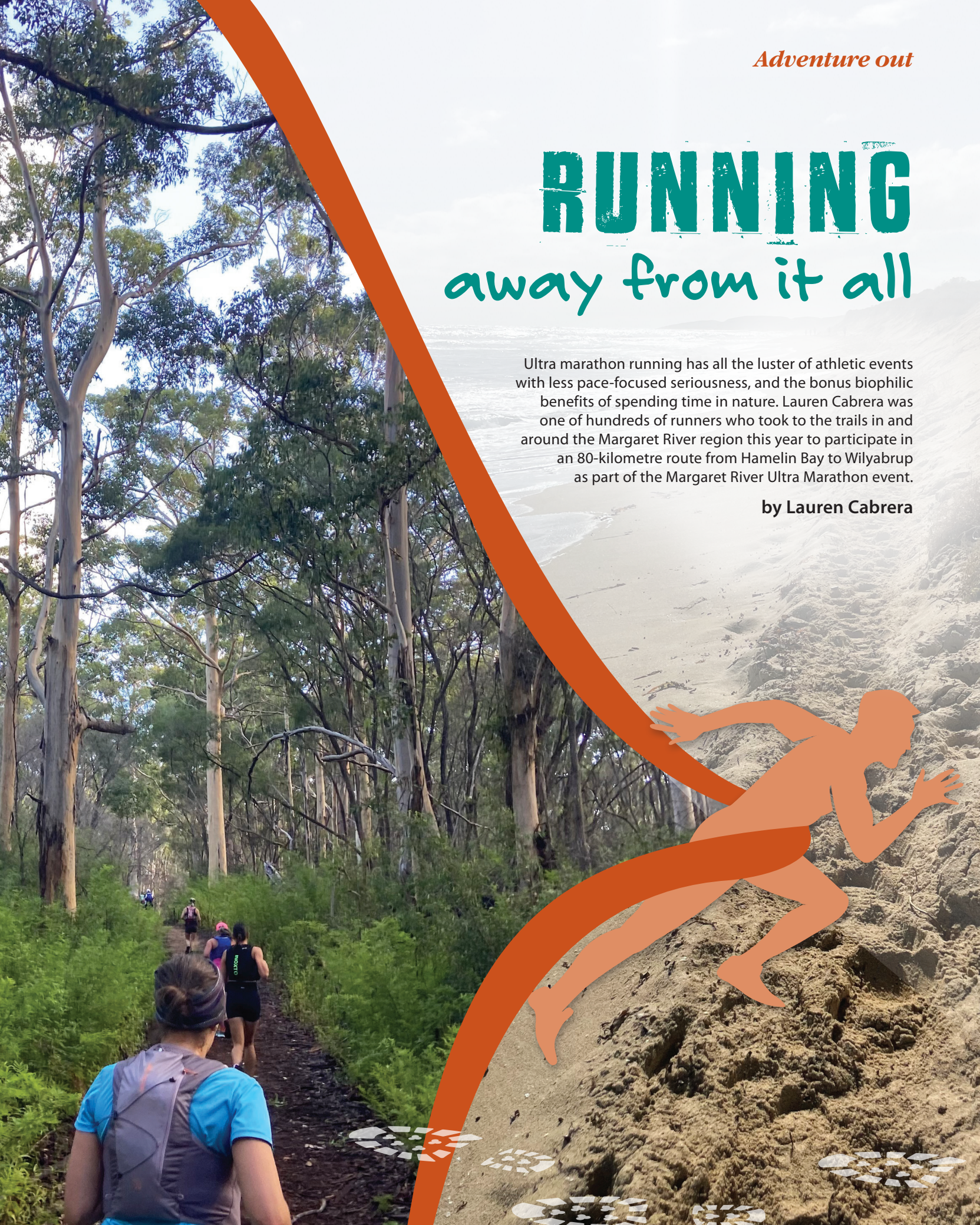




Adventure out

RUNNING

away from it all

Ultra marathon running has all the luster of athletic events with less pace-focused seriousness, and the bonus biophilic benefits of spending time in nature. Lauren Cabrera was one of hundreds of runners who took to the trails in and around the Margaret River region this year to participate in an 80-kilometre route from Hamelin Bay to Wilyabrup as part of the Margaret River Ultra Marathon event.

by Lauren Cabrera



As my shoes sank into the soft white sands of Hamelin Bay, I looked up to the throngs of supporters lining the rocky cliffs that flanked the shore. Unlike other start lines of running events where someone always decides electronic dance music is acceptable at 7:30am, we wrestled with our nerves to the sound of a steady bass rhythm that got louder as the start time neared.

The crowd responded, their cheers increasing as the countdown began.

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Main left Running through the Boranup Forest.

Photo – Lauren Cabrera

Main right The long stretch of soft sand on the second leg.

Photo – Peter Smith

Above Lauren happy in the forest.

Photo – Photos4sale

Inset Pete left it all on the course.

Photo – Lauren Cabrera

As a particularly average and naively enthusiastic trail runner, I was looking forward to the challenge of completing 27.5 kilometres of the 80-kilometre course from Hamelin Bay to Howard Park winery at Wilyabrup in WA's south-west. In a relay team, we would be running past the famous surf break of the Margaret River Masters surf competition, the beautiful Boranup Forest, over parts of the Cape to Cape Track, as well as campgrounds, wineries and coastal towns.

My vision of being the inspirational athlete in a motivational video was stymied after the first 100 metres by my clumsy attempt to lumber up and onto a jetty from the sand. As we rounded the first corner, someone very helpfully explained "Only 79.9 kilometres to go!"

