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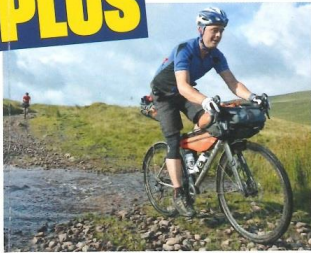


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UPS AND DOWNS

MADEIRA IS INFAMOUS FOR THE
115KM MADEIRA ISLAND ULTRA-TRAIL.
WE SENT DAMIAN HALL ALONG TO
HURT HIMSELF ON IT

PHOTOS JOAO M. FARIA





COMPARED TO THE COTSWOLDS, WHERE I LIVE AND MOSTLY TRAIN, IT WAS REALLY TECHNICAL. LOOSE ROCKS, BIG SLIPPERY ROOTS, STEEP BITS, MUD, HURTY BITS



ULTRA RUNNING

It is all Ester Alves's fault. I met the Portuguese ultra-running star at The Coastal Challenge in Costa Rica back in 2016. During post-race refuelling several of us debated the most beautiful and challenging trail-ultra races around the world. Ester had done far more than me. So which, I was eager to know, was her favourite? "Madeira," she said, without hesitation. "The Madeira Island Ultra-Trail (MIUT). It's the most beautiful – and one of the most brutal too."

Not only had I not heard of MIUT, the Ultra-Trail World-Tour race over 115km with a whopping 7,200m of ascent, but I wasn't even sure where Madeira was. Nevertheless it went to the top of my wishlist. There's something about the combination of a sadistic challenge in scenic surroundings I find irresistible. If you're gonna hurt, it may as well be somewhere spectacular, right? If, however, you'd have reminded me of that three-quarters of the way through MIUT, I would have tried to punch you in the face. I'd have missed, though, fallen over, and probably never got up again.

The Portuguese autonomous island of Madeira is, I've since learnt, famous for wine, cake and Cristiano Ronaldo. It's volcanic, but surprisingly lush and made mostly of mountains, which soar up to 1,760m. Put simply, Madeira is best understood as a load of green volcanic mountains squashed up together.

The MIUT route is frankly wicked. It crosses the island from west to east and could theoretically do so by going up the mountains, mostly staying up there, and coming down again at the other side. But no. That would be too easy. Instead it starts with a climb that looks piddly on the course profile but is about the size (approx 450m) of the biggest I do in training in the Brecon Beacons. Followed by two much, much, bigger (1,000m plus) climbs – and almost immediate descents. Then lots of jagged bits. Then another chunk of jagged bits. Then a really, really big climb. Then a slightly smaller one. Then some downhill. Then, if your legs still work, the finish in Machico.

Race prep

Before the race, I was lucky to have a run on the course with Daniel Ferreira from Go Trail Madeira (gotrailmadeira.com), a local guide who knows both the Madeira trails and MIUT like the back of his hand. As a taster, he cannily chose the most technical part I would do at nighttime. Compared to the Cotswolds, where I live and mostly train, it was REALLY technical. Loose rocks, big slippery roots, steep bits, mud, steps, singletrack, hurty bits. The kind of place where a slip could end your race. Gulp.

MIUT starts at midnight in Porto Moniz on Madeira's north-west corner and it's live on local TV. AC/DC's Highway To Hell sends us off into the night. We're soon climbing steeply on road. I'm breathing out of every orifice, soaked with sweat in the humid night air. The first climb is a minor bump on the lumberjack-saw course profile, yet it goes on for a lifetime.



ULTRA RUNNING

It's a relief to reach the top. But almost instantly we're at a valley bottom again. Then climbing again. It's relentless. And unfair! You're basically going either up or down. If you're running on the flat at MIUT you're probably off course (though for the record, course markings are excellent).

Huge crowds gridlock the roads, turning out in the small hours to see the headtorches zigzagging down the mountainside. As the field gets more strung out things quieten down. All I can hear is my loud puffing and panting as I climb forever in the cool, dark woods. The terrain is really mixed. Sometimes wide trails, but more often technical singletrack. It starts to rain heavily.

All the rocks are wet and I see other runners slip, making me feel glad of my inov-8 Rocclites. Gradually I see fewer and fewer runners. My backside is grumbling though. Not like that. It's sore, from all the climbing, and it's whinging about it. Sometime between 3-4am I start to feel sleepy.

The sky gradually lightens, to reveal, er, thick mist. But as I descend I see the fairy lights of Curral das Freiras way, way below. So far away. It's a fun technical, switchbacking descent to the race's major aid station where we can access our drop bags. I faff in the aid station and feel confused by all the food choices. Next is

another long climb. Of course. It's not painful as such, just slow and heartbreaking. I emerge from the trees but the climbing continues up into the fog on rocky terrain, often steep paths, sometimes with handrails. I haven't seen anyone for a while, so it feels good to reach a mountain-top aid-station hut full of friendly helpful faces.

Back to it

I zigzag down into the mist again and all around me is orange rock faces and bottomless drop-offs. I pass a runner who complains of tummy trouble. Or maybe foot trouble. I'm not sure. I've got Kate Bush blasting in my ears.

The sun finally burns through the mist, to reveal huge rock formations all around me, and huge amounts of air and space. It's a dragon-populated fantasy land of castles made of rock, as the sun battles with magical swirling mists. Three times the route takes me into tunnels, requiring a torch. My mind floods with euphoria. All the hard yakka feels worth it to reach this legendary place. But then everything starts to feel tough.

The scenery gets greener and misty again as I reach the 80km aid station. Who should I see inside by my old friend Ester Alves! It's so good to see a familiar face. "You must eat here," she says. "There's a long climb till the

next aid station." I knock back olives and cheese, cake and cola. "You are still talking okay," she said, "the runners ahead are not." But I feel tired. And hunted. I've been moving slower than a lethargic snail.

The guy ahead of me has a 15 minute gap. Probably too much, with 30km to go, to catch him. But there must be runners close behind. It's a slow uphill slog in woods. I see no one. I forget I'm racing. When I reach the aid station on about 95km, I know it's all downhill from here, which perks me up.

But it's warm, which makes me feel tired and sleepy. When a runner catches me I feel distraught. I try to stick with him, doing sub-8-min/miles, but he shakes me off. Another runner catches me. And another. Everything's going wrong. I'm throwing it all away. I hate myself. I hate the world. I hate this race. I probably just need a bit more cake. Another runner passes me. He's going so fast. I should be feeling alive as the path clings to the edge of epic seacliffs with white breakers crashing a long way below. But I feel despair. If they're moving so well others will surely catch me and we've got at least an hour to go.

Though I spy Machico, the path taunts me by staying high, seemingly intent on going round every hill before taking me down to the finish by the beach. I tumble morosely into town, thinking I've thrown everything away. But as I see the finish line and locals generously applaud, a sense of blissfulness floods my body is one of the best feelings there is. Plus I've placed 6th.

A little later Ester wanders past. "This is all your fault!" I had meanly wanted to shout at her back at that aid station. But now all I want to do is thank her. My legs don't share that sentiment. But for now, I'm very grateful. What a race. What a place.

Damian stayed at Santa Cruz Village Hotel (santacruzvillagehotel.com/en-gb), a friendly hotel with a pool and a good restaurant; for more on April's Madeira Island Ultra-Trail, visit miutmadeira.com/en/the-event/miut-course; for more on Madeira, visit madeiraallyear.com/en.

THE SUN BURNS THROUGH THE MIST TO REVEAL HUGE ROCK FORMATIONS AROUND ME... IT'S A DRAGON-POPULATED FANTASY LAND OF CASTLES MADE OF ROCK.

