

# MODERN athlete

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SA's Biggest Running Publication

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Image: Tobias Ginsberg  
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**December Race Calendar – Many Festive Season Choices!**

# Himalayan Running Holiday



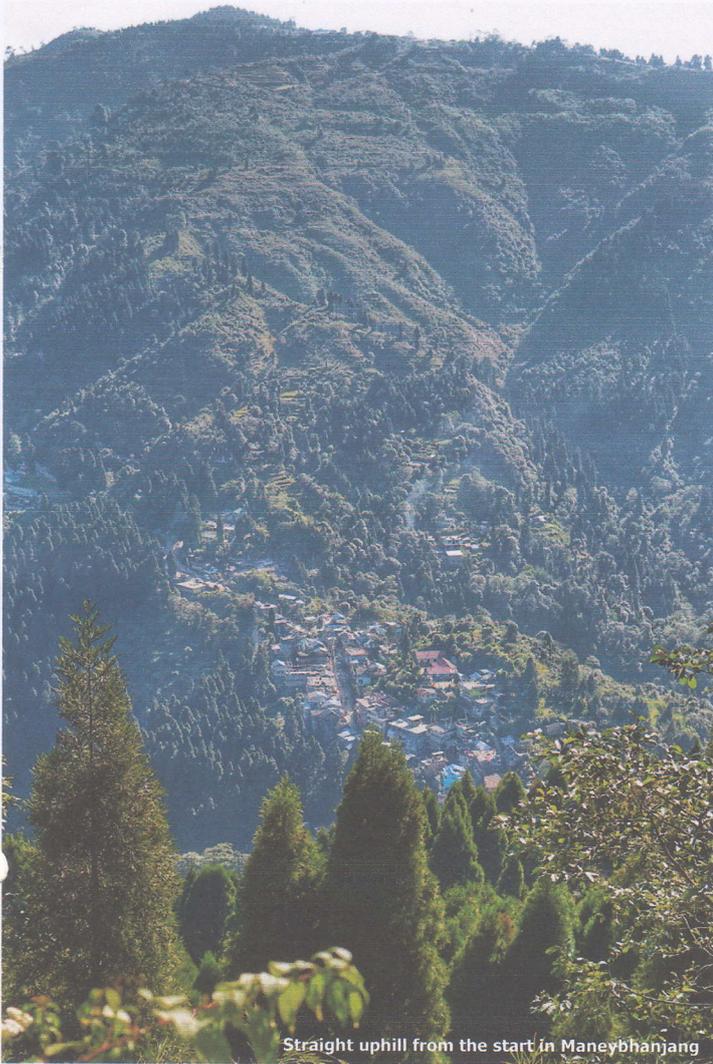
It isn't every day that you receive an invite to travel to India to run the Himalayan 100 Mile Stage Race, and when it has long been your dream to run in the big mountains, you grab the opportunity! – **BY ALFRED THORPE**



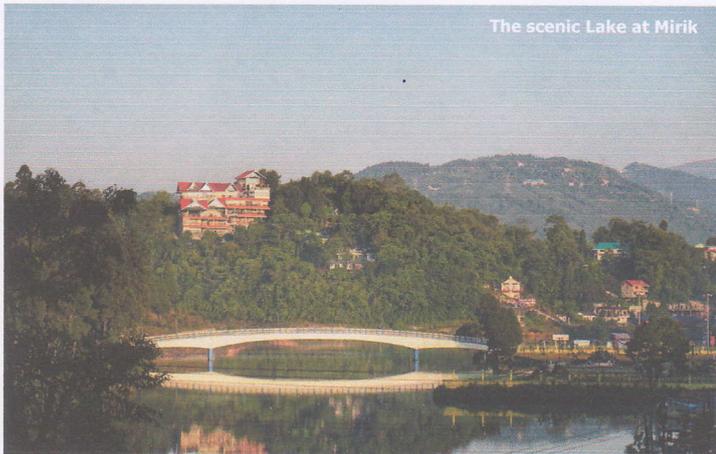


There are many advertisements for island holidays where the photos include white sandy beaches, clear blue oceans and reed umbrellas, where you can lie in the sun all day and sip on cocktails. I can do that type of holiday for a day or two, but then I want to go do something. Fortunately, activity holidays are slowly becoming more popular, but it is hard to find something that fits in with exactly what you want to do. I have tried organising my own running holiday a couple of times now, so I've faced the steep inclines of Reunion as well as the manicured trails of the Swiss alps, but one challenge remains... Travelling light!