AWAY WE GO

The Margaret River Ultra Marathon is a popular event, each year bringing hundreds of people to the region to run over the trails that follow in and around

the coastline of this most picturesque part of south-west WA.

Event organisers, Rapid Ascent, have a self-imposed entry limit to preserve the competitor experience and the event consistently reaches participant capacity months out from race day.

I got the luck of the draw and was designated the first two legs of the race—I 1.5 kilometres and 16 kilometres, respectively. Arguably the easier out of all five legs and with the added benefit of starting first thing in the morning, instead of having to wait until later in the day to get going.

The first leg took me inland through heathland and karri forest, following single track and four-wheel-drive tracks on the way to Boranup campsite. I slowed through the aid station, past the expectant faces of friends, family and relay team members as they searched for their runner to cheer them on, re-supply them with water or food, or hand over the timing chip to the next team member.



Ultra marathons

The broad definition of an ultra marathon is any distance greater than a marathon, which nominally clocks in at 42.2 kilometres. Ultra marathon events generally start at 50 kilometres, and can go all the way up to 50 miles, 100 kilometres, 100 miles and even up to 200 and 350 miles and more.

This event saw competitors completing the full 80-kilometre distance solo, or in a mix of teams of between two and five people sharing the distance split over five legs. The second day saw competitors completing a marathon distance of 42.2 kilometres over a similar course.

"There's no greater equaliser than an ultra marathon," Rapid Ascent Event Director Sam Maffett said.

"To see how people from all walks of life come together to conquer and achieve the unthinkable—80 kilometres, on foot, in a single day—it really is special!"



I reassured myself the reason people were overtaking me at the start of the second leg was because they were starting fresh, not on tired legs after an hour of running up and down hills and sandy coastal tracks. No way was it a reflection on my athletic prowess, certainly not!

We rounded the corner and into the stunning Boranup Forest, with its cool, tall trees and quiet majesty. I couldn't take the grin off my face, and if it weren't for my fellow runners I would have spent many a moment with my arms outstretched like Jack and Rose on the front of the Titanic.

Trail running gives me such quantifiable joy. I am by no means a fast runner, but I find great pleasure running through the bush for hours with a backpack full of snacks and water with a goal to simply finish a decent distance, and no desire to set any kind of remarkable pace record.

I drank in the beauty of the forest as the kilometres passed by. The course gently undulated and was wholly

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runnable. The vibe was encouraging, and I happily chatted with other runners when we slowed to hike up the steeper hills.

Conto Campground approached, and I was greeted by my teammates. I passed over the timing chip to Pete who was running arguably the hardest 19 kilometres of the course. Long stretches of soft sand over the beaches of Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park. Steep hills and rock hopping over challenging terrain.

"Deep in the soft stuff now! No running on this bit!" came the text to the group chat from Pete after 10 kilometres.

Pete ran over sections of the Cape to Cape Track, enjoying the spectacular views above Conto Cliffs and past Redgate.

"Large sections of this area were burnt in the 2021 fires, but new life is plentiful with the vegetation coming back," Event Director Sam Maffett said.

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Top left Running through picturesque vineyards.
Photo – Rapid Ascent Events

Above left Enjoying the scenic views of Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park.
Photo – Lauren Cabrera

Above right Start line for Margaret River Ultra Marathon.
Photo – Rapid Ascent Events



WRAPPING IT UP

Our final teammate, Zoe, met Pete at Prevelly to hand over the timing chip before setting off past the famous Margaret River Mainbreak at Surfers Point and back onto sections of the Cape to Cape Track.

It was mid-afternoon at this point, six hours after I set off that morning, and Zoe was only getting started. She had the longest distances for the final two legs, with almost 32 kilometres to cover.

“Dying on leg 5 now, the old tank is empty,” came the text from Zoe. “This is brutal.”

I waited at the finish line for Zoe, happily chatting to a woman called Wendy whose daughter Jodi was completing the 80 kilometres solo. The predictive tracker said Jodi was due to pass over the finish line any minute but there was no sign of her.

Jodi was an experienced ultra runner, and completing the Margaret River Ultra meant she would be awarded with the coveted ‘triple crown’ after finishing three of Australia’s largest, and most noteworthy ultra running events—Margaret River Ultra Marathon (80km), Run Larapinta Stage Race (127.5km) and Surf Coast Century (100km).





"Ultra marathons are no easy feat. These endurance races challenge not only your body but your mind, and it is a magical feeling when we overcome something that challenges us to such an extent."

Zoe passed over the finish line as the sun was well on its way down at 6pm. The finish line was much like the opening scenes of the movie *Love Actually*, where exhausted bodies were swallowed up in the loving embrace of friends and family.

It was sometime later as I was lining up to get some food that I heard Jodi's name called over the loudspeaker. I never saw Jodi, but I breathed a sigh of relief for an anxious Wendy and hoped her daughter was ok.

Ultra marathons are no easy feat. These endurance races challenge not only your body but your mind, and it is a magical feeling when we overcome something that challenges us to such an extent.

I lost count of the number of times the pain in my legs and lungs was quickly forgotten as I lifted my head to the scenes that surrounded me. We are so blessed in

Western Australia to have such natural beauty and I count my blessings that I am able to run in and around, over and through it all with my little backpack full of snacks.

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Opposite page

Above Start line for Margaret River Ultra Marathon.

Below The challenging terrain of the course involved runners scrambling up rocks.

Inset Runner enjoying the gorgeous Leeuwin Naturaliste National Park.

This page

Above Start line for Margaret River Ultra Marathon.

Photos – Rapid Ascent Events

Right Zoe and Lauren at the finish line.

Photo – Lauren Cabrera



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