

HEAD IN THE clouds

A 100-mile race high up in the Himalayas proves an irresistibly challenging way for **Fiona McIntosh** to explore northern India

The wind's biting, the ground covered in frost. Having watched the first rays of the sun light up the surrounding mountains, we're now shuffling up the hill from the rustic lodge at Sandakphu where we spent the night. The cold air rasps in our lungs as we pass smiling villagers and grazing horses. Today we'll run a marathon in the sky.

We'll follow a rough track that snakes along the border of India and Nepal before dropping

more than 4 000 feet (just over 1 200 metres) to the valley below. It's the third day of the Himalayan 100 Mile Stage Race, and I'm finally in the groove.

Thirty-six enthusiasts from 14 countries have gathered for the event. We're a diverse bunch: Several are veteran ultrarunners who have completed epics like the Marathon des Sables, Kalahari Augrabies Extreme Marathon and the Comrades. Others have only half-marathons on their CVs.

Argentina is particularly well-represented with eight participants. Madko Vidosevich, an ophthalmologist from Rosario, is the affable joker in the bunch, always apologising for his late arrival at briefings and insisting that all present share FaceTime conversations with his beautiful wife back home. Compatriots Patricia Anconetani and her husband Carlos Spinelli ran last year and have returned with their three children, who are part of the walking group that completes a shorter course each day.

The large North American contingent includes another returnee, Jacqueline Windh, a geologist and writer from Canada who's been honing her fitness and nutrition in order to be able to outrun the tsunami that she's predicting will sweep across her home, Vancouver Island, which sits on an unstable tectonic plate boundary. So impressed was she by her first visit that she's back in India for a month with her husband.

Sara Davies, who lives on a smallholding in Leicestershire farming pigs, sheep and chickens, has gifted herself the run as a 50th birthday present. She valiantly runs up every hill, ignoring the fact that most of us pass her at walking pace.

In poll positions are a leggy Frenchman and a super-fit young Australian couple



who are touring the world, competing in ultraruns and triathlons as they go.

The commonality is that everyone's here for the adventure, the chance to run wild in the foothills of the Himalayas. As I start down the first hill, I recognise the distinct summit pyramid of Mt Everest to my left, with two other 8 000m peaks, Lhotse and Makalu, close by. The great snowy massive of Kanchenjunga is straight ahead. With such a compelling view of four of the five highest mountains in the world, it's impossible to race. I click away with my camera, taking a couple of spectacular falls when I take my eye off the road.

Concerned about running at an altitude of 3 600m, I—along with fellow Capetonians Shaen Adey and Theresa Horn—arrived at 'base camp', the remote hill town of Mirik, a few days before the start of the race. We weren't alone. Noema Williams, a Maori from Auckland, had been there almost a week. "The highest point I've been to in the last few years is 249 metres," explained the sprightly 70-year-old. "So I thought I'd spend some time exploring and building up a store of red blood cells."

At 1 767m, the town offered the chance to acclimatise both to the altitude and busy, culturally very different, India. It was a good call; not only did we have time to visit Mirik's monastery, church, orchid nurseries,

markets and a local tea estate (and ride the famous coal-fired mountain railway, the Toy Train, that puffs through the hill station of Darjeeling) but we were in reasonable shape for the punishing climb of 2 565m that faced us on the first day.

"Day one is 40km of uphill. You can't run it," Bryony McCormick, a South African who'd completed the event a couple of years ago (and a fellow contributor to *The Intrepid Explorer*), had informed us. The initial sustained climb, largely on a rough cobbled road that was built in the 1940s, was brutal—but worse was the descent of nearly 1 000m she hadn't warned us about.

Down and down we went, our knees jarring as we entered a zone of ancient trees draped in lichens. The snaking road returned to its upward trajectory, and as we regained our lost height, the mist rolled in and the temperatures fell—along with our spirits.

At the final water point, we encountered the normally exuberant Madko. Somehow convinced that this should be the end point of the day, he was remonstrating with the timekeeper! It was with some relief that we finally struggled into Sandakphu and collapsed.

Although there are no cut-offs, some of the back markers were tempted to throw in the towel as the evening drew in. Angela Scott could see the lodge high in the mist

above her when the backup jeep came past. Spent, she begged to be picked up, but the driver would have none of it. "You're nearly there," insisted one of the organising staff, jumping out of the vehicle. "I'll walk with you." Radioing his colleagues, he sent for tea to be brought down. Revived, Angela survived to fight another day.

Pounding along the ridgeline, I feel the privilege of running in this majestic environment surrounded by lofty peaks. "The world's most scenic race" is living up to its billing. Yesterday, mist obscured our views, but now the weather gods are

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Running in the clouds on the Himalayan 100 Miler

THIS PAGE: Day 3—at last I can see the four giants

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Shaen Adey, Theresa Horn and I running past a stupa on the Everest Challenge; Passing through a village on day 1—a short relief from the almost continuous uphill

“Pounding along the ridgeline, I feel the privilege of running in this majestic environment surrounded by lofty peaks. “The world’s most scenic race” is living up to its billing.”

smiling. While today is a stand-alone race—the Mt Everest Challenge Marathon—we're not rushing. Sandakphu holds a special place in the history of mountaineering. Apparently it was from here, as part of the Great Trigonometrical Survey (a project that aimed to measure the entire Indian subcontinent with scientific precision), that the height of Mt Everest was first accurately measured.