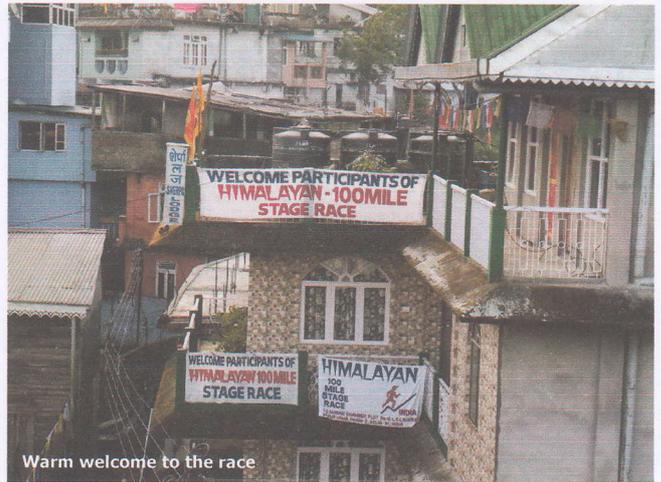
When you head into the mountains, staying dry and warm will always be an important part of your planning. You never know what weather the mountains might throw at you. The biggest constraint with this is the amount of weight you have to carry on your back, which in the end leads to it being more of a hike than a run. If you are on a tight budget, add food to this equation, and will definitely make it a slow, weighty experience.



