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# MEN'S Running

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RACEBOOK / MADEIRA ISLAND ULTRA-TRAIL

# TAKING IT ON

THE 115K MADEIRA ISLAND ULTRA-TRAIL  
FEATURES A QUAD-NUMBING 7,200M OF ASCENT  
AND TREACHEROUSLY TECHNICAL TERRAIN.  
**DAMIAN HALL** JOINS THE ELITE BAND OF  
ULTRARUNNERS TAKING IT ON

PHOTOS: JOÃO M. FARIA



## RACEBOOK / MADEIRA ISLAND ULTRA-TRAIL

M

adeira is famous for its cake, wine, and shy, self-effacing footballer Cristiano Ronaldo. But in trail-ultra circles, the Portuguese island off the coast of Morocco is famous – or rather, infamous – for something else: the Madeira Island Ultra-Trail (MIUT).

Starting at midnight, the 115K Ultra-Trail World Tour race takes runners from one side of the mountainous island, which is volcanic but surprisingly lush, and soars 1,800m above the clouds to the other. Sounds straightforward, perhaps, but the route unnecessarily seeks out the steepest, longest climbs, bagging a whopping 7,200m of ascent overall.

With three Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB) races on my running CV, I knew I could finish the race. But I wasn't there to complete: rather, to compete. The harder you run an ultra, the more likely you are not to finish: whether that's down to blowing up, the increased chance of tummy issues (the biggest cause of DNFs), simply tripping up, or a thousand other ways you can hurt yourself. My over-optimism frequently gets me into trouble, but the fact I was ranked 23rd didn't deter me from dreams of a top-10 finish. For me, that would feel like a win.

### READY TO ROCK

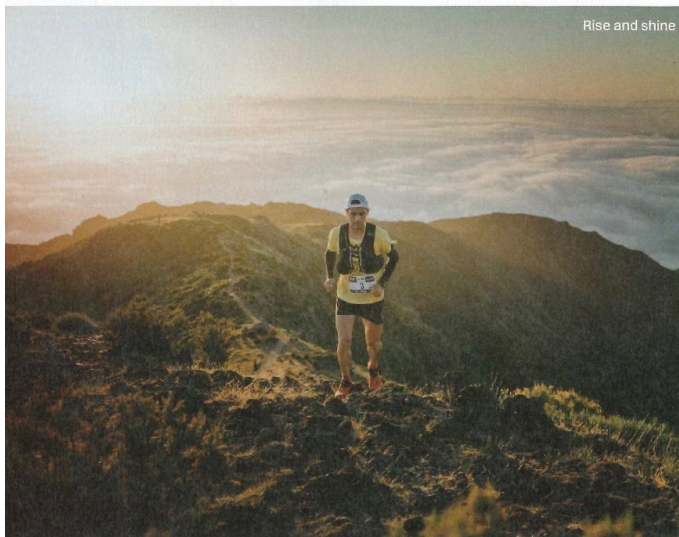
AC/DC's 'Highway To Hell' sends us off into the night at Porto Moniz on Madeira's north-west corner. We are soon climbing steeply on road. I'm breathing out of every orifice, soaked with sweat in the humid, heady night air. The first climb is merely a blip on the horrifying, lumberjack-saw course profile, yet it's the same size as the biggest climbs in the Brecon Beacons during my training.

It's a relief to reach the top, but almost instantly we're at a valley bottom again. Then climbing again. I'd been lucky to recce this bit of the course with Daniel Ferreira, from Go Trail Madeira ([gotrailmadeira.com](http://gotrailmadeira.com)), a local runner and guide who knows both the Madeira trails and MIUT like the back of his hand.

The mountain-top aid station is a clash of senses, going from silence and darkness to noise and lights, with yet more great local support. We tumble down again, on singletrack. Wooden steps, rocky steps, mud, roots, trail, no trail, loose rocks, slippery, slidey, simultaneously fun and not so fun. It's certainly keeping



Damian enjoying his big night out



Rise and shine

me awake. One trip here could be race over.

There are many lights in the valley below, car horns tooting. Locals have come out en masse (it's 2am!), blocking roads, to watch our torchlights zigzag down the mountain. It's humbling and motivating to receive their support.

Next is the third and biggest climb so far (1,200m). Poles out, I power-hike on switchbacks through woods, forever. And ever. And then a bit more. It takes an hour but feels far longer. My backside is really annoyed. The mountain-top aid stations, though, are always worth the effort, with super-friendly, helpful staff overseeing fruit, cheese, olives, tomatoes, ginger cake and a myriad more sugary temptations.

The descent starts on a broader firetrail but I'm soon back in woods, on rocks and roots, passed waterfalls. I start to feel sleepy, my body just realising I'm trying to sneak



## Key kit

|   |   |  |   |  |
|---|---|--|---|--|
|    |    |   |   |   |
| <p><b>INOV8 ROCLITE 290</b><br/>I saw several runners with overly cushioned shoes struggle on technical descents, but my trusty Roclites, designed for rocky and mixed terrain, were superb.<br/><a href="http://inov-8.com">INOV-8.COM</a></p> | <p><b>INOV8 ULTRAHELL</b><br/>Weighing just 108g, but with fully taped seams and transparent fabric you can see a race number through, it's indispensable, reliable kit.<br/><a href="http://inov-8.com">INOV-8.COM</a></p> | <p><b>PETZL NAO+</b><br/>Race rules ask for a flashing red light on your back, and the bright (750 lumens) NAO+ is amazing for technical terrain. An app lets you programme exactly how bright/how many hours you want.<br/><a href="http://petzl.com">PETZL.COM</a></p> | <p><b>BLACK DIAMOND DISTANCE CARBON Z TREKKING POLES</b><br/>Strong but light (from 280g pair) and quick to fold away, plus they give me no hand issues. I use these in all my European mountain races.<br/><a href="http://wiggles.co.uk">WIGGLE.CO.UK</a></p> | <p><b>33SHAKE GELS</b><br/>All-natural, mostly organic gels that are healthy and taste good, too. These make tummy issues less likely. I filled mine with mango juice. Yum!<br/><a href="http://33shake.com">33SHAKE.COM</a></p> |

**RACEBOOK** / MADEIRA ISLAND ULTRA-TRAIL



Feet in the clouds

© MARIO PEREIRA

a sleepless night past it. A Clif Shot mocha gel wakes me. Hips and legs are starting to whinge and groan.

