



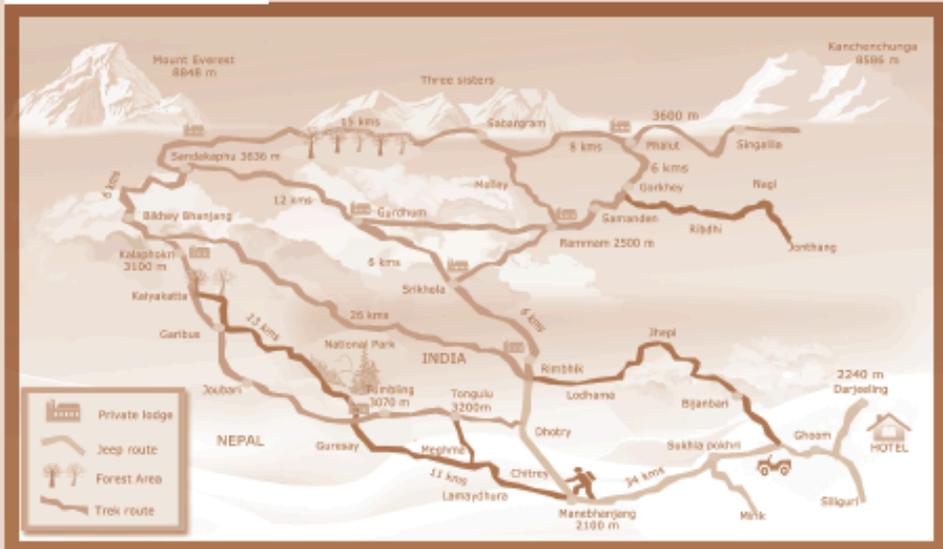
In the STEEP END

What does it take to do the Himalayan Run and Trek, a 160.9km (100 mile) stage race along the India Nepal border? Pat Kinsella discovers the stunning scenery doesn't make it any easier.

WORDS AND PICS **PAT KINSELLA**



Adventure Himalayan run



ITINERARY OF ADVENTURE

- Day one:** Wanephanjyang-Sandakphu; 36km (24 miles); 2400m of climbing
- Day two:** Sandakphu-Mole-Sandakphu; 32km (20 miles); 1020m of climbing
- Day three:** Sandakphu-Rimbik; 42km (26 miles); 1374m of climbing
- Day four:** Rimbik-Palimajua; 28km (13 miles); 1073m of climbing
- Day five:** Palimajua-Wanephanjyang; 27km (17 miles); 1641m of climbing



My first **42km** race...

I've never run a competitive marathon before, and a little part of me (let's call it my head) is fretting that this might not be the best place to start: 3,500m above sea level, in the midst of a five-day stage race.

I'm stamping around in the pre-dawn darkness, forcing spoonfuls of cold porridge into my reluctant face, and attempting to slap some circulation into the numb and already knackered legs that protrude porcelain-like from the bottom of my shorts.

As soon as the sun rises, though, I rapidly realise there's no better place on Earth to break my marathon cherry than here, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

In Sanskrit, Himalayas means 'house of snow', and this morning, in Sandakphu, a remote mountain village in the Darjeeling region of West Bengal, it's living up to its name. Walking to a viewpoint behind the hut where I slept, my running shoes crunch through a fresh crust of white water. 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 - with Kanchenjunga stabbing through clouds - and east, where Mt Everest, Lhotse and Makalu form a pantheon of peaks, still semi-silhouetted against the horizon.

As the morning ripens, the sun suddenly sets the spike of Kanchenjunga aflame, and light floods down its flanks like lava. A few minutes later, Everest and its 8000m neighbours are ablaze too. I try to locate my spoon and eventually find it sticking out of my mouth. Witnessing daybreak across four of the world's five highest mountains halfway through breakfast can leave you dumbstruck.

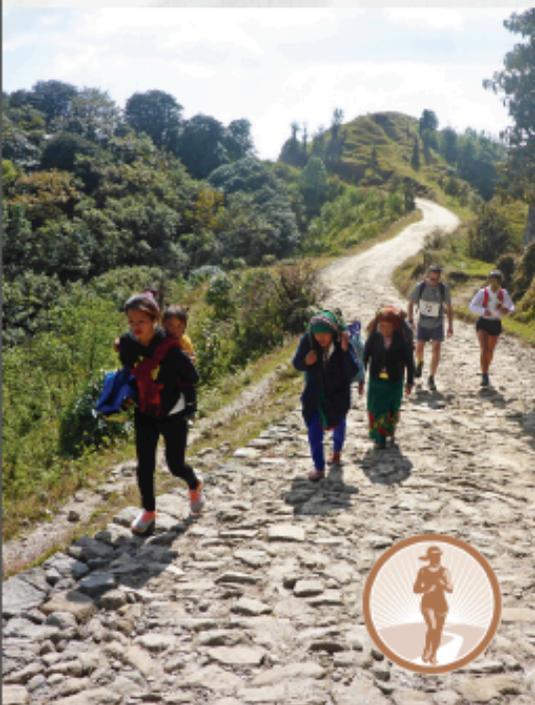
A shout shatters the scene, summoning runners to the start line. This is it. My first 42km race. But the route profile promises more down than up, and with such views for company, how hard can it be? I'm ready to dive in at the steep end. I've just got to be careful not to trip over my own feet while leering at the voluptuous vistas.



