to see some of the most beautiful sunrises the bush has to offer. You could actually feel everyone's admiration of nature as we looked at the beautiful pink colours on the horizon and stopped to take some photos.

Every day felt like we were on a long game drive through a Big 5 reserve, and the vulnerability of not being inside a game drive vehicle made you feel like you were almost part of nature. We saw a lot of game, especially giraffes, wildebeest, elephants, and of course, hyenas. On the first day we also had some excitement when we almost cycled into a bull elephant while coming around a corner. He was flapping his ears and sort of started coming towards us but we immediately backed off by cycling in the opposite





direction, and he went back to eating. I never felt unsafe at any point, and whenever there was a chance of a possible encounter with any dangerous animals the guides would be notified and we would be diverted or wait for the animals to move off.

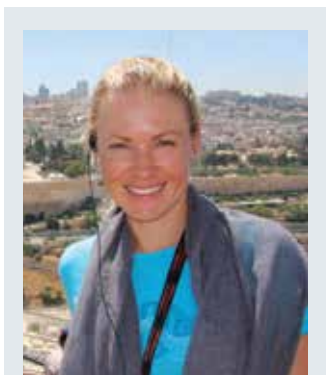
**FOLLOW YOUR LEADER**

Having unmarked and “unprepped” routes had its advantages and disadvantages. I think some mountain bikers would have enjoyed having sections with more flowing single track to ride on instead of navigating their way through rocks and trees from one animal path to the next, while on the other hand it contributed to the sense of adventure by not knowing whether you had taken the right line or animal path, or what awaited you around the next turn. The GPS basically just indicated the direction in which the guide needed to go and he had to choose the path he wanted to take to get there. Our team leader, Anton (Ant), is a Freedom Challenge finisher which gave all of us a false sense of security that he would



definitely not get us off course. What we did however not reckon with was that he was way too fit for some of us and he didn't mind taking the odd 5km detour to quickly go look for some game at a “nearby” waterhole. It was also hilarious when he managed to get our group off course when his GPS batteries ran flat and we arrived at the first water point around the same time as group five. Our little detour was mild though, compared to one of the other groups who added an extra 15km to their ride on the second day.

The riding is not very technical when you compare it to similar races like the Swazi Frontier, where you also mainly ride on animal footpaths and find your way with a GPS. The total ascent over the three days is also really low and the distances were perfect, between 50-60km, which did not leave you feeling completely exhausted by the time you got to the finish. I would recommend that you at least have a bit of prior experience with riding in sand or over rocky surfaces to thoroughly enjoy the ride, but you can always get off



**MIRODA OTTO**  
Age 34

**Lives** Umhlanga, KZN  
Miroda is self-employed and loves to travel the world, cycling all over. She has been addicted to cycling for about seven years, after her youngest brother asked her to do the Cape Town Cycle Tour with him.

and push your bike whenever you feel uncomfortable, and the sweeper at the back will make sure you do not get left behind.

By making the race an untimed event without any prizes to be won there was no rush to get to the finish and we could thoroughly enjoy the



scenery and amazing water points along the way. I think this is the first mountain bike race where I managed to pick up weight from all the eating and drinking. At the first water point of the day we got delicious crunchies and coffee with condensed milk. They then gave us another light lunch approximately 20km from the finish, and when you got to the finish there was another full lunch waiting. The team rides as fast as the slowest rider and if anyone has a mechanical, the whole team stops and works together to fix it. I stopped counting the number of punctures that needed to be fixed over the four days, and I loved the fact that no one ever got annoyed or irritated because we all knew it could be one of us next.

One of the great things they do on Tour de Tuli, that I have not come across in any other race



I have done before, was that they had back-up vehicles around, with spare bikes and bike parts, which enabled a few cyclists to still keep on riding where it would have meant the end of their ride in any other event. Three of the guys in our group had to at some stage either make use of a spare bike or a spare wheel to complete the day.



**WILDERNESS DREAMS**

I now understand why Tour de Tuli is such a popular event. It is especially great for companies to take their clients or for groups of friends to do something memorable together, while spending time in nature and contributing to a great cause through Children in the Wilderness. This was a

really special time of connecting and bonding with the people in my group, and I've made so many new friends.

When describing this incredible ride to people when I got home, the words I used repeatedly were "camaraderie", "friendship" and "fun". That pretty much gives you a good summary – it is one of those races you will remember forever. 🌟



**GUILTY PLEASURE**

**Guiding on the Nedbank Tour De Tuli by Neil Salter**

*Guilty pleasure:* a personal indulgence that can possibly make you feel a bit guilty but very worthwhile in the overall scheme of things. For some, it could be missing a meeting for a cheeky afternoon surf, or a mid-week trip to the spa. For the past three years the Nedbank Tour De Tuli has been my guilty pleasure where I have had the privilege of guiding on the tour.

A four-day MTB escape from running my own business, after kids and the hectic activities of daily life is just the tonic to keep the hamster on the wheel for another year. Guides need to reapply each year and after getting the green light and signing MOUs along the lines of...

