

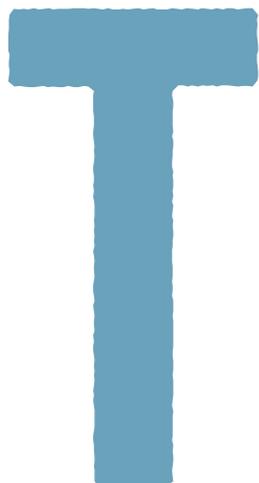


HIMALAYAN REDUX

A FAIR FEW EDITIONS BACK, WE RAN A FAIRLY PROVOCATIVE (AND ENTERTAINING) PIECE BY MARTIN COX ON THE HIMLAYAN 100, A STAGE RACE IN INDIA THAT HAS BEEN RUN SINCE BEFORE TRAIL RUNNING WAS IN FASHION. OUR QUESTION WAS, WOULD THE EVENT – COULD THE EVENT – EVER COME INTO FASHION, TOO? WE SENT OUR INTREPID CO-EDITOR TEGYN ANGEL BACK TO THE FRONT TO FIND OUT.

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THE HIMALAYAN RUN AND TREK (HRT100), 'HIMALAYAN 100 MILE STAGE RACE' (THE TWO SEEM TO BE USED INTERCHANGEABLY) IS, AS FAR AS I CAN TELL, AN ANOMALY.

Everything I know about trail running, ultra marathon and adventure tourism says it shouldn't exist. At 25 years old, it's one of the longest-running multi-day trail events in the world. With aid stations every few kilometers, it seems one of the best-supported trail runs in the world. Offering the same support to the fastest runners and slowest walkers alike, with no regard for cutoffs and a very apparent discouragement of competition among the participants, it's also one of the most inclusive events going.

Maxing out and spending two nights sleeping at 3600m, and with an average elevation of 2800m, it's likely one of the highest multi-day events in the world. And yet all this occurs in spite of very low participation and an environment that offers no shortage of logistical nightmares and adverse weather. And it happens all thanks to, or in spite of, the sheer will power of the Pandey Show.

The Race Director, Mr C. S. Pandey, is the creator and biggest star of the event; a personification of the entrepreneurial prayer of "build it and they will come". Pandey brings the same intensity to everything he does and it has a tendency to polarize people. Whether you end

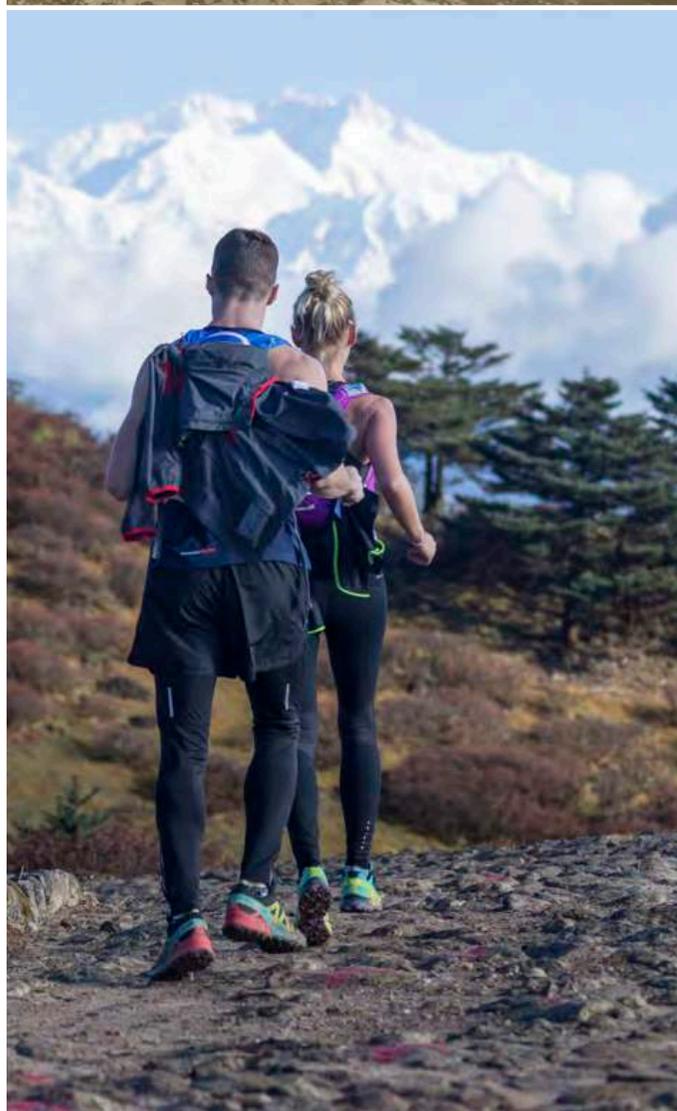
up loving or hating the man, the HRT100 would be an entirely different event without him and for that we owe him thanks. The personalities of this event are as much a part of the event as the incredible views and cobblestones.

