



*The*  
**DARJEELING  
EXPRESS**

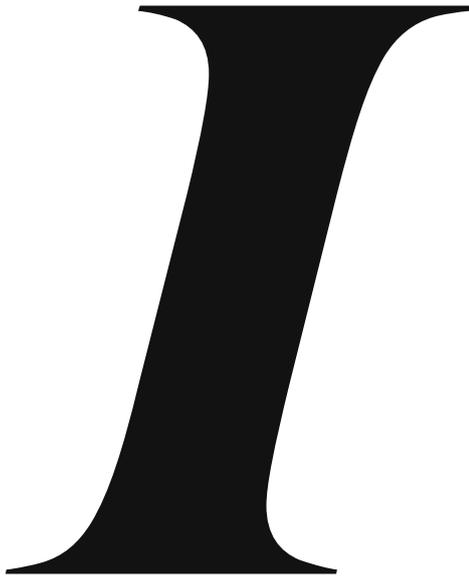
A full-page photograph of a runner in a blue shirt and black shorts running on a dirt trail through a lush, green valley. In the background, there are rolling hills and a large, snow-capped mountain peak under a blue sky with scattered clouds. A pink circular graphic is in the top right corner, and a pink line connects the name 'Bryony McCormick' in the text to the runner in the photo.

Having Everest  
dangling like  
a carrot in  
the distance  
provided  
motivation to  
keep moving.

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Destination running, be it road or trail, is a growing sport. And why shouldn't it be? Seeing a new country or city by foot unlocks a unique view of the place, allowing you to get close to the culture, the people, the vibe and the food – and really, to exist more as a local than other tourists do. Recently, *RW* features editor **Bryony McCormick** signed up for a 100-mile stage race through the Indian Himalayas – with travel and trail-running on her agenda.

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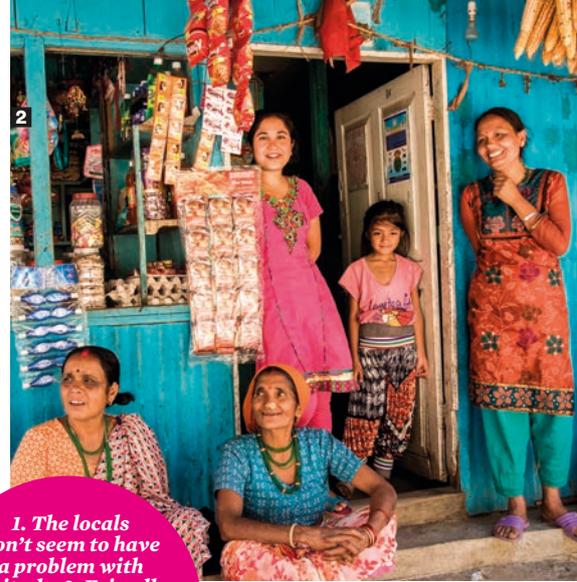


I've been about 23 hours in transit, squashed into a rattling bus with another 15 participants. We're finally in the beautiful Darjeeling Province of India, and it's flush with tea plantations, lush vegetation, and misty mountain tops.