I reach a road as it starts to rain. It must be 5:30am or so. After the next aid station I climb steeply with two others by a huge pipe that goes on forever. This isn't even a significant climb on the course profile. All the rocks are wet now and both the others slip, making me feel glad of my inov-8 Roclikes.

**GRINIUS AND BEAR IT**

It finally starts to get light as I descend towards Curral das Freiras (CP6), initially just fairy lights way, way below. It's a fun, technical run and I'm surprised to catch Lithuanian ultra star Gediminas Grinius. I congratulate him on his recent performance at the Marathon des Sables (MdS), just weeks ago. I do mean it. But I cruelly follow it with "You must be tired, no?"

My plan was not to know my placing till Curral das Freiras, 67K in, then start racing. With Grinius, I start a long climb through eucalyptus trees, without exchanging a word. As another runner closes, I push ahead and for the next hour try to edge away from them both. I emerge from trees to wet fog, on narrow, rocky trails.

At the next aid station – a cosy hut in mountain-top mists – I finally ask my position. Sixth! Oh heck. Better than expected. I feel a surge of adrenaline and my pace increases. Better still, I spy another runner in front. It's New Zealand's Scotty Hawker, who was one place ahead of me at UTMB. He's moving slowly and complains of foot or possibly tummy issues (I've got Kate Bush blasting in my ears).

As my euphoria grows, the sun finally burns through the fog to reveal huge charismatic rock formations towering above me, like castles rejected by the *Game Of Thrones* director for being too fantastical. I expect dragons to attack any moment.

Over the next two hours I traverse narrow rocky paths

next to huge drop-offs and tunnels that need torches. I get very emotionally attached to fifth place. Too attached. I start to tire. I'm told the runner in fourth is 15 minutes ahead, but guess the runner behind may only be three to four minutes. I feel hunted. It feels like UTMB again, where I slid out of the hallowed top 10.

All food seems unappealing. But I mustn't let something as simple as my fuelling be my downfall. I force cake, cola and Jelly Babies down. Sometimes I feel desperate. Sometimes I lose concentration and forget I'm racing. It's all downhill, I'm told, from the penultimate aid station. It's such a beautiful place to run. But I'm ready to stop now.

With about an hour left, just as I settle back into a happy place, something makes me turn around and...shark! Right on my heels is 2017 Tor des Geants winner Javi Dominguez. Despite 65 miles in his legs, he zooms past me doing 7min/miles. I can't keep up. Sixth is okay. But I MUST NOT let that slide.

I'm on a cliff-side path high above huge, white waves crashing into the bottom of plunging sea cliffs. Another runner goes past me. Then another. They're so much faster than me. I'm sliding from fifth, out of the top 10. I'm dismayed. Embarrassed. Depressed. Angry. I've effed this right up.

With about five miles to go, one more runner catches me. I could cope with placing ninth, my estimated current position. But 11th would be the end of the world. So I try, desperately, to stay with him. We leapfrog each other.

A glimpse of Machico, the race finish, some way below, gives me hope as we follow an endless levada (irrigation channels, which tattoo the island). The runner gets past me just before the final downhill, but ninth place looks about safe. Blissful relief grows as I reach the promenade and jog towards the finisher arch, enjoying applause and high-fives with locals. I cross the finish, a guy thrusts a microphone my way and asks how I feel about finishing sixth?

What!? (Three of the four runners who passed me had been in a concurrent shorter race, which I'd forgotten about). Haha. "I feel amazing!" 

**BY THE NUMBERS**

**115K**  
TOTAL DISTANCE

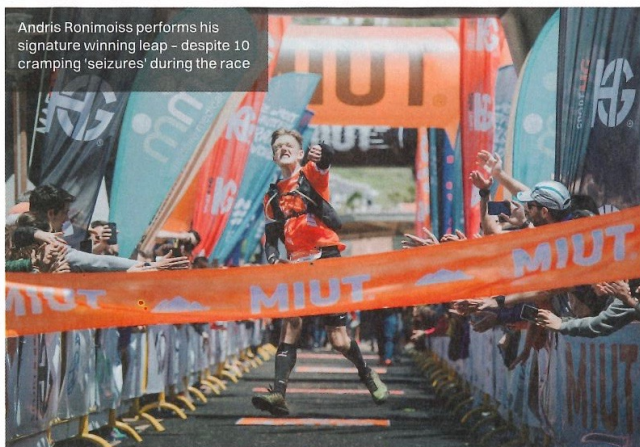
**7,200M**  
OVERALL ASCENT

**900**  
STARTERS

**5**  
UTMB POINTS FOR FINISHING

**13:57:10**  
WINNER ANDRIS RONIMOIS'S FINISHING TIME

Andris Ronimoiss performs his signature winning leap - despite 10 cramping 'seizures' during the race



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