

Events

Trail running Nepal

By Michael Maddess

New Year highs

It's pitch black. Frigid mountain air bites my arms and cheeks. My legs are heavy having hiked and run more than 60km already over the last 72hrs. Ahead, the local army boys are setting a blistering pace out of Pokhara. Having decided against carrying a light as recommended, I can hear them laugh every time one of them hits a hole in the road.

What more magical way to see in New Year could there be than running in the shadow of Nepal's mountain giants in the fifth Annapurna 100 ultra? I'd elected to just do the 50km distance after the exertions of the last few days, but some of those ahead of me are in the 70km or full 100km races.

It's not just lights that those happy-go-lucky locals have ditched though. Most are wearing only running singlets and skimpy running shorts made for summer conditions. Don't they know it just snowed up on the higher parts on the course? No water bottle or hydration system either, no money, not even food.

Meanwhile the 30-odd foreigners here look like they're ready for a serious hike with tights, long-sleeved shirts, rain jackets, toques, backpacks, hydrations systems and pockets bulging with gels, bars, biscuits and salt tablets.

In part the international athletes were there to help show just how good the Nepalese runners are – a fact lost on even the local media it seems. At the briefing, Race Director Roger Henke told us to expect that the locals wouldn't carry much and that they'd take whatever shortcuts they could find – allowed

so long as they went through the official checkpoints. Foreigners and Nepalese would therefore compete in their own categories, with cash prizes only for locals to encourage them in their running careers.

With a 5:30am start, those early kilometres up to Hemja were run in the black of night, the stars slowly fading as the sun climbed into the sky. The light lined the peaks first with silver, then orange, the sight burned into my retinas as surely one of the greatest dawns of a New Year I have experienced.

A steady pull up a dirt road to the 23km checkpoint at Dhampus (1,650m) was accompanied by U2 – snatches of 'New Years Day' looping in my head.

I watched the locals grabbing a glass of water from a random house, drinking from a tap, yelling ahead at villagers for a small offering of food. Still they stayed ahead of me. It was amazing and I was jealous of their home advantage: their stomachs able to handle anything they picked up on the side of the trail.

Switchback stairs brought us to a high of 2,100m near Pitam Deurali before a long, wet, technical descent to Landruk and beyond down to around 1,300m. It was great racing close to the locals who were on a different planet when it came to double- and triple-stepping loose, sharp-edged rocky stairs.

After a mammoth staircase back to the Ghandruk checkpoint at 1,940m, it was decision time. With the preceding days weighing on my legs, I did myself a favour and headed down to the 50km finish in the valley at Biretanti.



PHOTOS: LAXMAN (MTNS); CLARIE PRICE X2

Meanwhile the 70km and 100km runners were discovering snow on the high trail between Tadapani (2,630m) and Ban Thanti (3,180m). It was here that a hiker felt sorry for runner Bikash Shahi and gave him the vest that she was wearing. He gladly accepted it and continued to Ghorepani (2,860m), then down the mule track to Biretanti, to proudly add the 70km title to his donated prize.

Still more amazing was seeing 22-year-old Sudip Kulung Rai fly through the 70km finish ahead of Shahi. Sporting a yellow scarf that villagers at Uleri gave him and looking incredibly fresh, he bounded on, headed for the 100km finish which he reached in 12:05 to claim the Rs50,000 (US\$690) top prize.

Originally a porter from the Khumbu region, Rai also won the 2010 Everest marathon and finished second in last year's Kinabalu Climbathon. Here he was followed home by only four others: three other locals and UK's Lizzy Hawker, former women's world trail running champion.

Not all locals were as committed: the lure of the prize money seduced a few into accepting lifts on motorbikes and other vehicles, with organisers disqualifying those they could identify. It just went to show how the sport needs more attention in Nepal, and hopefully a little financial support.

I only hope my being there helped a little. For anyone thinking of joining, I can say that the first 30 magical kilometres alone are worth the entry fee. As Bono sings: "On New Year's Day . . . I will be with you again . . ."



AR Thailand

Local champ sets sights on region's best

Saman Gunan, the best adventure racer Thailand has ever produced, clinched another title at the Amarin Outdoor Unlimited Dash 2011 held in Pong Din Dam near Kao Kiew, Chonburi on February 6.

Saman completed the 9km crosscountry run, 200m lake swim and 18km mountain bike course in 1:35:17, beating a record field of 160 racers, many of them using the race as training for longer races.

For Saman it was perfect preparation for the biggest prize of all: "I have won every one of the races organised by Active Management Asia in recent years – Chiang Mai Challenge, Bangkok Challenge, Koh Samui Trophy – but not yet the River Kwai Trophy."

"Last year's trophy was won by Asia Pacific Adventure's Ryan Blair and Piers Touzel and I intend to claim back this trophy and bring it back to Thailand!," said Saman.

Results

- 1) Saman Gunan 1:35:17
- 2) Pravitt Vongvinit 1:35:53
- 3) Tongchai Biadnok 1:36:55