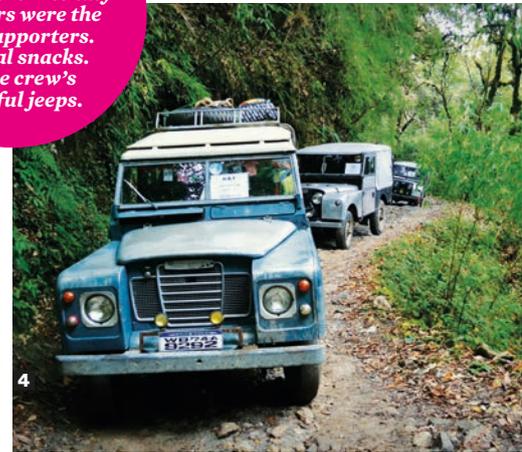
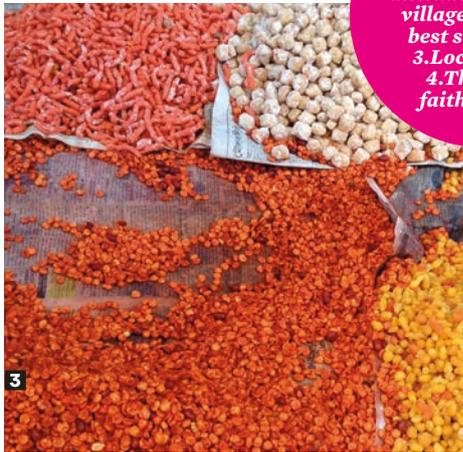
Quaint, colourful houses decorate the valleys and roadsides, adorned with row upon row of marigold- and bougainvillea-laden pot plants. Bright prayer flags flap in the breeze; and the locals smile, hands in prayer-position over their hearts, greeting you with a quiet *Namasté* as you pass by. Jeeps and buses, overloaded and precarious, blunder along narrow roads, disturbing the peace every once in a while; but only for a while.

Then, as our bus revs and shudders its way higher into the mountains, the calm and peace are replaced by fireworks and festivities. It's Diwali in a week, and clearly the celebrations have already started. Music blares, lights flicker, and festivities erupt everywhere you look. The driver skillfully navigates through a mob of celebrating locals, hands gripping the faux-fur-covered steering wheel, the elephant head of his Ganesh figurine swaying from the rear-view mirror. At last we're in Mirik, our overnight accommodation before the start and finish of the race; and my eyes crinkle at the corners in a personal, internal moment of happiness.

I'm in India to run the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race; and so far, it's everything I hoped it would be.



1. The locals don't seem to have a problem with altitude. 2. Friendly villagers were the best supporters. 3. Local snacks. 4. The crew's faithful jeeps.



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***“At any given time you can glance to your right at towering Kanchenjunga, or forwards at Everest.”***

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5. Locals teaching me how to make my beloved chapatis at Sandakphu. 6. Porters transport our bags through the jungle to the next overnight stop.



## CHOOSING INDIA

Irrespective of our religions or belief systems, I firmly believe there are moments in our lives when the universe and the planets align, and things happen.

For years I'd been considering a trip to India – mostly because I'd grown up in Durban, where you can find the largest population of Indians in the world outside of India; but I'd also studied eastern religions, fallen in love with yoga... and developed a strong relationship with Indian food(!).

My moment came in the form of a simple email, inviting me to participate in this race. Just like that, a wild adventure presented itself. The planets had aligned in my favour, it seemed.

## THE RACE

On paper the race looked challenging, to say the least. My biggest concern was the altitude; high enough to make people feel sick and pull out of the race, and I had no idea how I'd cope with it. I was also concerned about the 100-mile (160km) distance over five days – something else I hadn't done before. But hey, it wouldn't be an adventure without a few unknowns.

The route was roughly circular, and started and finished in the same village, Maneybhanjang, about a two-hour drive from the start and finish overnight accommodation in Mirik.

During the five days, we runners would pass through the Sandakphu National Park and the Singalila National Park, and have views of Mount Everest, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse and Makalu in the distance – in case the local villages, rivers, jungles and cobbled tracks weren't enough to keep us entertained. The race organisers and race website boast proudly that this is the most scenic race in the world; and I can confirm that they're not far off.

Pre-race, I'd done what I could to prepare myself. A few runners who'd done the race before had warned me about the elevation gain on Day One, with advice like "Nothing can prepare you for it", and "I had to pull out of Day Two". So I spent a lot of time going up and down the steepest mountain paths I could find.

Others told me to get some altitude training under my belt, which was more difficult; so I didn't. I figured I'd wing that part.

And so, with a healthy level of anxiety (but hours of climbing and descending in my legs), zero altitude training, 37 pre-packed Ziploc bags and a year's supply of Imodium, I jumped on a plane, and took off in the direction of the Himalayas.