Straight uphill from the start in Maneybhanjang



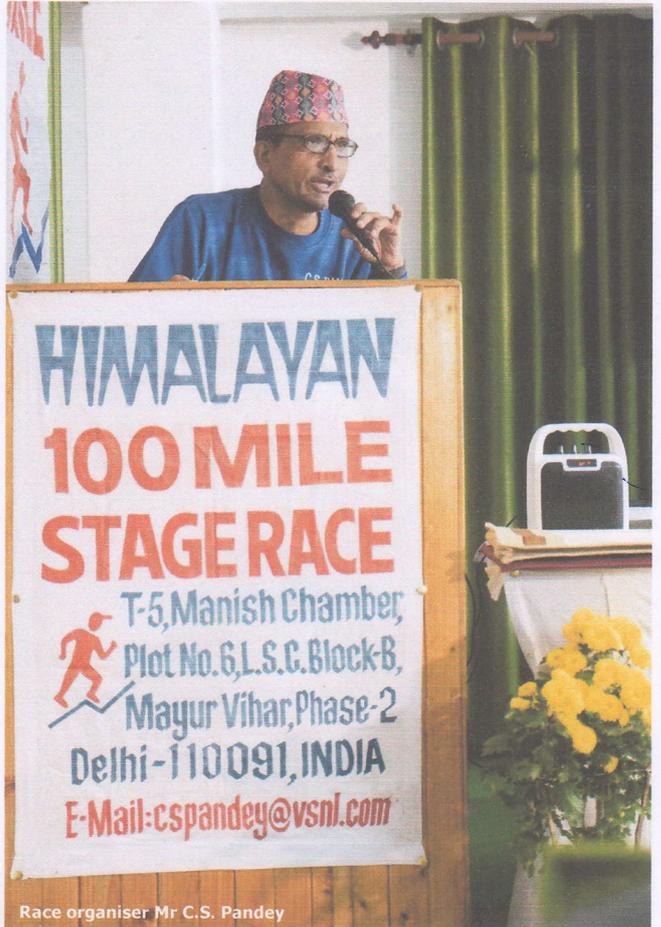
The scenic Lake at Mirik



Warm welcome to the race

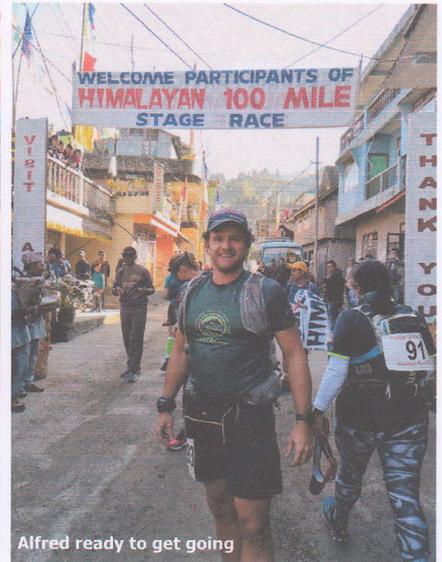
This brings me to the Himalayan 100 Mile Stage Race. Yes, this is a race, run over five days in the Himalayan foothills of a little-known part of India between Nepal and Bhutan, but to me it was the ideal running holiday, with excellent logistical support. From the time you arrive in India to the morning you toe the start line in the small town of Maneybhanjang, all is taken care of, and you don't have to worry about a thing.

Two days in the town of Mirik gives you enough time to prepare for the run and do some sightseeing. Should you wish to squeeze in as much as you can while in the country, a day-trip to Darjeeling can easily be arranged – and if you are concerned with the altitude, this day-trip will introduce your lungs to an altitude of 2000m above sea level, similar to the start of the race. I chose to enjoy my time in Mirik, opting out of another longish bus trip before a five-day run, and rather stretching my legs with a 5km run around the lake. Mirik also has a lovely market area and there are a few gems to be found in this little town.



Race organiser Mr C.S. Pandey

The field lines up to start



Alfred ready to get going

## The Race Begins

Day one starts with a bang... as in, with some serious climbing! (It isn't advised to make jokes like that – bang noises, that is – during this race, as the Indian Army is visible all along the route. That said, both the Indian and Nepalese Army troops were extremely friendly, and big supporters of the race.) The route of day one hugs the Nepalese border all the way up to Sandakphu, where you spend two days. This first section gets your heart rate up right from the start, with 1000m of climbing in the first 10km! What surprised me initially is that there are water points every 5km, and at every second water point you will find bananas, potatoes and other snacks as well. As a trail runner, this came as a surprise to me, but it is a great way to introduce roadies to trail.

With a total elevation of 2900m in about 38km, this is probably the most difficult day. The toughest part of this is that you finish the day at 3500m above sea level, and it feels like your lungs only manage to take in the same amount of oxygen as a guy that has been smoking Texan Plain for the last 30 years. On the positive side, when you arrive at Sandakphu, your race bag is waiting for you.

Nearly 3000m of climbing on day 1



Well-stocked water tables



This is what really made this whole running experience great, and completely different to a fast-packing/self-organised run. The joy of a 50-litre bag at the end of each day does add to one's daily creature comforts. No heavy load to run with every day, no reason to do any washing during the run, and there is enough space if you want to pack a flask of whiskey (I wish I had) or some sweet treats. This bag really is a luxury, in comparison with self-supported running races or holidays.

The accommodation at Sandakphu is basic and might come as a shock to some. Just remember that you are up in the mountains and everything has to be shuttled to the top. The staff were incredible and their service was top quality, which was more than enough for me. As the temperature drops, however, so does your heart rate, and a hot water bucket shower could not get any better. During another stage race in the Kalahari, we used 250ml of water just to rinse ourselves, so this was complete luxury in comparison!

And I have to mention the food, as well. I was excited to experience Indian food when in Delhi, but the food all around India was fantastic, and up in the mountains it exceeded all my expectations. They cater really well for Westerners – not too spicy – and I might actually have gained weight during the run, as I was always going for another portion of delicious Indian cuisine.

