

TRIPPING ESELFONTEIN

If you had to go by the name 'Eselfontein', you'd never have a clue as to the extent of this two-wheel paradise awaiting you just beyond the village of Ceres. WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACQUES MARAIS

IT HAD BEEN WAY MORE than a decade since my last visit to this land of slip-sliding singletrack, and my return trip certainly was way overdue. As a mountain biker, one tends to move on from old favourites, always off in search of a new route or ride, and in the case of Eselfontein, all that happened is that I missed out on a good few years' of endorphin-laden trail riding.

The trails at Eselfontein are still awesome. Like good red wine, they have only improved with the passing years, and now boast that perfect balance between gravity and momentum. It is pretty obvious that the trail builder here has had 30 years of experience when it comes to creating the perfect singletrack fix.

Best of all, it is only a couple of hours from Cape Town, so pretty much perfect to either bank a day-ride or bliss out on a proper weekend escape.

Your official trail head is at the old farmhouse, but you can link onto the route pretty much anywhere on the farm. The initial section starts off flat through the orchards, but don't let this lull you into believing that Eselfontein will be a chilled ride. Ascend along a jeep-track past the guesthouse and then onto the legend Green Route singletrack section after passing through your first stream crossing (3km).

The climbing is gradual enough to let you sit back and take in the view, but a few short and sharp rocky loops will

keep you focussed and present to the summit (7km). Anyone with intermediate MTB skills will love this ride, especially the looping S-bends berming you all the way back down via a few skid-out switchbacks.

A second rocky river crossing takes you into the Blair Witch Forest (11km), one of my fave parts of the route. Slip-sliding singletrack, perfectly sculpted, blasts through this poplar forest and beyond, following the river's edge (14km). Climb via the fruit orchards again until you reach the main gravel entrance road (16km) and swing left for half a kays.

Here a sign will direct you towards the looming koppies, with a looping climb heading into the Renosterveld ridges.



All still big-smile-on-your-chops riding to a sign where the route splits into three options (18km). Left takes you onto the Black Route (with some extreme climbing), straight takes you up the Black Loop in reverse (not a good idea), so keep to your far right to continue on the ride of a lifetime.

After a couple of kays of sweet contouring along tamped berms and looping curves, you drop back down and climb up along some agricultural fields (24km). Keep up the cadence and look for a sign to your right; right about now it would be a good idea to pin back your ears, as you have 4km of the kiest high-speed pedalling possible waiting.

Bomb the original Red Bull DH section from the long-ago MTB Fest here, now beautifully scaped for a zigzag ride into another dippy poplar forest section (28km). Check your teeth for bugs (if you weren't smiling, you had better ensure

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you have a pulse) as you pop into the adjacent fruit orchards.

A stiff climb to the left super-tubes you onto a lovely little mental drop-and-glide section – feel free to “Whoop” loudly! Here you have the option of swinging right to the farm house (36km), or otherwise give in to a sudden urge to ride Blair Witch Forest again. And again – just to make sure you stoke up those endorphins even more.

There's not enough space to fully take you through the 65km Black Route, but beware you will have to upsize your attitude markedly. This challenging route takes you high into the outlying ranges, with killer climbs, gritty drops and butt-clenching downhill – go do it, but maybe

have a few beers and a chat to Deon Malherbe first.

This crank is 'necessary evil' of the worst and best kind, but those who suck up the suffering will be richly rewarded as they top out along one of the finest singletrack stretches on our tiny blue planet. The views are breathtaking, so take a break to absorb the visual splendour extending across the Koue Bokkeveld. Then get stuck in holler-until-your-lungs-hurt mode along this beautifully groomed singletrack for the next few kilometres.

Finally, note: there's a total of more than 100km of XCO and Enduro track on Eselfontein now, so make your visit a long weekend at the very least. 🍷

GRADING Intermediate to difficult **DURATION** 1-6 hours **CONFIGURATION** Circular/return options of 16-65km
START POINT Eselfontein Farm **GPS COORDINATES** S33°24'05.7" / E19°26'01.6" **TERRAIN** Singletrack – surface varies from smooth to rocky **ACCESS** Day permit from Erika's Café, Ceres **TELEPHONE** Deon Malherbe at 082 38 94 202 **WEBSITE** www.eselfontein.co.za