*Race Director Mr C.S. Pandey's infatuation with the Himalayas was contagious.*



## DAY ONE – THE START FROM HELL

**ROUTE:** Maneybhanjang – Sandakphu  
**DISTANCE & TERRAIN:** 39km; cobbled, ankle-breaking rural paths  
**THE GOOD:** Finishing  
**THE BAD:** Everything that came before finishing  
**THE UGLY:** When a local passed me, carrying a wardrobe on his back

The first day is hellish – the solitary reason being that we climb for pretty much the entire 40 kays. We get to enjoy 1 600 metres of elevation gain in just 40 kilometres, and finish at a dizzying 3 600 metres. To put that in perspective, one of South Africa's toughest single-day trail runs, the Salomon Skyrun, has just 1 370 metres of elevation gain over its entire 100 kays. What I'm trying to say is that if you need to imagine the road I ran... just think of a vertical line, straight up into the clouds.

But let me not put you off just yet. The start is humbling; young, Nepalese-Indian girls walk through the crowd, handing out silky white scarves. We're told they've been blessed, and are for safety and courage on the run. Some people pack them away into their running packs; I opt to keep mine on – I'm going to need all the extra help I can get. Mr C.S. Pandey, the race organiser, uses the occasion of the start for yet another speech, which I've come to realise is one of

his favourite things to do. Second only to organising people.

Drums beat, people peer out of their homes; and just like that, the race I've travelled across the world to run begins. The serious athletes tear away, while the rest of us jog comfortably through the village. We turn a corner, and ahead of us we see... the uphill from hell. Aside from a short, rolling downhill section in the Sandakphu National Park, this is it, our entire day: one continuous, steep uphill. And when I say steep, I mean crawl-on-your-hands-and-knees steep. *Sure*, you think at first, *this isn't too bad*, and you put your head down and march on. But when you've been walking uphill for 30-odd kays, things start to change. You also gain altitude pretty swiftly, which starts to make you feel like a tyre with a slow puncture.

Because uphill is my weakness, my walking stance naturally starts to fail me, and by the 30-kay mark I resemble a bloodhound – my nose is basically touching the ground, and I'm this close to using my hands and resorting to crawling. Thankfully, I've left a set of trekking poles at the 32-kilometre water table; I use them to unfold my crooked body, and attempt to manufacture some momentum again.

The clouds are thick and there's no view to distract us, just corner after corner, unveiling more and more uphill. I make my umpteenth turn at about 36km and am presented with yet another zig-zagging traverse – something that'd make Sani Pass look like it was for toddlers – and officially lose my sense of humour. I slow down so much I'm almost going backwards. And that's when an elderly (by which I mean 80 in the shade) -looking man walks casually past me, a wardrobe double his size on his back.

A few metres ahead of me, he stops to rest on a broken stone wall. It's cold, I'm over it, and I decide to do the same. We sit in silence, neither of us too bothered with exchanging pleasantries. Then, as though he's finally convinced himself to get going again, he puts his hands on his knees and pushes himself up. He turns and looks at me, and that's the encouragement I need. I do the same, and with a small spark of energy, I wave him off and trundle forwards again.

Because it's so cloudy, the finish comes as a surprise. I'm so happy, I'm giddy. I laugh like a crazy lady, and then I cry. I'm also so cold, I may freeze to death.

I'm moved swiftly along to my lodgings for the next two nights – I'm bunking with two other girls, Sarah and Georgia, both from the UK – and am shown to the bucket of icy water that is to be my shower. Just wiping

my face takes my breath away. I opt for a WetWipe bath, followed by putting on every item of clothing I possess. I'm still cold, but I know that a good cup of tea – something there's no shortage of in India – will do the trick. The altitude is noticeable, the weather is cold; but the vibe in the kitchen is spectacular. Because of that treacherous first day, people are congratulating each other, hugging each other and slapping each other's backs as though we've been to war together. To be honest, it felt a little bit like we had.

