

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

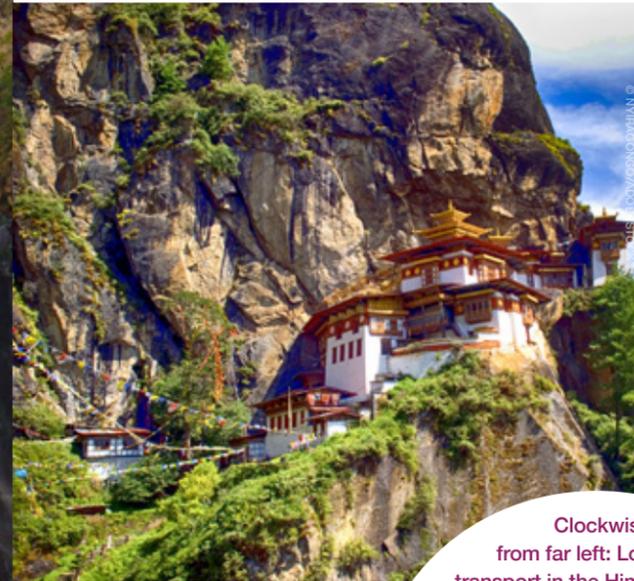
*In the early 1900s, the Aga Khan, the ruler who dominated India at the time, ordered a trail to be built in the north-east Himalayan ranges because it was rumoured you could see the “four giants” – four of the world’s five highest mountains – from one spot along it. Today the trail guides a small group of runners from around the world through the **Himalayan 100 Mile Stage Race**, an epic pursuit run in five daily stages. **Shaen Adey** was one of three South Africans to take on the challenge.*

Competitors on the Himalayan 100 Mile Stage Race get a view of ‘the four giants’, four of the five tallest mountains in the world.

FLYING FROM CAPE TOWN VIA DELHI TO BAGDOGRA IN THE DARJEELING DISTRICT OF NORTHERN INDIA WAS A LONG HAUL.

We arrived tired and dusty, but excited about the challenge: running in the mountains for five days on the Himalayan 100 Mile Race would certainly be tough. That was not the sole focus of the race, though. We were here for the promised rich cultural experience and insight into the lives of the Himalayan people.

From Bagdogra it was a 90-minute taxi drive to Mirik, where we would acclimatise to the altitude for a few days. The road was busy. Along with swarms of pedestrians and animals, we dodged other cars, trucks, motorbikes, bicycles and tricycles all loaded to the hilt. It felt chaotic, but somehow it worked.



Clockwise from far left: Local transport in the Himalayas is mainly left to short wheelbase Land Rovers, best suited to handling the precarious terrain. The mountains are dotted with holy temples. Local crowd support during the race is always strong. No time to yak along the way. Theresa Horn and Fiona Lush, two of the three South Africans who competed in the 2016 event.

Weaving through the village streets with their maze of small shops and hawkers, colourful ribbons and flags flying from buildings and bridges announced the approach of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. Soon the space opened up and the constant sound of car hooters was replaced by the screech of cicadas. An incredibly steep and seemingly endless climb took us out of the plains. I avoided looking at the scary drop-offs and focused on the green, rolling hills of tea plantations as we chased the sunset. The hills made my stomach churn as I grasped what we were in for on the run.

Mr Pandey, the founder and organiser of the race, greeted us in Mirik. Thirty-five athletes from 14 countries were gathered, all keen to explore the tea plantations, orchid nurseries and other sites. At sunrise we wandered up to the colourful Boka Temple. Slipping off our shoes we snuck into morning prayers and listened to the chanting and occasional interludes from



