

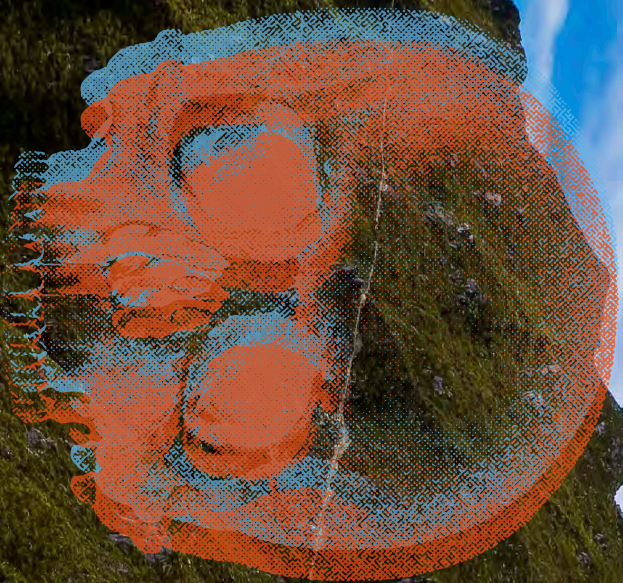
TRAILRUN

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OLD GHOST ROAD ULTRA // TRANSPYRENEA - VEGAN ENDURANCE ODYSSEY //
RUN LIKE A TIGER - TASSIE TRAIL FEST // BUFFALO GAL GRAND SLAM //
YUKON QUEST // PAUL HEWITSON // EQUALITY ON TRAIL //
PLUS REVIEWS, SHOES, GUIDES, GEAR & PORN

FEATURE



GIVING UP THE GHOST

WORDS: MAL LAW [IMAGES: STEPHEN ROBERTS (SHAKY)
FINGER PHOTOGRAPHY] AND RICHARD ROSSITER



TEAL BURN

TEAL BURN

BELIEVE EVERY GREAT RUNNING EVENT HAS THREE KEY CHARACTERISTICS: A GREAT STORY BEHIND IT; A SENSE OF JOURNEY OR PURPOSE; AND SOME CRITICAL X-FACTOR.

Yet most great events only become truly Great – capital ‘G’ – after running for a number of years. Like a good wine, they need time to breathe, round off the rough edges – few years of celebrating and maturing – if they are to truly become a classic.

But every now and again, very occasionally, a new event appears on the calendar that right from the get-go entices you with a magical, heady mix of those three key ingredients and promises to be Great right from its inaugural running.

Now to be fair, I’m a sucker for inaugural events. The idea of doing anything for the first time – to be a part of something new and shiny, maybe a little bit untried, loose and experimental – promises so much more in the way of adventure that even long-running classics like, say the Routeburn Classic, can’t offer.

But when I first heard that they were planning a race on the recently opened – or de-corked to continue the viticulture metaphor – Old Ghost Road, in the rugged, remote north-western corner of New Zealand’s South Island, I was beside myself with excitement and, along with my equally enthusiastic wife Sally, was amongst the first to sign up.

So why so much excitement and did it deliver on its promise?

First, you have to understand the great story behind the 88km-long trail along which the race is run. It’s one that is eloquently and entertainingly told in a short book by one of its co-creators Marion Weisel Boatwright,

which kicks off with a foreword (actually spelled, somehow appropriately in the book, as foreward) by one of the other dreamers

turned co-creators, race director Phil Roslitter. The opening paragraph of Phil’s foreword

(let’s get it right, eh, Phil!) not only sets the tone for the gripping, often hilarious, story that follows but reads like an ultra runner’s call to prayer:

“Doubt kills more dreams than failure ever will.” Phil writes.

“Never a truer word has been spoken than in the context of creating The Old Ghost Road. Whilst doubt regularly knocked on our door, deep down, I don’t think we ever stopped dreaming and believing that we could, and must, bring The Old Ghost Road to life.”

The creation of the trail was in itself perhaps the greatest ultra marathon ever conceived. From the seeds of an idea way back in 2007 to the official opening in December 2015, hundreds of volunteers led by a handful of passionate visionaries, toiled for thousands upon thousands of hours to bring to life a lost and never-completed 19th century gold miners’ road. What resulted is one of the world’s greatest hiking, running and mountain bike tracks that promises to play a big part in revitalising this once-prosperous but for so long largely forgotten (some might even say forsaken, but not me!) corner of New Zealand.

The full story – which is way too big to be told in full here – reads like part-detective story and part-epic adventure tale. It started with the chance discovery of an 1886 reconnaissance survey map for a ‘road’ from Moihikini in the north to Lyell in the south – a route that attempted to traverse some ludicrously rugged, wild, mountainous







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“landscape that was cut to pieces by deep river valleys and clad in impenetrable bush.