Day three, on the steep climb to Phedot



Aussie runner Jeremy Scriven - who placed third overall - runs past a local cheer squad on day one



Up, up, up. Little bit of down. More up. Mostly along a cruel cobblestone track built for yaks and strong-stomached Jeep drivers



On the up and up!



Pat at the starting line, still smiling, before the pain

EARLY DAYS

The Everest Challenge Marathon is day three of the five day Himalayan Run and 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 160km (100 mile) route along sections of the Singalila Ridge on the India-Nepal border.

The first day was brutal. From the town of Maneybhanjang - after being 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 38.6km. 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 a couple of Aussies amid an eclectic mix of adventurers from Germany, Sweden, Spain, Hong Kong, Austria, Canada, Argentina, the US, and a big posse of Poms. The age range is astonishing, from 15 year-old Brett, a Brit running with his mum, to Max, a man in his 70s, back for his ninth HRT. Nirmal? "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



Watch your step! The surface of many local bridges are patchy

HANDY TIPS

It's hard to prepare for exertion at high altitude - or to know how your body will react to it - but make sure you have the core fitness required to complete consecutive days of long distance running.

If you're planning on trying a drug like Diamox to help combat the effects of altitude, start early enough to identify any side effects.

Despite the extensive gear list provided, remember you can only take 15kg of luggage on the internal flights between Delhi and Gangdara. (That said, bring your own gels and energy bars.)



acquired taste, but fodder that fended off hunger flats and cramps.

In the last hour, the effects of altitude kicked in. Stumbling more than running, taking greedy gulps of air but still feeling breathless and dizzy, I was thankful to reach Sandakphu in daylight. Several runners and walkers arrived well after dark – all utterly exhausted, some in tears.

On day two my enjoyment evaporated and I descended into a nightmare, mostly of my own making. Lured into a false sense of optimism by a sensational sunrise, I lugged a large camera for the full 32.1 km out-and-back course along the spine of Singalila National Park, only for the bashful landscape to hide behind a sarimade of mist for the entire day. And to make my mood muddier, one of my trekking poles jammed.

There was swearing. And lots of lost ground. But then, just when I hit a low, three locals loomed out of the clouds: a young woman carrying a baby, followed by two companions both shouldering epic loads. This quickly beat my bellyaching back to where it belonged. Here people scratch a precarious living by performing daily feats of endurance and strength that are thrice as hard as a race we enter for enjoyment. And they do it while effortlessly rocking golden welly boots. Respect.

MOUNTAIN MARATHON

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 trekking pole too, 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 in the past, but this is panning out to be the maddest day I've ever spent on trails.

From Phalut we loop back to Melle, where the route forks east and dramatically drops off the Singalila ridge, flowing through forests along tight and 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 suicidal steep stairs, with every step irregular and slightly off-camber.

PRACTICAL DETAILS

• Participants in the HRT are hosted throughout by the company behind the race, headed by the charismatic and enigmatic Mr CS Pandey. You're met from the plane at Delhi airport, and everything from accommodation and internal flights to baggage transfers and optional side trips to Ayra and Darjeeling are arranged by HRT, who do a great job of India's often bewildering environment.

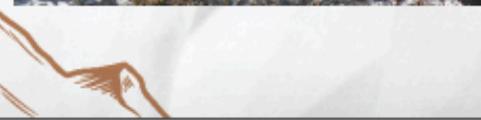
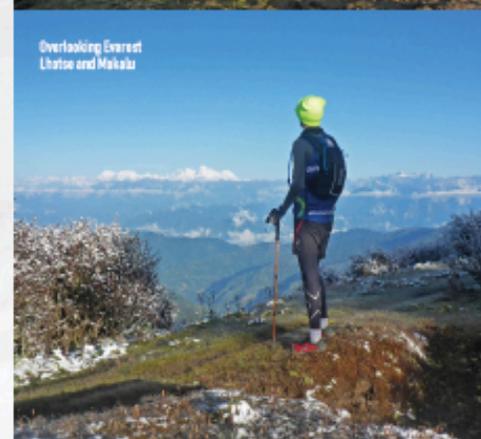
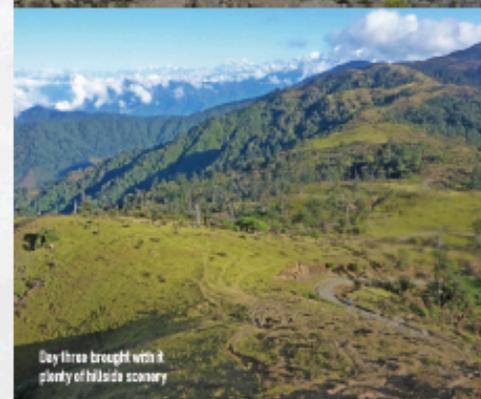
• Accommodation during the race is in shared rooms in establishments that vary enormously; at Sandakphu it's bucket-shower basic, while Rimbik's rooms are much more comfortable.