Great food at Sandakphu





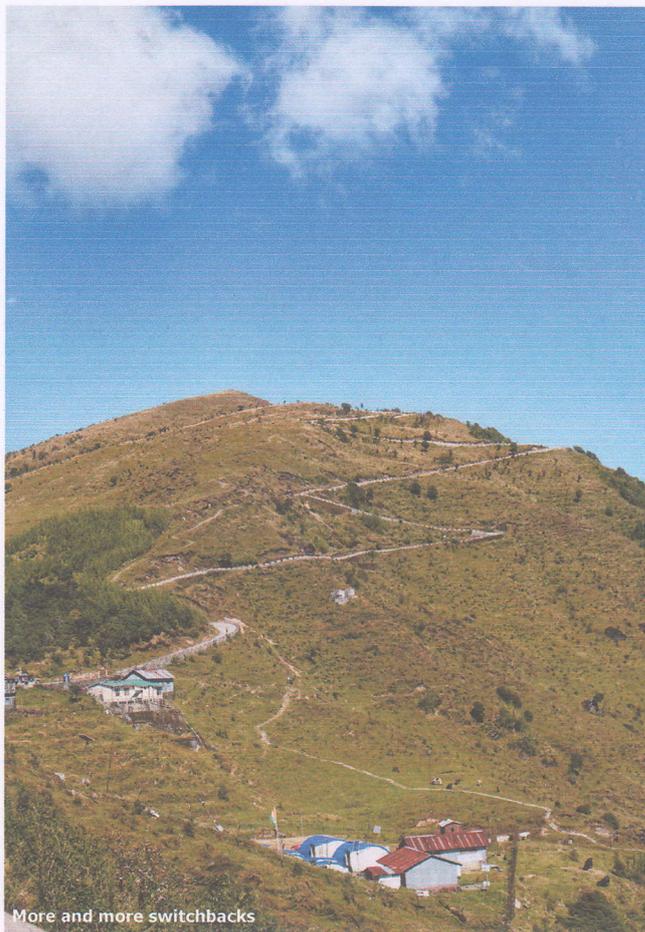
## The Sleeping Buddha

Day two started early for some of us, at 4am, waiting for the sun to kiss the snow-capped peaks of nearby Kanchenjunga, the third-highest peak in the world, and the Everest range on the horizon. I was actually a bit early, because I had not adjusted my watch after a time-zone change. Our first time change was in Mirik, where it changed with 30 minutes, and we had to adjust our watches with another 15 minutes in Sandakphu. So I strolled out into the darkness and found an outcrop where I waited patiently. In the silence, I had to pinch myself, sitting there in the glorious Himalaya. The words of one of the organisers will stay with me: "You are here for the mountains."

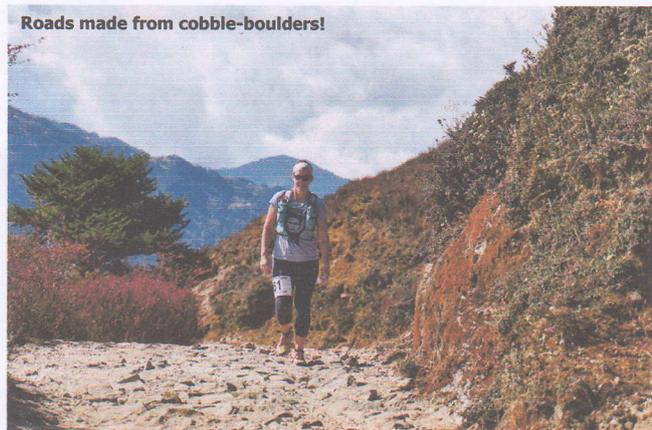
I am so glad that I got up instead of snuggling in a warm bed for another hour, because the visibility was great as the lady started revealing herself. The black outlines started turning white as the sun neared the horizon, and soon the peaks were painted with a soft orange brush. This was a soul-cleansing experience that I'm glad I did on my own, on a little outcrop without anybody else there. Later I joined others at the more popular viewpoint, enjoying a cup of coffee and socialising with fellow runners and other visitors from all over the world.

After such a tranquil start to the day, it was time to focus on running. It was an out-and-back run of 27km. To me this day should not be rushed. You need to take in the scenery, especially if visibility is good, as this is never guaranteed and clouds roll in almost every afternoon. This section of the route varies between 3200m and 3500m above sea level, and you get out of breath just sipping water. However clichéd it may sound, the views of the Sleeping Buddha (another name for Kanchenjunga) are truly breathtaking on the outward section of this stage.

