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# Napoleonic climbs

Maxwell Roche heads to the middle of the South Atlantic to tackle the extreme heights and volcanic terrain of the Saint Helena Festival of Running

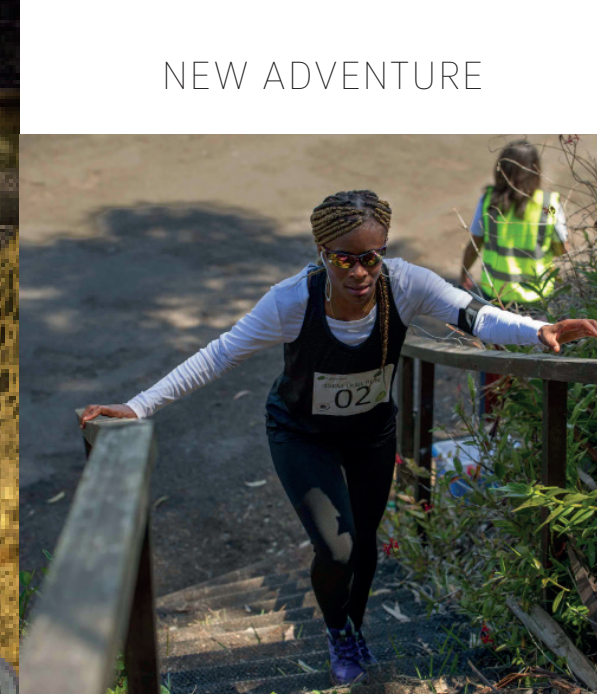
**W**hen Napoleon Bonaparte, exiled by the British government to St Helena in 1815 first clapped eyes on the island through his spyglass, he remained famously... silent. Naughty Frenchman though he may have been, I couldn't help but extend a tiny shred of sympathy for him back through the ages as I made my own approach by air 203 years later. From a distance, Saint Helena appears a forbidding land, nothing but dark volcanised, inaccessible rocks and stupendous frowning crags harangued on every side by deeply disgruntled sea; its appearance seeming all the more unpromising when viewed from the shadow of the arduous 48-hour air journey via the African mainland required to get there. Thankfully for Monsieur Bonaparte, myself and the island's 4,000 odd residents, the old English idiom 'beauty isn't only skin deep' very much applies to this most magnificent of places.

So, why did I endeavour to plonk myself 1,200 miles out in the middle of the South Atlantic on a forbidding little rock that has remained virtually untouched by humanity for the last 14 million years? Well, because every year, the islanders or 'Saints' as they are so called, host an infamous sports event, namely the 'Saint Helena Festival of Running'. Unbeknown to the world as yet, the event is one of epic proportion where, thanks to some of the most severe, precipitous terrain on the planet, the elastic limits of even the supplest quad and calf are tested. The week-long festival comprises three events; marathon/half marathon (depending on your persuasion), Jacob's Ladder Stair Climb (699 steps) and 15km trail run.

## Deep Heat and determination

It's 7am on marathon morning and I've travelled high above the lunar coastline into Saint Helena's emerald interior. All seems enchanting besides mild delirium and the overwhelming aroma of Deep Heat. Fruitful valleys, steep and sharp flax-covered cultivated summits and diversified scenery surround us as we carry out the conventional pre-race mingle and stretch in the rainy carpark of a local school. In need of a boost, I swipe a fresh guava from a nearby bush, and once the last of the refreshing pink juices

have burst forth from between my teeth, I seize my final opportunity pre-claxon to offer an open palm and exchange pleasantries with each of the 13 strong field; Tom a nurse from Oz, Joachim a conservationist from Belgium and Chris an air traffic controller from Scotland to name a few, all expats, except a couple of shy-looking locals towards the back of the pack. Toes now tickling the startline, I'm glancing left and right scrutinising the unhurried demeanours of my fellow competitors who seem to lack the resolve of serious club runners found elsewhere in the world. I put it down to the laid-back island attitude and decide to adapt accordingly, cast off my competitive self and



simply enjoy the uniqueness of the locale.

Nick Stevens, the big chief chairman of NSASH (National Sports Association Saint Helena), sinks the trigger on the starting pistol and we're away, accompanied by almost inaudible applause from the dozen or so sodden spectators. I skip slowly forward and settle into a peaceful, predetermined plod, breathing deep the sweet sea-laden subtropical air and enjoying the splash of my shoes on the rain-soaked street. Before long though, my weight rolls onto my toes and the pace slows. Running now with the road no more than a foot from my nose, I start to make proper sense of the situation; we're racing up a near-vertical incline. I'm shocked further still as Jo the Belgian streaks past me with cavernous furrows of resolve chiselled across his brow. Realising I've underestimated not only the severity of the volcanic terrain but also the seriousness of my competitors, I put on a surge and begin to chase the fluorescent jersey of Jo which flashes tantalisingly around every corner.