Now in its 26th year, the Himalayan 100 Mile Stage Race has been showered with accolades, not just for its views but for its superb organisation and social and environmental footprint. Despite the logistical challenges, we want for nothing—neither at the lodges nor on the route. Our health and well-being are attended to by a

specialised doctor, and cooks instructed in the peculiarities of Western tastes and delicate stomachs, plus frequent water and food stations, mean there's no need even to carry a running pack.

A portion of our entry fees goes to local charities and conservation efforts in the areas through which we run, so the walkers are tasked with handing out notebooks and pens to primary schoolchildren who line the approaches to many of the food stations.

The success is due to the tireless efforts of the founder and race director, Mr CS Pandey: an accomplished and intrepid mountaineer, trail runner and mountain biker who's spearheaded the development of adventure tourism in India. Although

very well-travelled, with his heavily accented English and distinctive Indian body language (the 'doddle' of the head and flamboyant hand movements) he comes across initially as something straight out of the Exotic Marigold Hotel. But Mr Pandey's fierce pride and passion for the area, for India's towering mountains, jungles and friendly communities is apparent from the start, as is that of his assistant race director, the unflappable Mansi Pandey, and their cheery staff. Little touches—the fairy lights and garlands of marigolds that decorate the lodges, the numerous scarves draped around our necks—the varied menu options and the snippets of local history and customs that are woven into Mr Pandey's briefings give insight into the mix of cultures in the region. It's charming.

I catch Eric Schranz on the steep technical downhill through the jungle. An accomplished American ultrarunner, with a personal best of 6 hours 37 minutes for 50 miles (yes, *miles*), he's taking it easy, snapping selfies with the soldiers who line the upper section of the route, enjoying the views of deep valleys and green hills and the interaction with the yak herders and villagers we meet on the way. Despite owning a wardrobe of state-of-the-art running gear, he's sporting a pair of brightly coloured, crocheted shorts that



elicit shy giggles from everyone we meet along the way.

As we lose height, the landscape changes and I'm distracted by stupas (burial mounds), temples and little homesteads surrounded by bright flowers and vegetable gardens. Trekkers utilise these paths, so there's also a sprinkling of lodges and teahouses.

"This is my slowest ever marathon time," Eric concedes as we cross the finish line in just over seven hours. But he's smiling. It's been a great day out. A mad Irishman, Michael Burke, is hot on our heels. Thanks to his bizarre strategy of flying down the hills at break-neck speed, then almost collapsing with exhaustion at the bottom of the descents, we've yo-yoed past each other for the last three days. "I love the rush of the downhill," he says by way of explanation when I suggest that a more steady, controlled pace may be more efficient.

The lodge in the tidy village of Rimbik has everything that a weary runner could hope for: lovely hosts, hot showers, flush toilets, a constant supply of tea and beer as well as tasty, filling food. Plus a view to die for, particularly at dawn when the velvety layers of mountain ranges stretching to the Tibetan border glow in the oblique light.

After the rigours of the marathon, we're rewarded with an easy penultimate day of only 13 miles. The roadrunners take off down the steep road to the river, happy to be on tar. As I struggle up the equally steep road on the other side, I rue the fact there are no modern bridges spanning these valleys. The only way to cross from one ridge to another is to descend to the lowest point then regain all the lost height.

As we're shuttled back to the Rimbik lodge, we're instructed to prepare for an evening of cultural exchanges. Frenchman David Fontaine, the race leader (and eventual winner), displays his versatility playing the bull to his Spanish girlfriend's sexy impersonation of a matador, while the English demonstrate football skills that would make the national team weep.

The final day starts where the previous one ended, the endorphins kicking in as our bus driver negotiates trucks, cars and motorbikes—often on the edge of precipitous drops. We jog through along a narrow winding road flanked by dense vegetation, catching frustratingly brief glimpses of Kanchenjunga before cresting the ridge, beginning the long final descent to the finish.

We manage a little celebratory jig as we cross the tape, happy that it's over and that we're still in one piece, but sad that

the race is at an end. We've enjoyed an incredible window on a little-visited region of northern India, a place virtually untouched by foreign tourists.

"The Mt Everest Marathon day was one of the best days of running/hiking in my life. The scenery, conversations and ultimately the finish in beautiful Rimbik was very special—and I'll remember it always," Eric emails me from his home in California a few days later. I'll second that. ☺

Have a look at www.himalayan.com for more information about the races and the organiser, Himalayan Run & Trek.

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: Eric Schranz beginning the descent into the jungle on day 3; Much of the route on days 2 and 3 followed the border between India and Nepal—Indian soldiers patrolled it and provided much-needed encouragement; The colourful Bokar Monastery in Mirik; Shaen and Theresa crossing the finish line on day 4; The run took us past various holy places (picture by Eric Schranz); Much of the second half of the route was on tarred roads through colourful mountain villages

RUN

FALKE

ADVANCE PERFORMANCE

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reduces friction
& blisters

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ankle support

HONEYCOMB
mesh construction
for cooling

SEAMLESS TOE
for anti-blister