I'd been recommended to attend HRT100 as a journalist and participant and had submitted my expression of interest. That was the easy part. The hours spent justifying my invitation and hosting, filling out forms and writing "official letters" paid full credit to the stereotypes of Indian Bureaucracy. Having done my research, I was fairly nervous about the whole affair. In the lead up I'd read about the HRT100 in this mag and others, spoken to other journalists and competitors who'd attended and spent months liaising with the indefatigable Mr Pandey. Everything seemed to indicate that it would surely be a love/hate experience in the truest sense of the term.

I invited my girlfriend to come along and run the event with me and I spent the months leading up to the event fretting for two. I'd specifically kept her in the dark about the confusing reputation of the race lest she freak and bail out. We didn't train specifically, focusing on other things, and just relied on our residual fitness to get us through. A mere week after my biggest race of the year we flew to India with flimsy preconceptions, awkward, perhaps unfounded opinions and far more social baggage than our backpacks could carry.

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« After a day of sightseeing in Darjeeling and some cultural acclimatisation we woke early and took a bus to the quaint hamlet of Maneybhanjang. At the relatively low elevation of 2000 metres we were ‘serenaded’ by a group of bagpipers and spurred across the start line by a crowd of villagers and local school children dressed in their Sunday Best. Climbing a massive 2500m over 33km, day one follows a rocky and rutted road that straddles the Indian-Nepalese border. We spent the first few hours climbing some seriously steep paved sections, the heat of the day making us sweat and keeping the clouds at bay. As the afternoon went on the temperature dropped and the clouds rolled in, obscuring the views of Kanchenjunga – at 8586 metres, the third highest mountain in the world – before a light rain gave way to snow.

A little before sunrise on day two we clambered up to the small shrine behind Sandakphu dodging patches of ice. The sun warmed our backs as it crept up the mammoth peaks like an incoming tide. We all huddled together in the icy dawn, four of the world’s five highest peaks before us; Mounts Everest, Lhotse, Makalu, and Kanchenjunga the Sleeping Buddha. Day two has you run along a long, high ridgeline toward the Buddha and, when clear, affords spectacular views. It’s an out and back course which gives you plenty of opportunities to greet your fellow runners, something Mr Pandey strongly encourages, but at 3600 metres above sea level you’re generally too short of breath to give anyone much love.

The Mt Everest Challenge Marathon (ECM) is an event within an event. For participants in the HRT100, it’s the third and longest day on course. However, the event does occasionally see entrants who make the mammoth jeep trip into Sandakphu only to run 42km before getting driven out again. Our edition saw the arrival of one runner, a Japanese man who operates a restaurant in Boulder, Colorado. He’d flown to India specifically to run this marathon... the ONLY entrant in the marathon event. At least he was guaranteed a podium.

Starting along the same ‘out’ course as day two, the ECM course then drops 1600m over about 12km. Combined with the elevation loss, this reasonably technical stretch of single track often sees the trail and mountain runners pull away from their road brethren and the field stretches out quite a lot. After dropping out of the Singalila National Park the course follows a paved road into Rimbik, the end of day three and the hub for the next few days.

After three days of altitude and ‘cobble boulders’, the 20km section of pavement on day three comes as quite a relief. Treated to incredible views up the verdant valley, you pound your way down narrow mountain roads, switch-backing all the way to the raging river below before climbing out again. The elevation profile looks like a reverse bell curve, flattening out at the bottom before getting progressively steeper at either extremity. After running full steam ahead away from Rimbik you stop at a non-descript point on the road, board a bus and drive back over the course.

