Running with the belles

Lady Tang joins HK 'obsession' in a race against the elements in Namibia. **Melanie Ho** reports



Lady Lucy Tang, Annabelle Bond and Sissel Smaller enjoy a laugh at The Peak as they prepare to compete in next weekend's RacingThePlanet ultra-marathon in Namibia. Photo: Oliver Tsang

The sentiment struck after hiking 25km over the hills of Stanley and Central. In an exclamation of exhilaration and knees gone tired, Lady Lucy Tang wrote on her blog "OH, WHAT AM I DOING!" as she realised the enormity of the challenge ahead – next weekend's RacingThePlanet: Namibia 2009.

Four encouraging postings from friends – including one who wrote down a schedule of multiple 35km runs with a weighted pack – and it is clear the 250km, six-day stage adventure is not just a race, but a community as well.

Though there are 214 competitors from 38 countries taking part in the race starting next Sunday, nearly a third are from Hong Kong or are based here.

It is by far the largest local representation for the Hong Kong-based company, RacingThePlanet, which has been organising ultra-marathon-style races since 2003.

The Hong Kong mix of 51 men and 29 women seems to offer everyone a person to cheer for: a woman favoured to win the women's division; a motivational speaker; a racing enthusiast who rises at 3.30am to squeeze in 30km before the stock market opens; and, to prove it isn't all just a little too superhuman, a woman who has never before competed in a marathon, much less a 10km race.

Tang, the wife of Sir David Tang, falls into that final category and will run the race as part of a team raising money for Eve Appeal, a charity that supports ovarian and other gynaecological cancers. Her teammates are UK-based Sissel Smaller and good friend Annabelle Bond, who have both climbed Mount Everest.

"Annabelle said I should try it," says Tang on her decision to enter the race. "I gave up smoking and drinking a year ago and Annabelle's all about trying something new. She said she thought it would be a fun challenge for me and help empower other women."

RacingThePlanet runs a series of annual races, exploring four of the world's toughest deserts. Competitors are asked to punish (and enjoy) themselves through 250km stretches of the Gobi, the Atacama, the Sahara and Antarctica. In addition to the series there is a fifth race which changes each year, with this year's race in Namibia, next year in Australia and, in 2011, Nepal. When the competitors gather to Namibia, it will constitute the largest sporting event to take place in the country and, at the same time, the largest gathering of Hong Kong people in the country. Tang's preparations have gone well, but nerves have also set in. So has determination. A year ago there were two packets of cigarettes a day and morning headaches. Now, there are hikes around her home in Sai Kung and a resistance to even the most decadent canapés.

"I didn't really have to think about giving up smoking and drinking," Tang says. "I'm now 42, life's too short and there are so many opportunities to give back. I can enjoy my sport and raise funds to help others. I was wasting my life away in this vacuous social thing and it got very tiring. I'm at a different stage of my life now and I want to raise money through sports." Tang, who says she has not set a minimum fundraising goal, added: "Well, I am talking to all of David's friends."

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> **Lady Lucy Tang, wife of Sir David Tang, on why she decided to leave her comfort zone and compete in RacingThePlanet: Namibia 2009**

Many other competitors are also running for charity. Hong Kong's Norman Waite, is raising money for his friend and fellow adventure racer, Otto Wong, who died from a brain tumour in March 2008. Wong's family and friends are trying to establish the Otto Wong Neuro-Oncology Clinic at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Waite's motivation comes from something higher than the need to prove he can run for 250km – in his case a charity race. While he finished 14th in a similar race in 2006, e-mails to friends and contacts asking them to follow his progress and donate funds has added a bit of pressure to his preparations.

"I have a distribution list of 650 so it's putting a lot of pressure on how I place in this race," says Waite, who has just returned from Australia where he trained in the sand to mirror the 30-metre high sand dunes he'll face in Namibia. "And in this race, the competition is outrageously strong. There's a lot of tough training happening." RacingThePlanet founder Mary Gadams chose the location for the remoteness of the country and of the Namib desert, the chance to race through parts of the world's second largest canyon – Fish River Canyon – and areas where few people had previously visited.

At some points, the course is so isolated the nearest town or village is a nine or 10 hour drive away. But all the conditions, including high sand dunes and heavy night winds, have not acted as a deterrent.