As we cross the infamous gully between two peaks named Frenchman's Gut (the windiest place on the island), I chuckle at the road sign and curse at the same time, barely keeping my footing on the characteristic Saint Helenian 40 degree decline. Ninety minutes later, I'm second across the line, rueing my relaxed tactics and determined to take down the crafty Belgian come the ladder climb in two days' time.

## Biblical ball-buster

Bent double, lungs aflame, I clamber on all fours prostrate, like a primate up the 699 step grade-1 listed concrete staircase called Jacob's ladder. Built in 1820, the biblically named and proportioned Jacob's ladder was used by British army soldiers wishing to transport goods to Ladder Hill Fort on the cliffs above the capital Jamestown. After the disappointment of the half marathon, I'm hell-bent on victory. Over a pint the previous evening, a local Saint lady had divulged that Graham Doig (current ladder climb world record holder at 5 minutes 16 seconds) ascended the majority of his way to world renown on all fours. Grateful for the seemingly vital insider information, I'd decided





to follow suit. Last to race, I place my hands on the cold, worn concrete and wait for the gun, before ploughing rhythmically forward. Around step 200, I'm slowing and losing sync between hands and feet, worried I'll miss a step in my fatigue and knock out my front teeth. At step 400, sustained deep breathing has stretched my sternum to splitting point and cardiac arrest seems nigh on inevitable. As I trip over the last of the 699 steps in a time of 6 minutes and 29 seconds, and lie gasping like a freshly landed chub at the entrance to the fort, Belgium Jo who has run the entire staircase in a far more comfortable upright fashion, leans over to offer me a smug consolatory hand up. "Second again, my friend," he says with a devilish wink.

## Final furious finish

Side-by-side we fly, Jo and I, below Byzantine blue sky along dusty riverbeds, through bracken-covered pathways and along lofty ridgelines on this, the final day of the festival. It's the race I'd been waiting for and a challenge of perfect purity. Simply put, an unrelenting off-road ripper of a run 15km from sea level on Saint Helena's black sand coast, all the way up to Diana's Peak, the highest point at her verdurous volcanic heart. Spurned by the disappointment of numerous second-place finishes throughout the week, I've awoken with a vengeance, determined to end my losing streak. The trail follows the course of a Victorian concrete sewer for the initial few miles through town, before we reach the forest fringe. The rest of the field and the seafront now far behind, we fall into race rhythm. Impossibly steep sections of pathway soon force hands onto knees. I can hear Jo's heart rate monitor emitting warning beeps. With 7.5km still to go I suspect he won't sustain the speed and fall away, drenching myself with water to guard against the heat. As we break the treeline and emerge onto the wooden steps that crest the island's green crater-strewn highlands, I know I'm beat. The Belgium never weakens. His emblematic florescent T-shirt can be seen billowing between passing clouds on the final steps of the highest peak.

After 56 minutes of competition, we're separated by just 35 seconds and 40 seconds shy of the record. Piling onto the summit and collapsing into one of my signature heaps, I'm comforted to see young Joachim face down in the grass suffering similarly. Despite his fatigue, he still manages to touch fingers to brow in sarcastic salute, saying, "You almost had me worried for a second there, old man." I'm five years his senior at age 33.

## Sucker for punishment?

If you're a mildly masochistic runner researching unique races in far-flung places, look no further than Saint Helena Festival of Running. Inaccessible except to hardened seadogs since its colonisation in 1658, Saint Helena is now very much open for business. 2016 saw the completion of what has been dubbed 'the world's most useless airport' and athletic types from all over the globe can now come and go as they please with relative ease thanks to a weekly flight

**“AROUND STEP 200, I’M SLOWING AND LOSING SYNC BETWEEN HANDS AND FEET, WORRIED I’LL MISS A STEP IN MY FATIGUE AND KNOCK OUT MY FRONT TEETH”**

operated by Airlink from Johannesburg. The festival delivers what are arguably some of the most charming and topographically challenging events on the planet. Other advantages to running remote races in obscure places include: an ego-boosting shot at the podium (the opportunity to come second rather than 1702nd); no apparent selfie culture to contend with since the internet is also still a rumour; endemic species around every corner; 360-degree sea views and untouched volcanic scenery resembling the moon crossed with North Wales; paradisaical mid-twenties running temperatures due to subtropical maritime climate; bittersweet world-famous pre-race coffee praised by Napoleon himself "so you know it's good"; a colourful colonial history; and migratory whale sharks willing to swim with you on your down days.

Saint Helena is one of the planet's true lonely lands, a place where runners, willing to go the distance, both on the way there and when they get there, can time travel to a bygone age of empire and, without serving a life sentence, experience a Napoleonic sense of isolation.

**To register for the 2019 festival, visit [sthelenatourism.com](http://sthelenatourism.com)**