Over a few quiet beers before bedtime, Ignacio – a wildly crazy Spanish runner, with limited English vocabulary – describes the day best: he called it “criminal” (pronounced “cree-mee-null”). One day down, four to go.

## DAY TWO – THE SIGHT-SEEING DAY

**ROUTE:** Sandakphu – Molle – Sandakphu

**D&T:** 32km; more cobbled, ankle-breaking rural paths

**THE GOOD:** Watching the sun rise over Mount Everest, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse and Makalu

**THE BAD:** Sleeping at altitude. Well, not sleeping much at all, really

**THE UGLY:** Going for a third day without using the bathroom

Day Two is a blissfully easy (by comparison) and flatter route. It's an out-and-back, and exactly what we need after a day of climbing, to loosen up our bodies. The major challenge is that it's all at 3 600 metres above sea level. To put it in perspective, the highest point in the Drakensberg is Thabana Ntlenyana, and that peaks at 3 482 metres. What this means for Day Two is that the running is slightly slow and sluggish. Fortunately, the views are spectacular.

At any given time you can glance to your right at towering Kanchenjunga, or forwards at Everest. It's hard to believe we're in line of sight of the world's mightiest mountains.

I spend the day running with two South African guys, Simon and Gareth, who were midway through a backpacking trip and decided a physical challenge-come-adventure in the Himalayas was due. We catch up to Dave, from the US, and Sahill, the only local runner; and, incidentally, a Hollywood actor – yes, that's an 'H' – from Mumbai. Because of the route, the distance and the view, it's a rather jovial day, and while the altitude certainly affects some, I'm left feeling pretty chipper.

That night we destroy another outstanding meal cooked in the stony kitchen by the

## DAY THREE – THE LAXATIVE MARATHON DAY

**ROUTE:** Sandakphu – Phalut – Rimbik  
**D&T:** 42km; cobbles, trail, stony stairs and tar

**THE GOOD:** 12km of downhill, into welcome oxygen

**THE BAD:** Deciding to take a laxative

**THE UGLY:** Being so buggered, a fellow runner literally had to pull me uphill

It's hump day for us, and I wake up feeling gross. Even though I've been constipated, it

*“With every metre I drop, my body begins to rejuvenate itself; and before I know it, I'm dancing my way down the mountainside...”*

Sandakphu locals; and once again we end the night over a few beers, and swopping war stories.

The only thing nagging at me is the fact that I'm physically unable to go to the loo – the opposite experience to what I'd expected, travelling to India – and am feeling rather bloated and uncomfortable. But with luck, my body will do its thing eventually, and Day Three will be a breeze.

hasn't stopped me shovelling in the *chapatis* – fresh Indian flatbreads – and my stomach looks like I could be a few months pregnant. The spirit in my room is already low, though; Sarah is (understandably) anxious about the condition of her body. She's had several major operations: to remove her large intestine and create a stomach, and she's running with a colostomy bag. By doing this race, she's also attempting something

## Know Before You Go

**VISA:** You need a tourist visa to travel to India. [indianvisaonline.gov.in](http://indianvisaonline.gov.in) has all the info.

**FLIGHT:** Fly to Delhi, then catch a domestic flight to Bagdogra (JHB to DEL can be as cheap as R6k return; DEL to

BAG is around R2k return).

**RACE ACCOMMODATION:**

Accommodation is comfortable, but basic. Bedding is provided, but take an extra sleeping bag for top camp, where

the temperature plummets into the negatives. Expect roommates, unless you stipulate none and pay a little more.

**RACE FOOD:** Food at the overnight stops and at support stations is sufficient, and



*Descending into the jungle meant beelining it downhill into oxygen-rich air. The further I descended, the more my body started to rejuvenate itself.*

tasty. I brought stuff from SA and ended up giving most of it away. Indian food is hands-down unbelievable, and even better than that for vegetarians.

**MEDS:** There are race doctors, but it's not a bad idea to take the basics. I

stocked up on everything under the sun to treat Delhi Belly, but ended up needing the opposite. Also, if you're a lady, take lady-products; India, in general, does not sell tampons – and it's a particularly tough one to explain with charades.

