

## Premature end for Forster at Toughest 'Roof of Africa' ever

This year's Baboons Lesotho Sun Roof of Africa rally was universally acknowledged as being the toughest one in its 41-year race history. Taking place from 27-29 November and known as the 'mother of all hard enduro races,' there were only 89 finishers out of 300 starters in this legendary event.



Unfortunately, BMW Motorrad's extreme enduro specialist Gerhard Forster was one of the riders that didn't make it all the way to the finish line. The talented German had entered the rally for the second time as a privateer and had been right in contention for a good result until he was forced to withdraw at the end of the penultimate day due to injury.

The organisers had tried to limit the amount of entries by making this year's Roof of Africa route extremely difficult, but the allocation of 300 entries was sold out early for this event. And even during the riders' briefings, it was necessary for the organisers to point out certain sections that would be 'sheer hell' to get through, such as a mountain pass of four kilometres that was so difficult that they predicted it would take the top riders approximately four hours to conquer – equating to just 1km/h to complete just that section.

The 2008 Roof of Africa kicked off with the traditional Round-the-Houses event in the main streets of Maseru. Traffic ground to a halt and large crowds gathered for the running of the traditional 'prologue' section, with all 300 riders taking part in three loops of a tar and gravel street circuit. After this, the participants rode out to compete in the Lesotho Time-Trial – an 89-kilometre stage that saw three of the international competitors finishing in the top six, including Gerhard Forster.

The following day saw competitors encounter muscle grinding, energy-sapping terrain with hills, rocks, river-crossings and every possible test imaginable during the 182km second stage. The route was wet with muddy sections and difficult water crossings,

testing the technical ability of all riders. New Zealand's Chris Birch (who finished behind Gerhard Forster at this year's Red Bull Romaniacs Hard Enduro) was the first rider to arrive at the finish in Ramabanta. Gerhard finished in ninth position on his BMW G 450 X after unfortunately crashing into a fence post and injuring his shoulder, and was forced to withdraw from the race after a medical examination.

Only 132 riders lined-up for the start of the final day's 180-km stage, which included rocks, valleys, hill-climbs and steep down-hills to test the concentration, strength and fitness of the remaining participants. In fact, only 89 of the original 300 competitors made it to the finish line and it was New Zealand enduro star Chris Birch who was the overall victor, beating his nearest rival, Jade Gutzeit, by a massive 48 minutes and 37 seconds. Third place overall went to Darryl Curtis, who fought to the bitter end but had to be content with a 57 second deficit on Gutzeit.

As one of the 22 overseas contestants competing in this year's event, Gerhard Forster was pleased to help strengthen the international status of the race but was visibly disappointed to have hit a fencepost and ripped the ligaments in his left upper arm, which prevented him from starting the final day.



"That was a really great, yet extremely difficult race," commented Forster. "Congratulations to Chris Birch for the victory – he was definitely the best rider this year and was in a class of his own. For me the 'Round the Houses' and the time trial were ok but on the second day the track was very technical and was peppered with rocks, as well as tricky climbs and descents. Close to the end of the stage I was running in sixth place when I crashed on a small trail. In fact it was not a hard crash but I fell on my shoulder quite awkwardly. I finished the day in eighth or ninth place but I was having trouble moving my arm freely so I knew I was in a bit of trouble. In the evening the doctor advised me to not start the following day, which was disappointing but that's racing. Without a doubt, it was the hardest one I've ever done."

With everyone looking forward to next year's event, training programs will definitely be revisited and motorcycles repaired, so that the top riders can raise their game enough to challenge Chris Birch, who will surely be back to defend his title in 2009.