"It is literally the most competitive field I've ever seen," Gadams said. There is Ryan Sandes from South Africa, who is 26 and is definitely going to be up in the top three. Then there's Salvador Calvo Redondo, who won our race in Vietnam in 2008 and then there's an Italian, Marco Olmo who is 60 and has won some famous races.

"On the women's side, I would say Stephanie Case, who won the Vietnam race, has a strong chance. I think Lucy Bond Marriott will be really strong and Lucy Hilton, who almost won the overall Gobi March in 2007, will make up the top three. Someone always comes out of the woodwork and in this race there are so many good people and so many former champions."

With two 250km deserts behind her, including one where she finished first, Marriott is a safe bet. Raised in Hong Kong, Marriott will be joined by her husband, Francis, and her older sister, Annabelle (on the team with Tang and Smaller).

"It will be interesting to see how we go," Marriott said. "There are a lot of really fast women and there are a lot who can beat me, some who are definitely stronger than I am. I'll probably run most of the way with my husband, but usually in these sorts of things you just go with the flow and find a group of people to tag along with."

Marriott first developed a love for running in boarding school when she ran cross-country. When she returned to Hong Kong, there were runs along Bowen Road, while her sister was beginning to get interested in climbing. As her sister went on to scale the Seven Summits, Marriott became quite "addicted" to running.

"We both loved running and Annabelle really got into the climbing and I started doing the King of the Hills series and hill-running races," Marriott said. "She did more endurance racing before I did so I think we're strong in different areas. I'd say my strength is more in the 25-30 kilometre sprint."

Hong Kong is a fast-growing market for running and endurance racing, with many beginning with the Oxfam Trailwalker and working their way to longer – and more exotic – challenges. Gadams is thrilled to have so many locals participating, even though the popularity for this race is mystifying.

"I wish I had a great answer, but I honestly don't know," Gadams said. "A lot of people from Hong Kong have done our other races and so they're very much captivated by going to an area where not a lot of tourists have been."

Among those from Hong Kong who will race are a pilot, an equity analyst, a director of a wine import and distribution company, numerous lawyers and financiers, the former CEO of Jardine Matheson Group, a police inspector and some purely recreational athletes.

Hong Kong's Derek Kwik was among the first to complete the 4 Desert series. With an impressive resume of ultra-marathons, Kwik's advantage is he "knows the feeling on day three and how the feet are going to look on day five". Experience is key, but so is breaking down an intimidating distance into something more manageable.

Said Kwik, who also does motivational speaking: "When I'm running across Namibia I'll never think about the finish line because it's too far away. I don't even think day-to-day. I think checkpoint A to checkpoint B and before you know it, it's day seven."

In other words, running 10km 25 times seems different than attempting 250km all at once.

Each competitor is required to carry everything they need for six days, except for water and a tent, on their backs. There are no showers and bathrooms, no ice baths or heating pads. There are no post-stage deep-tissue massages.

But then again, Namibia may be the perfect setting for this growing community, who seems to revel in blister kits and freeze-dried foods.

Perhaps Tang and Marriott, Kwik, Waite and even Gadams all live by Kwik's e-mail signature, a phrase borrowed from Lance Armstrong, arguably one of the toughest athletes of all time: "Pain is temporary, quitting lasts forever."

An ultra-marathon for the ultra-dedicated

1. **214 competitors will be participating in RacingThePlanet: Namibia 2009, with 17 past RacingThePlanet/4 Deserts champions taking part.**
2. **75 per cent of the competitors are male, 25 per cent are female. Fifty-four women will be competing which is the highest number of female participants ever.**
3. **The largest contingent hails from Hong Kong with 63 competitors. The next largest is 58 from the UK and 32 from the US.**
4. **Six continents will be represented: Asia, Africa, Australasia, North America, South America and Europe. That includes 38 countries.**
5. **Competitors, volunteers and staff will consume more than 17,563 litres of water over seven days.**

Police training gives Tsang a head start

In true Hong Kong fashion, training begins and ends with rice. That is, a 10kg bag of unopened rice stuffed into a back-pack and loaded onto the shoulders of Tom Tsang Chiu-tong as she and her partner, Barry Smith, go for their weekly training sessions.

"We bring bags of rice because it moulds to the back and isn't lumpy, but then we add water and we train with it once a week," said Tsang, a senior inspector with the Hong Kong Police.