**ENTRY:**

Costs \$2 254 (R26 400) to enter. Enter and mention this article and get \$400 (R4 700) off.

**MORE INFO:**

Go to [himalayan.com](http://himalayan.com) for more details, and to register/enter.

she never thought she'd be able to after her operations; and mentally, she's doubting herself. And Georgia – currently the second-placed runner – is nursing pretty bad injuries; they look like they could pull her out of the race. So I opt to keep my preggie/constipated belly to myself.

At breakfast, one of the South Africans offers me a natural laxative; and somewhat tentatively, I decide to take it. Unfortunately, between then and the start it has no effect. But at the 10-kay mark, it kicks in. And it *really* kicks in. Gareth and I have fallen in stride again, and the poor guy... just four days into our friendship, and he has to wait patiently while I make bush stops all along the way.

The route takes us to the turnaround point from the day before, and then out on an extra loop before dropping us off the mountains, through a jungle, and into Rimbik. I'm moderately okay until we hit the out-and-back. Then, a combination of things – the upset stomach, a tired body, the altitude – seem to gang up on me, and I start losing composure badly. I felt like a champion the day before; but today, most of the field has caught up with me, or are coming close. I catch Adam, a fellow journalist, giving me that 'she's NOT looking good' face when he passes me. I cry a little.

I'm not well, physically or mentally. But I keep at it. At one point, up another devastatingly steep climb, I feel Gareth quietly grab my elbow and tug me uphill. I realise I've been marching on the spot for several moments, thinking I'm moving forwards. It's dire. To his credit, the guy hangs with me, realising the state I'm in.

At the start of the downhill I wave him off, confident I'll be able to get myself to the bottom. And, on my own for the first time that day, I decide to treat myself to some of the race food I'd bought from home, as well as swallowing my first-ever GU energy gel. I pop some headphones on and start off down the single track. With every metre I drop, my body begins to rejuvenate itself; and before I know it, I'm dancing my way down the mountainside, passing runners and locals and generally just having a ball. My stomach has sorted itself out, and I start noticing the vast changes in the scenery around me, as the jungle thickens and the day heats up. Plus there's oxygen, glorious oxygen. By the time I get to the bottom, I've made great time and finish strong – stoked to have the longest day behind me.

Our overnight at the Tenzing Sherpa Lodge is amazing, and it feels good to kick my shoes off and bask in the sun, knock back a beer, and wait for the rest of the field to finish.



## DAY FOUR – THE REST DAY

**ROUTE:** Rimbik – Palmajua

**D&T:** 21km; tar. All of it.

**THE GOOD:** Only having to run for 21 kilometres

**THE BAD:** Having two blown-out kneecaps from my hero descent the day before

**THE UGLY:** Eating my body weight in deep-fried *chapatis*

The fourth day provides some mental relief. For the first time, we'll be running entirely on tar. It's an easy day: 10 kilometres downhill, over the Lodhoma River, and 11 kays up, through the Singalila National Park.

I'd started with a bit of a crew, but I end up on my own, and really soak up the surroundings. I high-five kids, *Namasté* local villagers, and even get stopped by policewomen – twice – for a selfie. (Their selfies, not mine.) In the last few hundred metres a young local girl runs with me for a bit, clinging on to my hand and laughing loudly. It's only when we finish that I notice she's wearing an "I ♥ SA" T-shirt – such a coincidence it brings tears to my eyes. (Side note: you get overemotional at endurance events.)

A bus takes us back to camp, where we all maximise the extra free time normally spent running. With Diwali just days away, the village is buzzing. The evening is brought to a close with a cultural talent show, in which competitors from each country have to perform a short skit. Cringe-worthy, at times; but humbling and moving too.

Our two nights in Rimbik are everything I'd ever dreamt India would be: a combination of awesome running, cold beers shared with great people, home-cooked meals, friendly locals, quaint and peaceful accommodation – and all the while, the Ramman River valley providing a lush, green backdrop for it all.