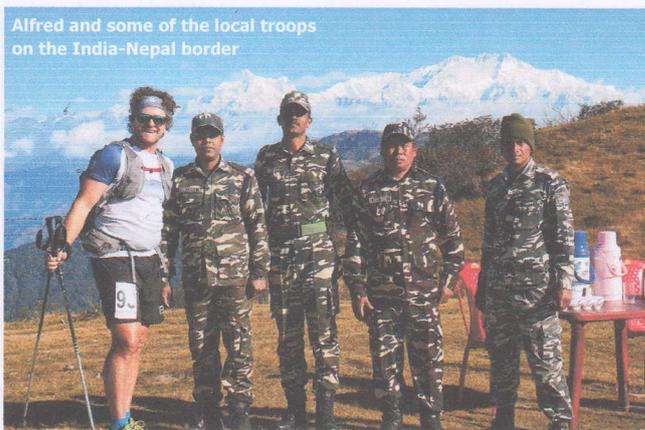
The quicker runners fly past you on their way back to Sandakphu, but it is nice to see fellow runners en route, not just at the finish line. Every runner has his own strength and pace, but you do get to know some of your fellow runners moving at a similar pace, depending on how much breath you have left to do any talking.



More and more switchbacks



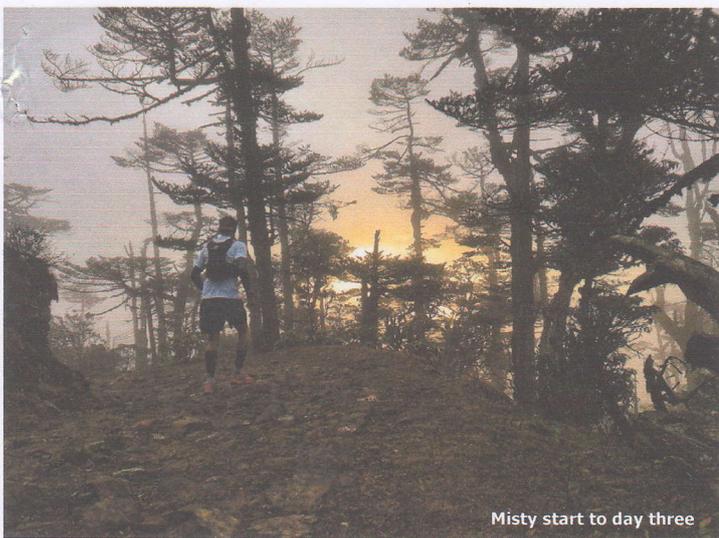
Roads made from cobble-boulders!