Day five is like day four in reverse, starting with bus trip from Rimbik back to the finish point of day four. The first half of the day climbs higher and higher out of the valley before rolling over the day’s high point and bombing down to Maneybhanjang to close up the 150km loop. Every day offers something new, whether it be traditional mountain culture or views. The running is very good, if not incredible, and offers an equal mix of trail, gravel road and bitumen. There is enough challenge to attract the elites and enough aid to support relative novices. But all these things aren’t particularly hard to come by, especially given the explosion of trail running globally.

We love to talk about the familial feeling of trail running and a good event should embody this. As a runner you come out of a race glowing if you feel like everyone out there, from your peers, to the volunteers, to the Race Director, has your back and holds your best interests at heart. In our neck of the woods, the Northburn 100 reputation for this. Lisa Tamati, an incredibly experienced ultra runner, and Terry Davis, the Northburn RD, create a race environment that makes you feel all warm and fuzzy. Northburn is like a big Christmas gathering of cousins and uncles and in-laws where everyone rocks up, eats plenty of steamed Kumara and hot soup then heads home to sleep (or drink) it off.

In contrast, the HRT100 is like a campervan road trip where three generations spend a week living out of each others pockets, smelling each

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other's neglected bodies, learning everyone's triggers and dealing with Dad's mood swings, obscure sense of humour and occasionally awkward patriarchal good intentions.

We'd be warned the race briefing was a wonder of the modern world: a Taj Mahal built as a monument to the Flogging of Dead Horses. After flying from Melbourne to Delhi via China due to airline cancellations, we sprinted for out connecting to flight to Bagdogra and the spent three hours bouncing into the Indian Himalaya on a rattling bus; the last thing we needed was another three hours of self-congratulation and well-practiced clichés. Paying no heed to the warnings we'd received, the race briefing defied our anxious expectations and proved legitimately valuable.

As an event that targets the full spectrum of experience, the briefing gave a LOT of information and most of it was relevant. Sure, Mr Pandey has a tendency to give a little too much context and his verbose storytelling makes Lord of the Rings seem like a Haiku, but the time he spent explaining changes they'd made in the risk management protocols, for example, highlights a genuine desire to improve and render the event as safe as possible.

Pandey also spends a good portion of the briefing introducing and thanking all the key staff; from the drivers and cooks all the way through to the local officials and his incredibly humble, very capable daughter and second in charge, Marsi. Without any prompts he was able to refer to every staff member, honoured guest and participant, by name, age, origin, resume, profession and, if pushed, village of birth.

Mr Pandey has been known to refer to himself as both your father and mother, doting caregiver one minute and disciplinarian the next. If you do something stupid you will inevitably get a Pandey Whipping and will generally deserve it.

One of his stories tells of a runner who defied his instructions to stay on the Indian side of the border. Given that one side of the road is India and the other Nepal, this can be a fairly easy to rule to break. This particular woman ended up taking tea with a Nepali family and was found hours later by a panicked HRT staff. As a result, runners now have to physically sign in (pencil and clipboard) every time they pass an aid station or checkpoint (approximately every 3-4 km).

I'm the first to admit that India is a country of contradictions. The airport security is hyper vigilant one moment and asleep the next; the people you meet would give you the clothes off your back in the morning and then charge you \$15 for a cup of tea in the afternoon. Given this, it's easy to develop preconceptions about an event like this.

The HRT100 flies under most radars and that, combined with preconceived ideas about India makes people hesitant. Read a few melodramatic articles, listen to a few fireside stories, believe a few tall tales and all of a sudden you've been turned off on the soft grounds of rumour and innuendo.

I mean, how can an event that has been running for so long be so unknown?

The HRT100 crew love to highlight the fact that on more than one occasion by those few who have ventured forth, theirs has been labeled the most scenic running race in the world. As an introduction to multi-day racing or running in the Himalayas, you'd be hard pressed to find a better outing. The balance of spectacular scenery and an incredibly warm and welcoming community produce something that in every conceivable way is an adventure – and a Race Director – you'll not soon forget. **RUN**

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