Tsang will compete in her first RacingThePlanet event in Namibia with Smith, a police superintendent for the Hong Kong government. When Smith first proposed the idea a year ago, Tsang's reaction was one of disbelief. Not because she didn't think she could do the challenge, but because a long time ago it had been Tsang who wanted to hike and run and now the tables were turned.

Tsang, who has been in the police force for 13 years, saw Smith's determination and so she agreed, signing up for the 250-km desert stage race. They began training together and about five months ago, strapped on their rice-filled packs and started hiking. After a short-lived career as a secondary teacher, Tsang decided she wanted to be a police officer aged 25. Passing her entrance examinations required a basic level of fitness so Tsang began to run.

"At the very beginning it was difficult, but I think it's because before I joined I wanted to make sure I had a top fitness level," Tsang said. "I didn't want to just pass. I wanted to pass the test with top marks and so I trained hard for the physical tests. I expected myself to be very good and so it was difficult."

Tsang has continued to run, taking part in hill races as well as excelling in some of the Hong Kong Police's organised races. Now a senior inspector, Tsang works at the police college, training up inspectors and working on leadership aspects and practical exercises. Her work might just give her an advantage when it comes to the race.

"As a police officer you need a sort of attitude of not giving up," Tsang said. "Whenever I take up a job, I want to finish it and I want to finish it with my biggest effort and I think this attitude will help. I'm not sure if I have prepared well enough for this, but I will try my best and I will go for it."

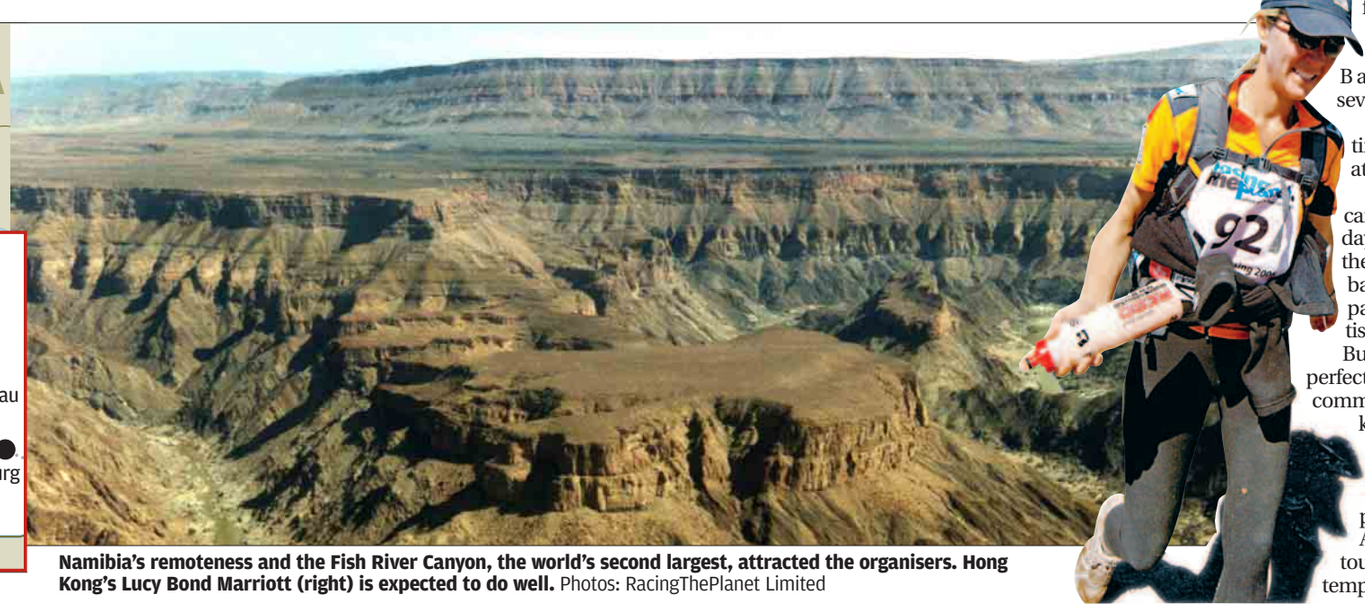
Melanie Ho



Police senior inspector Tom Tsang is scaling new heights. Photo: SMP



SMP GRAPHIC



Namibia's remoteness and the Fish River Canyon, the world's second largest, attracted the organisers. Hong Kong's Lucy Bond Marriott (right) is expected to do well. Photos: RacingThePlanet Limited