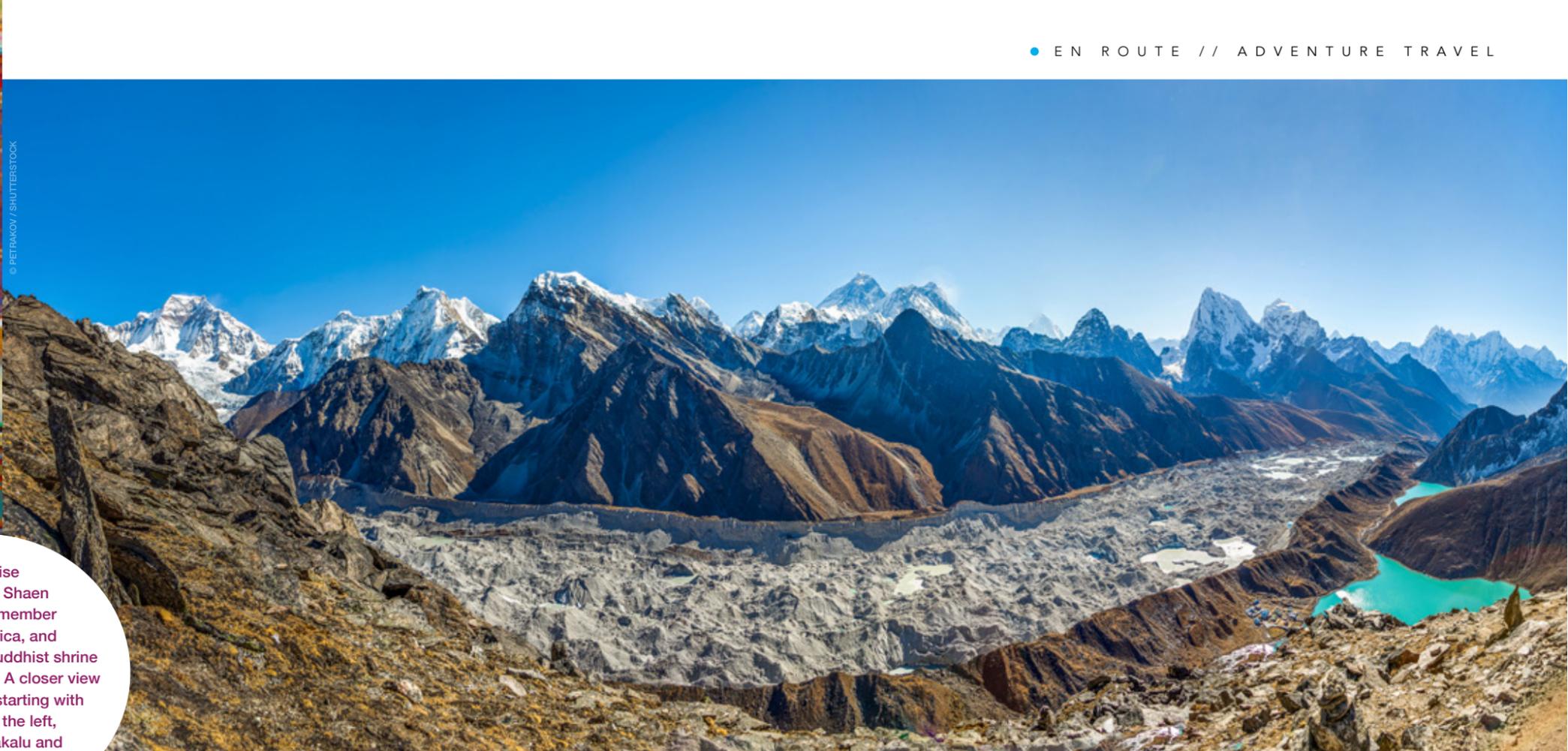
drums, cymbals and conch shells. Monks came and went. Tea was served. Young kids in the back rows wriggled and giggled. In the evenings, when the shops lit up and the markets were alive, we walked the streets.

We had more acclimatising to do, though, so we journeyed to the famous British hill station of Darjeeling, where we visited the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park and peered into the cages at mythical creatures like the snow leopard and Bengal tiger. At the Himalayan

Mountaineering Institute we paid our respects at the tomb of local legend Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, who – along with Sir Edmund Hillary – claimed the first ascent of Mt Everest.