Alfred and some of the local troops on the India-Nepal border



The rising sun lights up Kanchenjunga

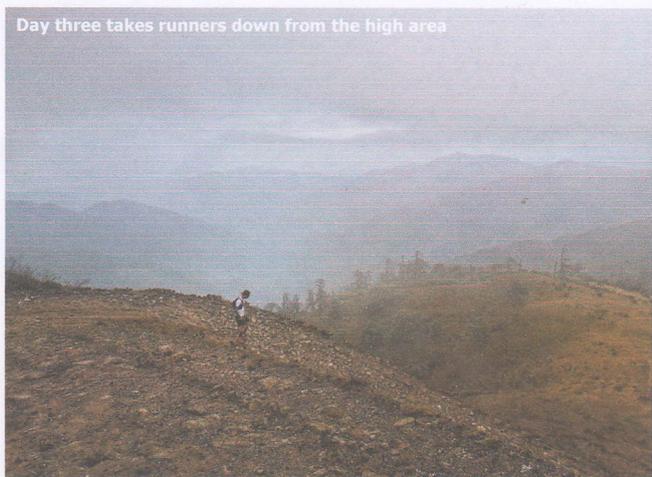


Misty start to day three

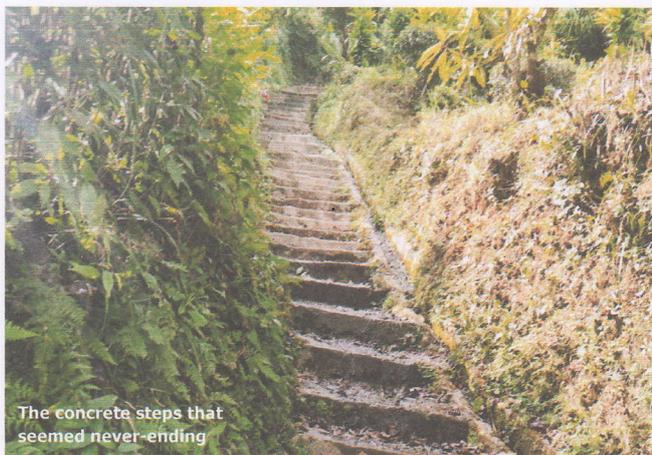
## Marathon Challenge

Day three is the marathon length stage, and is a race within a race, as it doubles up as the Mount Everest Challenge Marathon. The name is derived from the fact that you can normally see Everest on the horizon for part of the first two thirds of the race. To me, the whole race revolved around this day. Not only would it be the longest day of the race, but also the last day in the higher mountains. Months of training and planning came down to this day, and soon it would all be over.

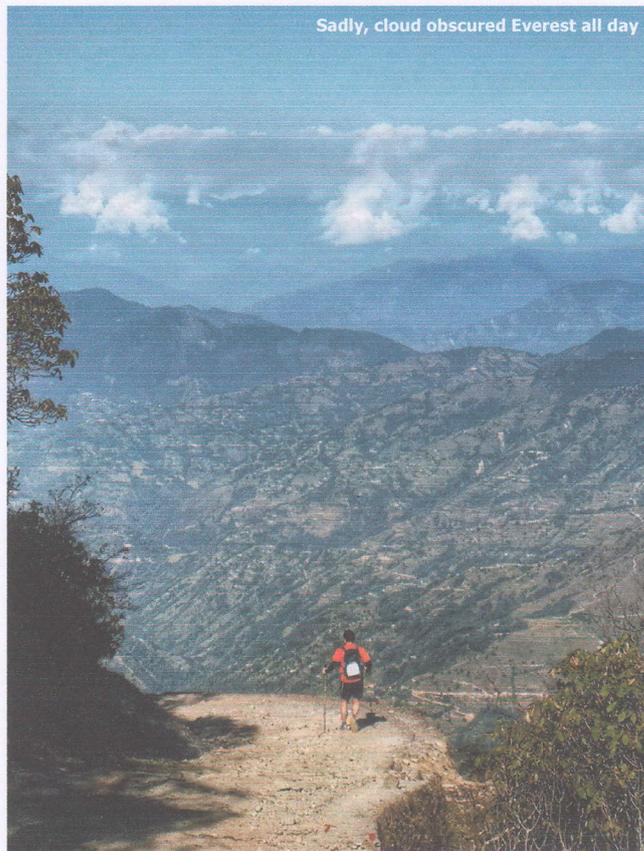
The first stretch of the day is on the same route as the previous day, but you do it in the dark, so it is a completely different experience. In fact, it does not actually feel like running the same route. Also, the mist did not lift for the first couple of hours and I patted myself on the back for getting up early the previous morning to enjoy the sunrise, as we did not see Kanchenjunga all day. The second third of the day is another out-and-back section along a ridge where you look down into Nepal. Unfortunately, Everest was also not visible all day due to cloud cover.



Day three takes runners down from the high area



The concrete steps that seemed never-ending



Sadly, cloud obscured Everest all day

Eventually we had to turn our backs to the big mountains and start heading down. The toughest section of the day was a 1500m descent over 10km. Included in this section was some technical single-track, which was a nice break from all the jeep track up to this point. The last part of the descent was made up of concrete steps – if you had asked me then, I would have said it felt like a thousand steps, but it was probably way less. Running further, the signs of civilisation became more obvious, and after crossing the Ramman River, the reality of traffic, humans and shops hits you as you enter the town of Rimbick. In one day the terrain changed completely, from high altitude to subtropical forests. We went from basic mountain cabins to cold beer and wifi, from oxygen deprivation to wishing you were back in the silence.



