



This picture: the author on the well-maintained PR1 section of his 17km run, legs and lungs on fire. Below: ducking the huge ferns overhanging the trail

FROM DESK TILL DAWN

madeira trail challenge

Across 40-plus kilometres and 2,500 metres of ascent and descent, **Fergus Scholes** gears up to conquer the tiny Atlantic adventurers' paradise

Madeira? I'll be honest; I pictured old-timers on sunbeds sipping fortified wine. But once I set aside my prejudices to go about some research, I had a change of mind. It turns out that this remote archipelago – 500km from the west African coast – is now a fully fledged, year-round mecca for adventure lovers. Where to begin: 1,000km of trails for hiking and running, 300km of mountain-biking paths on spectacularly diverse terrain, top-flight canyoning, world-class surf, paragliding, dolphin swimming... I could go on. Shortly thereafter, my weekend adventure was planned: a trail run along some of the island's most dramatic peaks, mountain biking from one of its highest summits all the way to sea level and, as a finale, an ocean swim with dolphins.

FRIDAY 18:00

From nowhere, the island appears in my window. Applause erupts as we touch down in the renowned crosswinds of



Funchal airport. Just minutes later I'm being driven along a meandering motorway towards the iconic Belmond Reid's Palace, my home for the weekend.

FRIDAY 20:00

"I'll take the crab, lobster bisque linguine and tuna, please" – not to mention two puddings for afters. I'm dining under the stars at Villa Cipriani, one of the hotel's three top-class restaurants.

FRIDAY 22:10

A shot of tingling nerves registers in my belly as thoughts turn to tomorrow's adventures, so I gulp down my fresh mint tea and head back to my room. Once all my gear is arrayed on the floor, ready for the morning, it's lights out.

SATURDAY 05:30

I'm fumbling for the handset, still half dreaming. "Mr Scholes? Your wake-up call." Almost immediately after, a knock at the door and my pre-ordered room service

arrives. I wolf down a huge bowl of porridge, some fruit and coffee; suddenly I'm human again. I bolt down to the foyer where I'm greeted warmly by Daniel Ferreira, my running guide. Not a second to lose – within minutes we're in his car navigating hairpin turns towards the start point for the morning's run.

SATURDAY 07:25

We reach Pico do Arieiro – at 1,818m, the island's third highest peak – just in time to catch a mesmerising sunrise. Adding to the spectacle, a carpet of dense clouds hangs just below as far as the eye can see, roiling like a dry-ice waterfall in slow motion. It's completely still, around 13 degrees and sunny; perfect running conditions. Daniel unfolds his map and points out my route: 17km, with plus-minus 2,500m of descent and ascent, along the island's central east-to-west mountainous backbone. Walking over to the start point, he indicates a knife-edge ridge: "That's where we're headed." My guts constrict; it looks sketchy as hell. "Yeah, sweet," I casually reply. After a couple of deep breaths, we're off.

SATURDAY 08:15

Around 3.5km in, and nerves are long gone. I'm now riding a wave of sheer euphoria – this is running heaven. We're currently on the PR1, a well-maintained path with handrails and stairs in the most



precarious sections, criss-crossing repeatedly from the sunny south-facing side of the mountain to the shaded north side. The views dazzle at every turn.

SATURDAY 09:00

I'm getting hot – sweat trickles down my face and my heart rate climbs to 160 beats per minute; well in the “red zone”. Daniel points to the peak above: “Pico Ruivo,” he says in a bit of a gasp; he too is feeling it. “Madeira's highest point” – drawing breath again – “1,862m... above... sea level.” My legs and lungs are on fire, but I love it. I dig in mentally for the climb.

SATURDAY 10:07

Eight hundred metres up, 11.6km in. After another gruelling ascent, the burn in my legs is almost nausea-inducing. Luckily, it's mostly downhill from here.

SATURDAY 11:15

The remote path joins the road, marking the end of our run – 17km and three-and-a-half hours later. I'm at once elated and slightly crestfallen that the first part of my day is done. Daniel and I high-five and chat briefly, post-gaming the course we've just completed. Then I bid him farewell.

SATURDAY 12:30

Felipe Caldeira, Madeira's top mountain-biking guide, is at the wheel, as I kick off my shoes for half an hour, stretch out and refuel on a sumptuous lunch hamper laid on by the Belmond. Felipe fills me in about the scene here and how his global clientele travel to ride the hundreds of kilometres of top-class biking trails – probably, he says, the most diverse in the world. The words “not the best place for beginners” float back. I begin to wonder if I'm out of my depth: while I do plenty of road biking back home, mountain trails are a relatively new thing for me.