And the best thing is, only one day stands between all of us and finishing a 100-mile stage run.

# 10 Lessons I Learnt in India

**1** You cannot eat too many *chapatis*, especially when they're warm off the fire. Believe me, I tried.

**2** If you ask a local a difficult question, you will get a head wobble.

**3** It is possible to become constipated in India.

**4** Cows have right of way. Quadruple-lane highways in rush hour can literally be brought to a standstill by cows crossing.

**5** As crazy as it seems, the driving system works. The rule: only worry about the car in front of you. Think about it...

**6** Don't fight the altitude: take things slowly, let your body adapt.

**7** People and event organisers make an event. I lucked out in this department.

**8** The smog in Delhi is so severe you can look directly at the sun at any time of the day.

**9** Indians take Diwali seriously. Their houses may not have windows – or walls – but they'll have 800 000 LEDs hanging from the ceiling.

**10** If you don't want to get a tummy bug, eat the local yoghurt and drink a local beer when you land. (Advice from Adam, my fellow journalist – and it worked. Something about the bacteria...)



PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED BY HRT; DENISE GIOVANELI (TOP RIGHT)

*L-R: This local's shirt was a coincidence! The third and fourth day are entirely on tar, but the views remain awesome. The kids cheered us on like celebs.*



## DAY FIVE – THE FINAL DAY

**ROUTE:** Palmajua – Maneybhanjang

**D&T:** 27km; more tar

**THE GOOD:** Crossing that finish line

**THE BAD:** The first 10 kays of uphill

**THE UGLY:** Accidentally catching a glimpse of a fellow runner relieving himself... and he wasn't having a wee

The final day dawns, and spirits are high, regardless of the injuries, blisters and broken bodies. Even if we have to crawl, the finish line is in sight. Today's route is fairly relaxed, with a good 10-kay uphill to start with, and then a slow, undulating downhill to the finish line back in Maneybhanjang.

Everyone starts off slowly, bodies warming up, knees creaking, joints protesting; but the uphill goes by fairly quickly.

By the time I start the second half of the day, I'm on my own again; I opt for some Rice Krispie Treats and Jon Mayer to get me through the kilometres. Without knowing it, I'm gaining ground on the

guys that I'd run with on and off for the entire five days, and I catch them with about four kays to go. It seems fitting to share the finish line with them – these people I'd 'gone to war with' on the first day, who'd pulled me up

hills, and let me use their phones to contact boyfriend-back-home for much-needed pep talks and I-love-you's.

We can hear the finish before we can see it: drums beating, kids squealing – and oddly, a set of bagpipes piping.

It's hard to explain what it feels like at the end. You've had so much time to digest the thought of it during the five days that when it actually happens, you're not sure what to do. I guess for me, as with most of the endurance events I've done, the highlight is this last kay, when my body and mind are drunk on the euphoria: that I'm going to make it, that I'm going to achieve this incredible thing. All my anxiety disappears, my injuries seem to fade, and the experiences from five days suddenly well up inside me and turn into an overwhelming ball of emotion, which comes out in the form of giddy laughter, happy tears, high-fives and hugs.

I lean forward to get my finishing scarf, take in a breath, and soak in the moment, storing a memory I'll carry with me until I'm old, and bingo's my only form of entertainment.

### THE REWARD

It's only on the plane home that it really dawns on me what I've done, who I've met, the places I've seen. I sit in my economy seat, hips locked in cramp, slops on swollen feet, knees thudding with pain, and consider the achievement and the adventure. As I fidget with my prayer beads – I bought a set, of course – I'm overwhelmed by a sense of satisfaction and peace. Not only had I set out to achieve something I'd never done, and actually achieved it; I'd also experienced such kindness and such hospitality, in one of the most diverse and beautiful countries I've ever visited. I got to see the best of India, with some of the best people, from my fellow runners to the organisers and crew. How many travellers – gosh, how many locals – can say that? 

*“...the highlight is this last kay, when my body and mind are drunk on euphoria: that I'm going to make it...”*