Simple course markings keep the runners on the right path



# Switchbacks and the Road Home

The next two days of running was much easier mentally, as both the marathon distance and high altitude were now behind us. After being disconnected from the world for three days, it was almost sad to be back to where your phone would notify you what's going on in the world. On day four, countless switchbacks await you and the sound of the Ramman River grows louder as you drop down towards it. The day ends on the side of the road after about 19km of running down into a valley and part way up the other side, followed by a bus trip back to Rimbick.

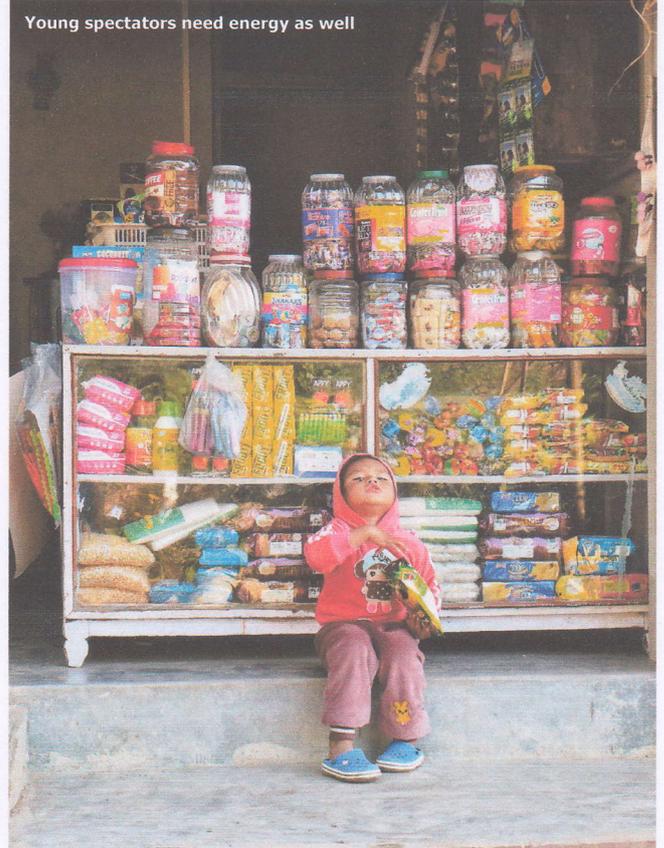
That evening a bonfire was lit and the locals entertained us with all their traditional dancing and musical talents. As athletes, we were all asked to perform with our fellow countrymen and women, but an impromptu group performance is probably not my strongest point. Let's just leave it at that...

On the final running day you get bussed to where the race finished the previous day, and the last opportunity to gain altitude lies in the first 8km of the day. A beautiful village awaits you at the top and then the reality of it almost being over kicks in. A big part of the day's 28km run is on tarred road, and in the near future this entire section will be completely tarred, as we ran past different sections where they were upgrading the road. This means the race will be more accessible and 'runnable' in future, which will come as great news to the 'roadies.'

The most welcome and friendly welcoming party awaits you at the finish line back in at Maneybhanjang, with school kids cheering and singing as each athlete arrives at the finish line. Phoning home with that overwhelming feeling of achievement got me really emotional, but it was quickly 'fixed' with a cold beer.



One simply must carry a camera in this race!