The original pioneers never got far and gave up on their plans with only a few kilometres of pack track built at either end. But where these hardy forefathers failed, our heroes – the small band of west coasters who dreamed of resurrecting this audacious dream – succeeded. Eight years of hard physical yakka and millions of hard-won grant dollars later, the glorious Old Ghost Road was opened to an eagerly awaiting public.

At this point I really must make clear that what is a ‘road’ by name is definitely not a road by nature. It is trail. Glorious trail through glorious, breathtaking and varied landscapes; everything from pristine lowland bush to the rugged beauty of the open tops of the Lyell Range; this ‘road’ has it all. And by necessity – as the trail has been built to mountain biking standard – it is for the most part well formed and well graded and therefore, for the strong at least, almost totally runnable.

Without doubt the Old Ghost Ultra (OGU) also delivers on the second of my key criteria for greatness: it provides a sense of journey and of purpose. True, any point-to-point race has a humpstart advantage on our and-back or loop-style courses as you finish somewhere other than at the start. But it’s more than this simple geographical fact that provides a feeling of purpose and achievement when completing the OGU. For apart from anything else you have crossed a mountain range and knocked off something that for so long had been dreamed of by many and yet, until recently, completed by very few.

But what of that third key factor? What provides the OGU’s elusive X-factor? The answer to me is as simple as the making of the trail was hard and the same people who

conceived and realized remain part of the event itself – and it’s these people and the passion they pour into it that delivers the X-factor that few other events can match.

These are the same guys that dreamed, schemed and coined the trail into existence, so turning up for their event is rather like buying a craft beer straight from the brewer rather than a mainstream beer from the supermarket. The people are truly authentic and that sense of authenticity – gritty realness and total integrity – flows through the event experience. In a world of increasingly commercialised trail running events, the honest ‘old school’ atmosphere that runs through every facet of the OGU is increasingly hard to come by and so is ever more valued, at least by old-timers such as myself.

Pretty much everything I’ve written was known or evident to me even before we even rocked up in Westport on a sunny Friday afternoon back in March. There was no doubting our excitement and sense of anticipation. But would all this expectation be backed up by the experience we were about to have? Or would these novice organisers make a complete balls-up of the whole thing? We were about to find out.

One of the first things that was evident at the briefing was that although the field was quite small – due to a relatively late announcement about the inaugural race, there were only about 55 of us picking up our hessian goldminers sacks that were our race packs (another nice nod to the trail’s history). Even so, the assembled runners had come from all corners of New Zealand, with even a sprinkling of overseas contestants.

The next thing evident once briefing got underway was that these guys had thought of everything and had the runners – not sponsors or media – front of mind when