1. I acknowledge the risks and hazards which exist in an event of this nature and I am participating entirely at my own risk.
2. I acknowledge and confirm that I have the skills specified on my leader application and the information provided on my registration form is correct and without fabrication.
3. I acknowledge that I am fit and healthy and have mastered the mountain biking skills necessary to lead a multi-stage mountain bike event of this nature.

Training must then begin (or continue), as the route is not a

cake walk. I have been mountain biking since my Natal student days, carving around Shongweni on my Trek 800 rigid in the early '90s. I'm fortunate to count Sabie Experience, Imana Wild Ride, Berg & Bush, Wines2Whales and Swazi Frontier, amongst other stage races over the years, on my CV, so I'm used to slipping training into a busy work week.

From a guide's perspective, one is always impressed by the professionalism of Nicola Harris from Children in the Wilderness, and her team of organisers, in pulling off an event going through three countries, and all the logistics involved, from the moment we arrive at the airfield three km from the Pont Drift border post in Botswana.

We check in, sign our life away and in return get radios, medical kit, bear bangers, a siren and the brightest T-shirt Nicola can come up with. Later that afternoon we get to meet our group of riders for the first time. There is always an interesting mix of alpha males and females, either self-employed or corporates, both sans PAS – some for the first time! Tyre pressures, what to do during a wildlife encounter, the fact that it is a ride not a race and meeting times are discussed.

The highlight of the first evening, besides the perfectly cooked, rare fillet steak, is the welcome speech from the Botswanan minister – that has the perfect mix of appreciation, welcoming and inappropriate jokes. There are usually around 18 groups consisting of two leaders – one at the front and one at the back – in communication with two-way radios, and around 12-16 riders per group.

An example of a day on the Tour is this year's first day, from Limpopo Airfield (Bots) to Amphitheatre Bush Camp (Bots) – 65km, 200m climbing, a mix of ancient elephant sandstone amphitheatre paths, ethereal baobabs, mopane thickets and

some sandy river bed crossings mixed in for good measure.

**4.45AM: wake up, pit stop, check bike, change, coffee, breakfast, meet up**

As part of Group 1 our aim is to be off at first light, around 6.15am. Anton Wood, three times Freedom Challenge blanket wearer and route organiser for the Bots side for the past five years, was my fellow guide, leading from the front.

Chilly exit into a spectacular sunrise – and straight away Botswana is putting on a show that did not let off for our two days whilst we were in her bosom (well, technically her left ankle). Elephant herds, curious playful giraffes and their young, massive Eland, cheeky Jackal, pretty Kudu, shy Steenbok, pronking Impala all the while surrounded by ever-changing natural beauty.

Radio cackles; a rider in Group 2 has gone down three km from the start. Fortunately, it's only a buckled front wheel and not a collarbone and the rider can continue after receiving a replacement. It's a quick, sobering reminder that no matter how innocuous "tech" sections look they can take a slice out of any ego – and concentration is required at all times.

This year we sussed pretty early that we had a chilled group more interested in game viewing and nature than racing through the day. This allowed for some poetic license en route when it came to following directions. "Donald Colin Trump" from Springs may have even intimated that we were lost at one stage... There were a few grumbles whilst portaging through thorny scrub and tennis ball-sized rocks, but quickly forgotten when it resulted in a breathtaking view or chance animal or bird encounter.

The Tour has got it just right for the riders, that before you get a bit tired, thirsty or hungry, out of the blue pops a tea, and 20km after that a brunch stop

in awe-inspiring surroundings. Another responsibility of the group leaders is never to leave a rider behind at the rest stops. I'll give myself a 6/10 this year and blame the group members with verbal diarrhoea and hearing problems. Nothing like a solid one km interval on a full stomach to ensure it doesn't happen again. The thorns are brutal and we averaged nine plugs and about 15 bombs per day over the four days. The mechanics had their hands full replacing tyres, slime and bent rims.

A day can last between four to nine hours, depending on various factors – game viewing, mechanicals, injuries, fitness – and then it's onto hot showers, lunch, massage and a kip for some of the earlier arriving groups. Prior to supper the group leaders get together for a briefing on the following day's stage and work through any admin brought up on the day, whilst the riders enjoy sundowners.

Then it's supper with the group, and by now everyone is more comfortable in each other's company. The day's highlights are discussed and new well-earned or inappropriate nicknames are bestowed. Our group was not Group 1, but "Melody (Miroda) and her bitches", paying homage to the most skillful, bravest and only female rider in our group.

A red wine night cap and then early (?) to bed. The days tend to blur together, so much of beauty all the time, that you have to reflect on photographs to stir specific memories.

If you have a passion for the bush and riding your bicycle, Nedbank Tour de Tuli must be on your bucket list. If you have good fitness levels, basic mechanical skills, some bush experience and decent people skills, guiding may be for you. It goes back to the fun element of just enjoying riding in a stunning, relaxed environment with people who feel the same. No Strava segment anxiety to worry about! 🌟