Young spectators need energy as well

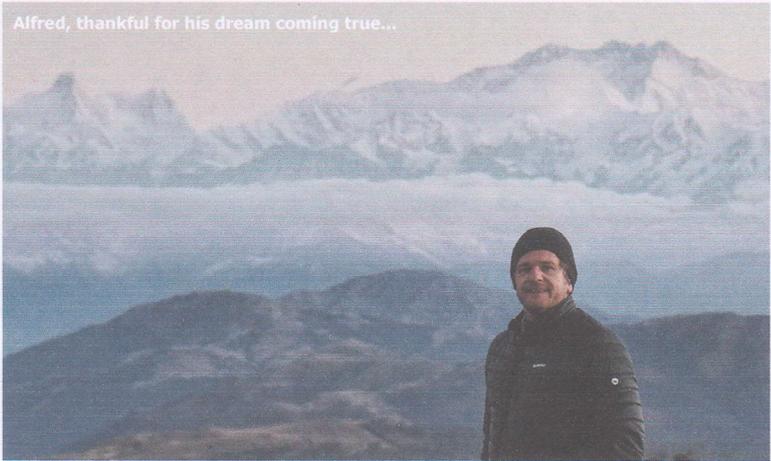


High-fives for every finisher from local kids

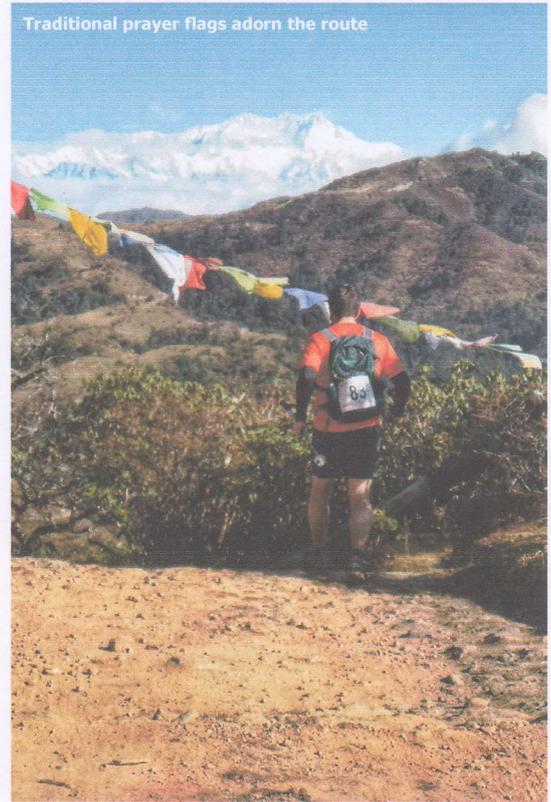


Tarred roads for the last two days

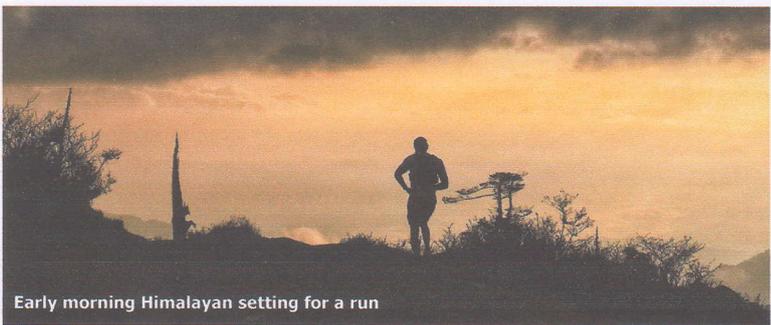
Images: Alfred Thorpe



Alfred, thankful for his dream coming true...



Traditional prayer flags adorn the route



Early morning Himalayan setting for a run

## Dream Come True

I started dreaming about running in the Himalaya after watching Ryan Sandes and Ryno Griessel's video of their Grand Himalayan Trail FKT, but never in my life did I think I would actually be able to go. Not everyone has that kind of sponsorship money behind them\*. Of course, this race is nowhere near the level of running that they did, but I'm also nowhere near the type of athlete they are. My dream was just to do some running in the Himalaya. I did not know where or when that would happen, but this opportunity was the perfect fit for my dream to come true.

This race makes it possible for people to get access to the mountains and enjoy running at altitude without breaking the bank. It is not an extreme trail run, but it is a nice introduction to big mountains and higher altitude. The race is perfectly designed for road runners to do a bit of trail. But with that said, it is not only a race, it is a cultural, physical and spiritual experience. So my advice is this, don't wait for later. Do it. In the words of Ryan Sandes, "Life is short. Live every day to the fullest."

\* Thank you to Mr C.S. Pandey, organiser of the Himalayan 100 Miler, and Modern Athlete magazine, for making it possible for me to achieve this dream. 



The Himalayan 100 Miler is doable even by roadies

The Himalayan 100 Mile Stage Race has been on the race calendar for 25 years, and the next edition of the event will take place from 1 November to 5 November 2020, with the third stage featuring the Mount Everest Challenge Marathon on 3 November. To find out more about this event, go to [www.himalayan.com](http://www.himalayan.com), or send a mail to [info@himalayan.com](mailto:info@himalayan.com).