SATURDAY 13:15

Fifteen minutes in, I take a tumble on a steep right-hand bend. “You ok?” yells Felipe. I pick myself up, brush off the muck, and give a thumbs up and a grin.

SATURDAY 14:00

Whoa! This is exhilaration on a level I've not experienced in a long time. The concentration required to tackle the



Clockwise from left:
the author pushes his bike up an insurmountably steep section of the biking trail. Sighting a pod of bottlenose dolphins. The author with

Pedro Mendes Gomes (left), owner of the dolphin and whale-watching outfit Rota dos Cetáceos. Bottom:
Belmond Reid's Palace hotel in Funchal

boulders, steep switchbacks, trees and other obstacles is intense. But little by little I'm finding my confidence and getting a feel for the bike.

SATURDAY 15:05

A brief pause at 26km. I stretch out my fingers to relieve the mild cramp that's developed from gripping the handles so tightly. We've descended some 1,300m already, with only 100m of uphill, and the amazing trails just keep on coming. Almost every 30 minutes we seem to enter a new microclimate: at the beginning it was dry, compacted gravel with cacti, but now, as we enter the cloudy northern slopes, it's like a Peruvian rainforest – humid air, muddy ground, huge ferns overhanging the trail (which we duck), lush grasses brushing against our ankles.

SATURDAY 16:15

For an hour we've been plying a remote trail on the north coast, set barely back



from cliff edges that stand hundreds of metres above the Atlantic. We've been carrying the bikes up some really steep sections; my entire body is beginning to really feel the full day of exertion.

SATURDAY 16:45

After 35km, culminating in some exhilarating freewheeling down the roads of Caniçal, we make our final turn onto the seafront promenade. I take a deep breath of fresh sea air and reflect on the four hours of hard moving. “How was that?” shouts Felipe. The sense of accomplishment is huge – I was well outside my comfort zone for large sections of the ride and I am absolutely buzzing. We strip down to our shorts and launch ourselves into the sea. This is living.

SATURDAY 19:00

Back at Reid's Palace, I'm coming round to the sound of waves and a glass of ice-cold lime water after the most glorious full-body massage. My thoughts quickly turn to food – I'm ravenous. Without delay I head to Villa Cipriani for dinner.

SUNDAY 09:00

I claim a seat on the sun terrace next to the salt-water swimming pool and then attack the buffet: Bircher muesli, pastries and a fresh waffle with maple syrup, beautifully crispy bacon and scrambled eggs – all totally justified, and just the job.

SUNDAY 10:30

I navigate the steps to Reid's lower sundeck and private jetty, where waiting for me is Pedro Mendes Gomes, the deeply tanned owner of Madeira's premier dolphin and whale-watching outfit. As we speed out into the open ocean on his impressive 30ft rib, he tells me there are a staggering 28 species of dolphins and whales regularly seen here, making a day at sea one of the island's top attractions. Today we're hoping to see – and swim with – dolphins, and possibly spot an 18m-long sperm whale someone clocked earlier. In 12 years of operating

here, only one in 13,000 trips bears out no sightings at all – pretty amazing.

SUNDAY 11:30

I hear it – the sharp exhalation of air from a blowhole – before I see the distinctive swept-back dorsal fin of a bottlenose dolphin. Unfortunately, it's not permitted to swim with this species – they're less amenable to our presence in the water than others – so we must stay aboard. My swim hopes have been thwarted, but we trail them for some time; it's enchanting to watch them.

SUNDAY 16:00

After an afternoon snooze in the sun, I pack my bags and head to the main balcony where I indulge in Reid's Palace's world-famous afternoon tea – it does not disappoint. Then it's hotel checkout, airport check-in and I'm London bound.

SUNDAY 00:00

I creep into bed, and dream of cliff-edge sunsets and dolphins. ♦



FAST FACTS

Fergus Scholes travelled as a guest of **Belmond Reid's Palace** (belmond.com; from €555). The running experience with Go Trail Madeira costs €240; the biking experience with Freeride Madeira costs €540, and dolphin swimming with Rota dos Cetáceos costs €65. **British Airways** (ba.com) flies daily from London Gatwick to Funchal, from £90 return.