

## Racing At The Top Of The World: The Himalayan Stage Race

Get inspired by contributor Jeff Horowitz's incredible experience running some of the highest peaks in the world



Written by Jeff Horowitz

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It's pre-dawn, and I reluctantly pull myself out from under my toasty blankets and put on my warmest running clothes. It's cold out, which is no surprise.

I step outside, and as the sky turns pink and orange, I'm rewarded with a beautiful view of Kangchenjunga. At 28,169 feet, it's the third-highest mountain in the world. On the horizon, I can see Mt. Everest. It appears smaller, an optical illusion caused by distance.

I'm standing at 12,000 feet, and as I breathe in the cool, thin air, I worry about the task ahead of me. I'm in the middle of running the grueling 5-day, 100-mile Himalayan Stage Race and Mt. Everest Challenge.



I've survived the first two days, but today is the longest stage. It's a full marathon on a rocky trail that climbs up along a lonesome ridge and then crashes down, down, down into a tropical paradise. If my legs can somehow hold up, it will be beautiful.



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This adventure is the brainchild of race director C.S. Pandey, a climbing and trek organizer challenged 30 years ago by an ultra-runner to map out a running route at the Roof Of The World.

Mr. Pandey did that and more; he founded an annual event, bringing together participants as young as 12 and as old as 80 for an epic racing adventure. His love for the Himalayas is deep and infectious, and when he talks about his mountains, you can't help but fall in love with them too. But that doesn't make running them any easier.

My own adventure began with a flight to Delhi, India, where I joined the group for our next, shorter flight to Bagdogra in West Bengal. We numbered about 20; a smaller group than the race used to attract before the pandemic, but Mr. Pandey hopes that runners will come back as the world continues to revive from that long nightmare.

This year's group includes an ultramarathon race director from Florida, a British running couple, a man who raced at the South Pole, and other runners and adventurers from all around the world.

The youngest was Trevor, a big, strapping novice runner from the American Midwest. He looked more like a tailback than a marathoner, but he was on a month-long odyssey through Asia and wanted to experience something different and challenging. He'd get that and more.

Everyone had a story, but they'd all come here to test themselves against this beautiful beast of a race.

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We boarded a bus for a two-hour ride past the tea estates of Darjeeling and the families of monkeys lounging alongside the roadway. Then we headed up treacherous winding roads to Mirik, home to the race headquarters.

The next morning, we were bused to the nearby town of Maneybhanjang, at 6,600 feet, where the race would begin. Local townspeople placed good-luck scarves around our necks and cheered us on. The start was called, and we made our way up the main road out of town.

And then we began to climb. And climb. *And climb.*

The first day's stage was 24 miles, almost all of it straight uphill, which reduced all but the strongest of us to a walk. Trevor, the newbie, came in first, much to our surprise. He had been asking all of us for advice before the race and had clearly made good use of it all.

But that didn't explain the whole story. "Young legs beat experience every time," someone said, and we all smiled.

We finished Day 1 at a camp in Sandakphu National Park, the only place on Earth where four out of five of the world's highest peaks can be seen simultaneously.

The camp consisted of simple buildings with simple beds; there would be no great creature comforts on this trip. I would fill the long miles with visions of taking the world's longest hot shower when this was all over. But that would be later.

Now, domesticated yaks wandered around our huts as we ate dinner and got ready for Day 2's labors: a 20-mile out-and-back trail run at 12,000 feet.



I'm an old hand at distance racing, and I know that when there's a job to do, you just have to get it done. But here, I found myself stopping and gazing around, awed by the majesty of my surroundings.

There's no time limit in the race, and Mr. Pandey and his crew will ensure everyone has support on the route even if they come in past sunset. Even so, I thought shutting off my competitive gene would be challenging, but it was not.

In the Himalayas, even as you race your heart out, you're missing the point if you don't stop and marvel at your surroundings.

Day 3 of the race was the Mt. Everest Marathon Challenge, a full marathon within the stage race. It starts at Sandakphu and eventually descends to the town of Rimbik. After witnessing that gorgeous mountain sunrise, I tried to ignore the howling coming from my tired legs and instead watched the barren landscapes give way to wildflowers and lush vegetation.

By this point, the group had bonded, sharing complaints about our fatigue, our sense of wonder at the beauty of our surroundings, and the friendliness of the local people. Despite the apparent difficulty of living in such a challenging environment, the locals seemed happy and greeted us warmly.

The final two days took us off the trails and onto roads, which was a relief to many of us. We found some bounce in our legs as we filled our lungs with air and began to really run again.



Day 4 was a half-marathon, followed that evening with dinner and a performance of traditional songs and dances by the race crew. The mountains were behind us, and although our labors were not over, a sense of nostalgia was already creeping in. We had survived the hardest part of the race, and while we longed for the finish line, none of us really wanted it to end.

Our last stage – Day 5 – was a 17-mile race to the finish line.

Whatever reserves I had discovered on day four were still powering me onward. I spent some time running with Greg, an air runner from Florida who distracted me with stories of his long runs across the U.S. and South America.

Then, there were only six downhill miles to the finish line, and I gave it all I had, racing as if I were in a local 10K. I streaked across the finish line to the cheers of local schoolchildren lining the course.

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There, too, was Trevor, who had won the entire race. While he might have been new to ultrarunning, he already knew what good sportsmanship was because he stayed at the finish line to cheer on all the other runners as they came across the tape.

Still to come was a celebratory dinner and awards ceremony, but as I sipped water at the finish line, waiting with Trevor and others for the last few runners to come in, I reflected on what I had just experienced and the friendships I had made.

I would call it a once-in-a-lifetime adventure, except that, with any luck and a new pair of trail shoes, I'll return once again to this crazy, difficult, beautiful race at the Roof Of The World.

For more information about the Himalayan Stage Race, see <https://himalayan.com>.

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**Jeff Horowitz**

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