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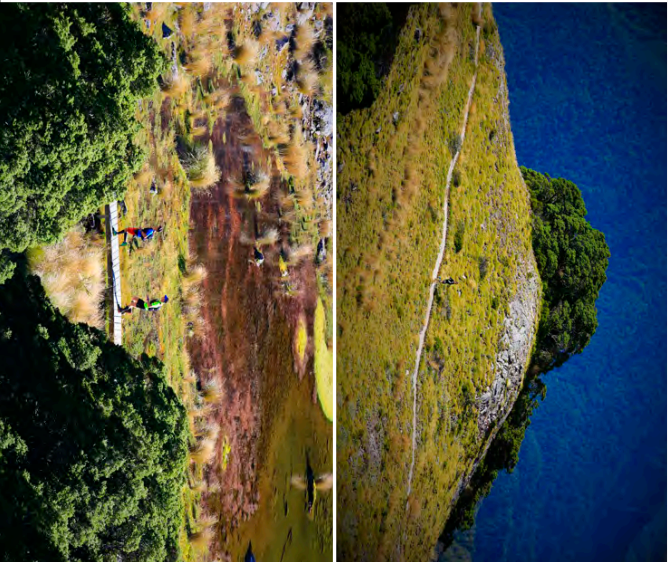
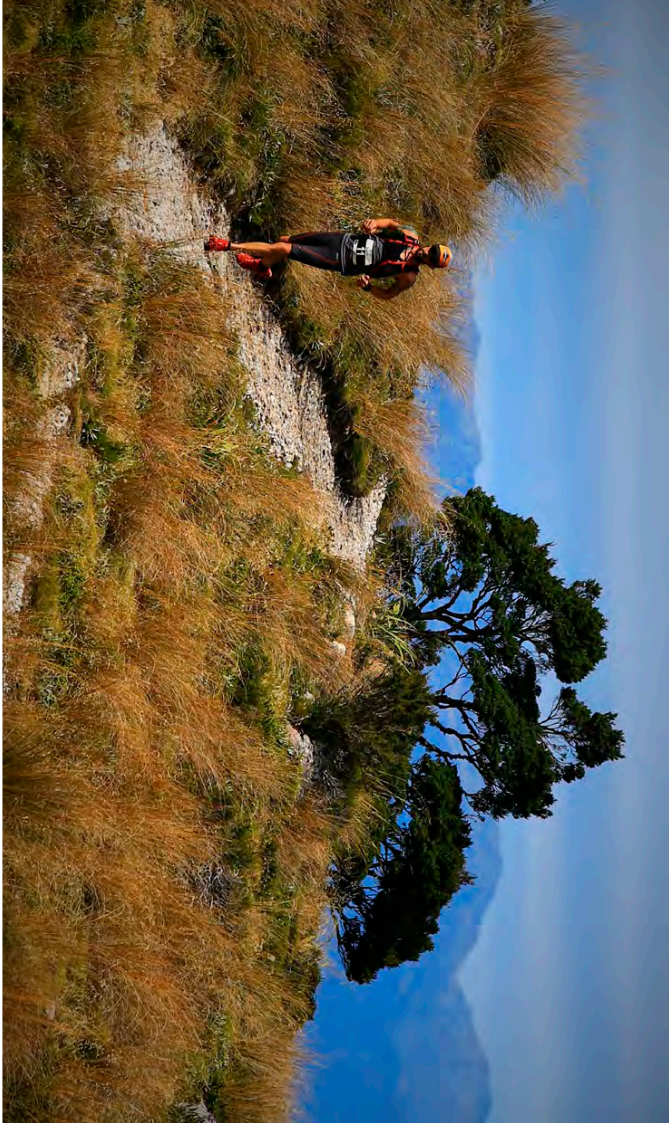


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GHOSTLY TRAIL TALE

The story behind the making of the trail is brilliantly told in the book *Spirit to the Stone* - Building the Old Ghost Road available from

www.ghostroad.org.nz

THE 2017 OGUEVENT IS SCHEDULED FOR SATURDAY FEBRUARY 25TH

TRAIL FACTS:

Length: 85km
 Ascent: 2600m
 Max elevation: 1340m
 Start: Seddonville
 Finish: Lyell
 Race record: 7:53:21 Ruby Muir / Ben Aynsley

The Trail

The Race

Video

making race plans. All very reassuring when you're about to tackle 85km of tough terrain, the only realistic escape from which if things go wrong would be in a helicopter.

We assembled for the 5 a.m. start at the lovingly-built Rough & Tumble Lodge (owned and run by the aforementioned 'Weasel') and with little fuss were soon on our way. Within a hundred metres, as we transitioned from gravel road to the single-track bush trail that marks the start of the Old Ghost Road proper, we were given our first surprise - Weasel playing a dirty country number on his fiddle at the side of the track; his unique way of saying "Go well you mad bastards."

From there the delights kept unfolding. Perfect underfoot conditions, pristine bush illuminated by dozens of bobbing head-torches and, an hour or two in, a sunrise as memorable as any. Add to that the abundant birdsong, quirky track signs and the knowledge that we were all the time gradually rising towards a mountain range that few of us had even known the existence of until a month or two back, and we had the perfect recipe for a cocktail called Trail Bliss.

From the 32km mark the trail steepened into one contiguous climb and then equally leg-blowing descent to the half-way mark at Stern Valley Hut. Then the real work began, climbing out of the bush and on to the spectacular open tops of the Lyell Range. Sooner than expected we got our first sight of the much-vaunted Ghost Lake Hut,

perched precariously atop an awe-inspiring bluff. Only shortly after did we realise that it wasn't as close as it looked and in between there still lay a steep, hidden drop to a low saddle from which we climbed all over again to receive the warm, friendly ministrations of the aid station volunteers who were lucky enough to spend the day hanging out at this iconic spot.

Some more climbing and traversing across beautiful open tops got us within about 22km of the finish, where the final downhill began..

"What?" you may well query. "22km of downhill to finish? You've got to be kidding!" No, I'm not. For all but about 5km where the gradient is so gradual that on tired legs it feels more like a slight uphill, the only egress from this point is down on a graded trail through lush native bush. Almost too good to be true.

The event wraps with more old-school goodness. Everything from the finish line BBQ to the hour-long bus trip back to Westport to the Sunday morning prize giving is embellished with the passion and humour of the dreamers who dared to dream not only this great trail, but this great race, into existence. **END**