• 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 along stunning and occasionally terrifying roads. It's all part of the experience.

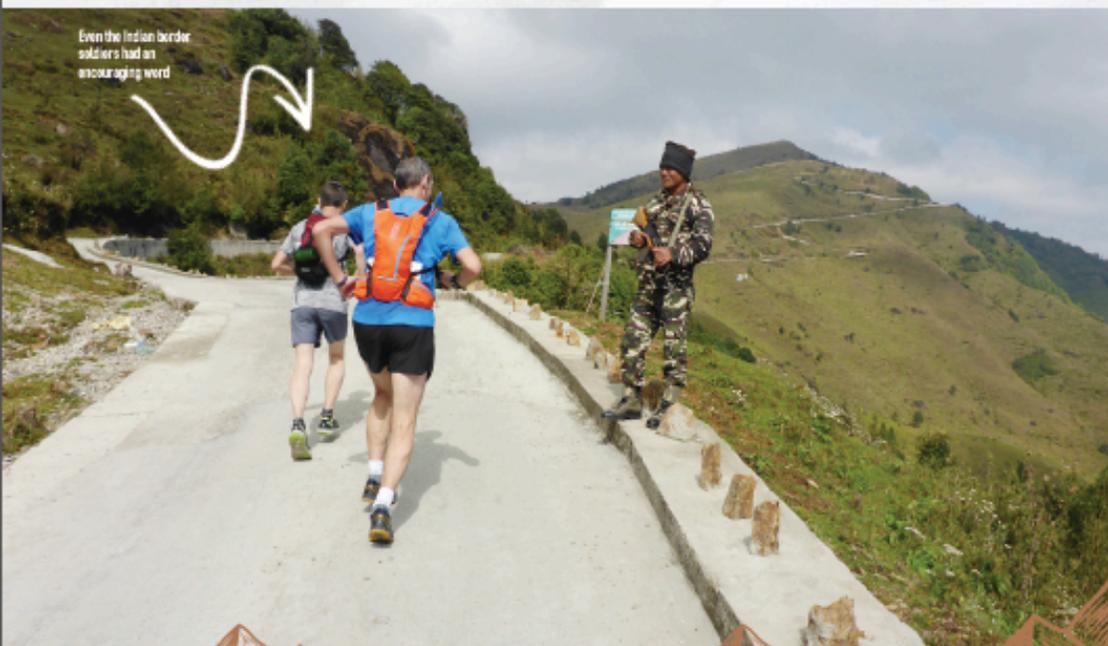
• All food is provided – beer and water is bought by the bottle, but everything else is included in the overall price.

• A doctor accompanies the HRT on every stage and each runner is checked at the beginning and the end.

• For more about the Himalaya Run Trek, visit www.himalayan.com.



Even the Indian border soldiers had an encouraging word



Young gun strolls on the descent from Melle



Day three brought with it plenty of hillside scenery

Overlooking Everest, Lhotse and Makalu

Pat overlooks Karchenjunge during the marathon day



I'm not expecting Nike to come knocking, but as a virgin mountain marathoner, I'm happy enough

passing through the front yards of beautiful flower-covered cottages clinging to the precipitous hillside. It's lunchtime, and immaculately dressed school kids stream out of class and onto the paths. Some goggle shyly at the sight of sweaty westerners wobbling through their midst, while others confidently return my breathless "namaste!" with wide-eyed enthusiasm.

Two local lads flash past at lightening speed, showing me exactly 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 four kilometres to the finish, and my watch says I've been running for just over six and a half hours. Having started with no greater ambition than completion and survival, suddenly I'm consumed with desire to set a sub-seven hour time. Fortunately, the final stretch is along a relatively 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 1100m and descended 2800m during the day.

And the next day brings my first ever competitive half marathon. An easy day - followed by a 27.3km stage to complete the century and close the loop at Maneytharyang, bringing home a hundred miles of Himalayan memories. 🏆



Paul celebrates his win with a strong Bangal Beer

TOP GEAR

- Lightweight, folding or telescopic trekking poles (preferably properly functioning ones) are highly recommended
- Take a pair of trail running shoes and a pair of road running shoes. You'll need the latter on the last two days.
- Gloves, hat and a lightweight waterproof jacket are essential during the running, while warm down jackets are needed at night in the mountains.

