SEPTEMBER 2014 saw the inauguration of the Swiss Epic, an instantly highly vaunted Swiss iteration of what the Europeans regard as the epic of all epics, the Cape Epic, the Western Cape’s notorious annual mountain bike stage race.

This six-day saga took place in the Valais Alps from 15 to 20 September 2014, and took riders from Verbier through Leukerbad and Grächen, before ending in Zermatt.

Among the very first cohort of ham-calved cycling warriors was Graham Girdwood, a member of the Johannesburg Bar.

Having partnered in the Cape Epic, Transalp (another MTB alpine stage race stretching from Bavaria to Italy) and a few local stage races, Werner Luderitz SC of the Pretoria and Johannesburg Bars and Graham Girdwood decided it was time for a new challenge, for something, err, somewhat less pedestrian.

The nascent Swiss Epic sounded to them like the perfect coffee ride: five days spent peddling in the Swiss Alps – after a 14 km prologue.

‘It was hardly anything to worry about, we thought, especially since it was the inaugural event. What is more, nothing could surely be tougher than the Cape Epic.

‘As things panned out, Luderitz SC ended up injuring himself on a secret training camp, which sadly necessitated surgery. He couldn’t, after all, take part.’

Girdwood was left to find a replacement partner to ride into the breach.

‘In truth, and with the clarity of hindsight,’ Girdwood opines, ‘Luderitz SC dodged a withering bullet: he must have realised that the race was much more grueling than had been anticipated: 15,000 m of sheer climbing spread over five days, after an introductory 1000 m of climbing stretched over 14km.’

Over the span of five days that translated into 3000 m of climbing daily – in cycling argot, about three Cape Argus tours per day.

‘Coffee riding it was, however, not!’ Girdwood intones breathlessly. ‘The Swiss Epic was the hardest physical experience I’ve ever endured: seven to eight hours in the saddle bike every day.

‘It eclipses the Cape Epic, both in terms of level of difficulty and the technical skills required.

‘Given my day job, poring over difficult law in chambers, or pitching battle in court, many suggest a more relaxing way of taking a break would be to kick up one’s heels and laze on a beach somewhere.

‘That may be so, but there’s something quite cathartic about dealing with the daily stresses the Bar yields by challenging oneself physically.

‘You also tend to think on another plateau about that difficult case waiting on your desk upon your return – quite literally, in fact.

‘That mind wandering back to the law might, however, also account for the near-misses and crashes.’

‘And what’s next?’

‘Well,’ Girdwood’s voice lowers to a husky whisper, ‘there’s an even bigger challenge – a local race called the Freedom Challenge, from Pietermaritzburg to Paarl.

‘Gerrit Pretorius SC, past GCB chair, has completed it twice. Fitting for a GCB chair, indeed.’

See the companion piece, on p 45–46, ‘Liversage rides to freedom’.

The Swiss Epic is not for those with a fear of heights.