

Moving mountains

Marathon debutant Pat Kinsella dives in at the steep end during the Himalayan Run-Trek, a 100-mile stage race along the India-Nepal border



'BREATHING IN THE COLD, CLEAN MOUNTAIN AIR IT FEELS UNFATHOMABLE THAT, JUST DAYS AGO, I WAS STRUGGLING THROUGH DELHI'S FUME-FILLED FUG'



witnessed daybreak across four of the world's five highest mountains, and I've barely finished breakfast. I think today might be special. What better place to break your marathon cherry?

On The Upside

The Everest Challenge Marathon is day three of the five-day Himalayan Run-Trek (HRT) stage race, one of the world's oldest continuously running trail events. I'm taking part in the 27th rendition of the race, which sees runners, hikers and sometimes even mountain bikers (although no one is cycling this year) negotiate a 100-mile (160km) route along sections of the Singalila Ridge on the India-Nepal border.

The first day was brutal. From the town of Maneybhanjang – after being surreally serenaded by Indian bagpipe players and receiving ceremonial scarves from local children – we began running uphill. And that's how it continued, for the next 24 miles. Up. Up. Up. Little bit of down. More Up. Mostly along a cruel cobblestone track built for yaks and strong-stomached jeep drivers.

But I enjoyed it, especially gabbing between gasps to fellow runners. The 60-strong field features about 30 Brits, along with an eclectic mix of adventurers from Germany, Sweden, Spain, Hong Kong, Austria, Canada, Argentina, the US and Australia. The age range is astonishing, from 15-year-old Brett, a London lad running with his mum, to Max, a man in his 70s, back for his ninth HRT.

Ninth? 'Wait till you get onto the ridge,' he sagely responds to anyone who asks. Bands of cheering children lined the sides of the serpentine track as it slithered upwards through villages, and for a long while I was accompanied by three happy-looking hounds. At each aid station, we guzzled water and ate salted bananas – an acquired taste, but effective fodder for fending off hunger flats and cramps.

In the last hour, the altitude kicked in. Stumbling more than running, taking greedy gulps of air, but still feeling breathless and dizzy, I was thankful to

Itinerary of Adventure

- Day One:** Maneybhanjang-Sandakphu; 24 miles (38km); 2,900 metres of climbing
- Day Two:** Sandakphu-Molle-Sandakphu; 20 miles (32km); 1,020 metres of climbing
- Day Three:** Sandakphu-Rimbik; 26 miles (42km); 1,379 metres of climbing
- Day Four:** Rimbik-Palmajua; 13 miles (21km); 1,073 metres of climbing
- Day Five:** Palmajua-Maneybhanjang; 17 miles (27km); 1,641 metres of climbing

Gear List

The terrain is tough, especially for the first three days, when you run along a crude cobblestone path, where the threat of race-ending ankle injury is omnipresent.

- » Good socks with increased joint support – Falke's stabilising Cool Running socks, with ankle-area compression, are recommended.
- » Lightweight, folding or telescopic trekking poles (from a decent brand such as Leki) are invaluable.
- » Take trail-running and road-running shoes – you'll need the latter on the last two days – or go with one all-terrain set of heels, such as Hoka One One's Challenger ATR (the extra suspension is perfect for the rugged landscape and steep descents).
- » Low on-trail temperatures mean you need layers, starting with a thin, technical, long-sleeved top (such as the classic Helly Hansen moisture-wicking crew) and some supportive and warm undies, like Falke's running boxers.
- » Waterstops are regular, but a tight-fitting small backpack with a bladder you can fill with electrolyte-infused liquid, plus pockets for gels, is required. The CamelBak Ultra 10 is ideal.
- » Gloves, hat and a lightweight waterproof jacket are essential while running, and a warm down jacket is required at night in the mountains.

What time are you hoping for?' I'm asked by several of my fellow runners as we stand in the mess hut, amid the pre-dawn gloom, shivering and shovelling porridge into our reluctant mouths.

I have no idea. I've never run a competitive marathon in my life. And a little part of me (let's call it my head) is fretting that this might not be the best place to start: 3,500 metres above sea level, in the midst of a five-day stage race through the foothills of the Himalayas.