Then came my highlight: a ride on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, built between 1879 and 1881. When she was a child my grandmother lived in the Himalayas and rode to school on this “Toy Train” that puffs along a narrow gauge track between Darjeeling and New Jalpaiguri. Today the track shares much of the tar road through town, bringing traffic in Darjeeling to a grinding halt daily. But residents take the inconvenience in their stride, parking their cars to one side and hopping out to wave and take photos.

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Clockwise from below: Shaen Adey, the third member of team South Africa, and Theresa Horn. A Buddhist shrine filled with offerings. A closer view of the four giants, starting with Mount Everest on the left, then Lhotse, Makalu and Kanchenjunga.

ON YOUR MARKS...

Finally race day arrived, and we were bussed to the start at Maneybhanjang. The group set off at a fast pace as soon as the green ribbon dropped, but was soon met by a monster of a hill that set the tone for the rest of the race. The track zig-zagged relentlessly uphill before dropping down to our first food station, where we were welcomed by a group of Nepalese school kids. After a quick photo we set off on the steep climb up through the Singalila National Park. Home to the rare red panda, it's filled with gnarled old trees draped with lichens that looked bewitched in the rolling mist. *Baard boome* my fellow Saffer Theresa Horn observed breathlessly: trying to run at altitude was proving a serious challenge. Short wheelbase Landis – the local taxis – came past, their distant whines as they continued uphill a depressing indicator of how far we still had to climb. But the tracks were rutted and steep so I was happier to be on foot than squashed inside a vehicle.

On day two, an out and back race from Sandakphu where we'd overnighted, the Saffers were strong on the steep downs, negotiating the cobbled stones

with nimble feet and opening a gap on the city slickers. Yak bells rang out across the misty valley, reminding me of a hiking trip in the Swiss mountain village of Grindelwald. We skimmed along the ridgeline, catching a brief glimpse of Everest before it was swallowed by mist.

“You saw the highest mountain in the world today,” confirmed Mr Pandey as he described the history of the region at the race briefing that night. “In the early 1900s the Aga Khan, ruler of much of India, heard tales of a unique spot high in the mountains of the north-east Himalayan ranges from where it was possible to see four of the world’s five highest mountains – Mt Everest, Lhotse, Makalu and Kanchenjunga – all at once. He wished to travel there so instructed his men to build a trail along the mountain ridge that you ran this morning, the border of present day Nepal and India. Sadly the Aga Khan never made it to this spot. But you runners are benefiting from his vision.”

Day three, the Mt Everest Challenge, was a full marathon (42 kilometres), but we were now in the swing of things.



Initially the terrain was easy going and the dawn sky was crisp and clear so we were treated to magnificent views of the four giants. The chance of seeing these snow-capped peaks was one of the main reasons I had entered the race, so I gave thanks to the weather gods.

After the ridgeline we faced a steep, long descent of over 1 200 metres to the finish in the village of Rimbik. “The race is not over until the elephant’s tail crosses the line,” Mr Pandey had cautioned. “Don’t break an ankle on the jungle paths. Not even the toughest Landis can get there to rescue you.” We took his advice, running carefully and enjoying the changing landscapes and vegetation as we descended through forest to the lower slopes, where we passed well-tended fields and houses surrounded by flowers, the yards full of maize cobs drying in the sun.

The final two days were spent running in the Rimbik area, through rugged mountainous scenery with deep gorges

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and raging rivers. The small settlements were fascinating, with numerous shrines draped in colourful prayer flags. Life went on for the curious locals as we odd-looking intruders hobbled through.

Before the final leg back to Maneybhanjang we stopped on a hilltop for our last glimpse of the majestic Himalayan mountain range before the long descent to the finish line. Frenchman David Fontaine took podium, while Anna Petrakos from Australia was the first woman home. But simply completing the course made us all feel

like winners.

“If you found something really great, take it to your country. And if you found something bad, please leave it with me in my country,” Mr Pandey requested as we boarded the bus in Mirik. I left nothing save my weary footprints. And I took away great treasures. The views of the mountains, the connection with my grandmother on the Toy Train, the camaraderie of fellow runners and the memory of the friendly people that we encountered along our route will be with me forever. 🌿