In Sanskrit, Himalaya means 'house of snow', and this morning, in Sandakphu, a remote mountain village in the Darjeeling region of West Bengal, that's what it feels like. Wandering to a viewpoint,

my running shoes crunch through a fresh crust of ice and everything around me is blanketed white. It's only a light dusting, but listening to the silence and breathing in the cold, clean, oxygen-light mountain air, it feels unfathomable that, just days ago, I was struggling through Delhi's fume-filled fog and clinging heat, amid a cacophony of car horns.

The serious snow hangs on the rooftops of this huge house, the gable ends of which dominate the skyline to my north – where Kangchenjunga stabs through clouds – and east, with Mount Everest, Lhotse and Makalu forming a pantheon of peaks, still semi-silhouetted against the horizon.

As a shout shatters the scene, summoning runners to the startline, the rising sun suddenly sets the spike of Kangchenjunga aflame, and light floods down its flanks like lava. A few minutes later, Everest and its 8,000-metre neighbours are ablaze, too. I've just





are thrice as hard as a race we enter for enjoyment. And they do it while rocking golden welly boots. Respect.

Mountain Mayhem

The marathon route repeats the first 10 miles of the trail we'd run the previous day, but minus the mist it's totally transformed. Some of the climbs and descents feel familiar underfoot, but now I'm looking well beyond the rugged rock-strewn track to the astonishing apparition beyond, where the planet's highest peaks punctuate a bluebird sky.

I've jettisoned my traitorous pole, and while the elevation still steals my breath on the stiffest switchbacks – especially during the savage ascent to Phalut – I feel like I'm flying compared to yesterday.

While I've never raced a competitive marathon before, I've done the distance and more during various wild-running adventures, but this is panning out to be the maddest day I've ever spent on trails.

From Phalut, we loop back to Molle, where the route forks east and dramatically drops off the Singalila Ridge,

flowing through forests along technical singletrack for several kilometres, before meeting the mountain village of Shirikola, where things get properly gnarly.

Marker arrows send us tearing down sets of suicidally steep stairs, with every step slightly off-camber, passing through the front yards of flower-covered cottages clinging to the precipitous hillside. It's lunchtime, and immaculately dressed schoolkids stream out of class and onto the paths. Some giggle shyly at the sight of sweaty westerners wobbling through their midst, while others return my breathless 'Namaste!' with wide-eyed enthusiasm.

Two local lads flash past at lightening speed, showing me how it should be done, but I can't convince my brain to let go, and I keep my centre of gravity low. A forward fall here would be fatal – at the very least to my hopes of finishing the race.

At the bottom of the long village, a marshal directs us over a wall. It's an unlikely looking turn, until I realise the road behind him has disappeared into a massive landslide. So over I go, to scramble down a near-vertical muddy

bank to a bridge spanning the rushing River Ramman, which we follow to Rimbik, where the marathon ends.

It's 4km to the finish, and my watch says I've been running for just over 6.5 hours. Having started with no greater ambition than completion and survival, suddenly I'm consumed with a desire to set a sub seven-hour time. Fortunately, the final stretch is along a smooth road, which undulates rather than rears, and I sprint across the line with 6 hours 59 minutes on the clock.

OK, so it's not something Kipchoge would probably put on his CV, and I'm not expecting Nike to come knocking, but as a virgin mountain marathoner, I'm happy enough – especially considering we've climbed over 1,100 metres and descended 2,800 metres during the day.

And tomorrow I'll get to do my first-ever competitive half marathon. An easy day – followed by a 17-mile stage to complete the century and close the loop at Maneybhayang, bringing home a hundred miles of Himalayan memories. **To find out more about the Himalayan Run-Trek, visit himalayan.com**

PRACTICAL DETAILS

Participants in the HRT are hosted throughout by the company behind the race, headed by the enigmatic and charismatic Mr Pandey. You're met from the plane at Delhi airport, and everything from accommodation and internal flights to Bagdogra through to baggage transfers and optional side trips to Agra and Darjeeling are arranged by HRT.

Accommodation during the race is in shared rooms in establishments that vary enormously; at Sandakphu it's bucket-showers basic, while Rimbik's rooms are much more comfortable.

Daily start times can be red-eye early, but most evenings participants are early to bed. Transportation to/from start/finish spots is in minibuses.

All food is provided except beer and water, which is bought by the bottle. A doctor accompanies the HRT on every stage and each runner is checked at the beginning and the end.

