

BLAZING A TRAIL

RAGING FOREST FIRES, CHASTENING CLIMBS AND PERILOUS DESCENTS WERE JUST A FEW OF THE OBSTACLES COMPETITORS AT THIS YEAR'S ZOLKAN 4 DAYS RACE HAD TO OVERCOME. AS MATT MAYNARD REPORTS

Zolkan 4 Days is a four-day stage race from the Andes mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Last year I competed in the first edition near my adopted home in the capital city, Santiago. This year I left my running shoes at home and returned with my camera for a more wide-angled look at the race and the Chilean running scene. In 2017 the migratory event was scheduled to visit the temperate rainforest of Huilo Huilo, in Northern Patagonia.

Yet 10 days before the race was due to start, forest fires broke out across the country. By the second day of the crisis, the fires were no longer just a news item – the smoke had reached my home in the capital. Street lights flickered on during the day and the sun became a fading smudgy orange. Fire engines roared both day and night, and the surrounding Andes mountains disappeared behind a cloud of suspended ash.

But after more than six years of living and running mountain races in this long, thin, South American country, I have learned how Chileans embrace adversity.

Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis are to be expected. Despite the hardship being experienced across the nation, the race directors decided that the race would still go ahead. Running would be an act of defiance against the disruption, and a celebration of the natural world which elsewhere was being destroyed.

It's a 525-mile journey from central Santiago to the southern city of Valdivia. I took the comfortable night bus and spent the journey looking out the window at the ominous glows illuminating distant hillsides. Once in convoy with the Chilean and other international competitors, we travelled east towards the Andes. While the 2,670-mile long country is only 217 miles at its widest part, 60% of Chile is mountainous. Travelling across it to reach the Huilo Huilo Biological Reserve was a long and winding journey around lakes and over smoothly-tarmacked passes. Early the next morning, before the race start, I followed course markers uphill for four miles onto the flanks of volcano Mocho-Choshuenco and waited for the frontrunners to arrive. »

Clockwise from here: even the strongest runners are reduced to a walk; a Chilean sunrise over the Pacific; running through a forest glade; a rain-soaked overnight camp; a familiar hands-on-knees sight



Patagonian paradise

Patagonia is the 1000-mile stretch of land from Tierra del Fuego in the furthest south reach of the Americas to the nominal northern border where Zolkan 4 Days 2017 took place in the Chilean Lake District. Patagonia encompasses two countries. The Argentinian part is in the western rain shadow and characterised by the dry desert steppe and its beret wearing “gaucho” horsemen guarding their flocks. The Chilean side is a lush, wetter environment. Prehistoric nalca leaves still grow to the size of car bonnets, 80-year-old condors plane the sky and hungry pumas stalk the forest beneath creeping glaciers.

DAY ONE: FRONT RUNNER

Francisco Pino, “the volcano kid” – as the other local runners call him – is the first runner I spy, pattering beneath the tree canopy over the steep volcanic soil. The lead competitor is a local Chilean craftsman and poet. Much of Pino’s “training” is spent carrying large lumps of wood found on his local volcanos back to his home. Here he sculpts them into furniture.

At four miles into today’s 16-mile stage, Pino is halfway up the climb. His breathing is controlled and his arms chop back and forth with each short stride. Already the thick coihue trees are thinning out, and are replaced by the swaying stands of thinner rauli beech. Soon he will be above the treeline altogether and begin the climb over sun-baked volcanic scree. Once on the screaming descent back into the treeline and down towards Panguipulli Lake, Seb Chaigneau, the French downhill expert catches him. They cross the finish hand-in-hand.

I walk the remainder of the course and arrive with the last competitors to a watermelon feast on the sunny shoreline. Our tents are erected a few metres from the lake and physiotherapists are massaging runners beneath the shade of a weeping willow. Pino has already administered his own ice bath therapy in the lake.

After sunset I catch him in a moment of stillness at a market stall. He is seated on a bench eating a giant slice of blueberry cheesecake. His baseball cap is decorated with abandoned chimango

feathers from a Chilean bird of prey. “In the mountains,” he tells me over the pulsing clip of Chilean cumbia music, “you must seek the centre of yourself – your soul. Don’t think, just feel. And obey your instincts.”

DAY TWO: OBEY YOUR INSTINCTS

The forest fires have not reached the Huilo Huilo biological reserve, but the 13-mile route today has been changed as a precautionary measure. The second stage begins with winding switchbacks through cloud-snagging rainforest. Runners then continue under the canopy along a sun flecked ridge-line trail, made spongy from thousands of years of forest decay and regeneration.

At the highest point is a clearing through the trees with a view to yesterday’s summit. I decide to wait here for the runners. As they begin to arrive, a red-tufted woodpecker the size of a newly born child begins hammering just above me for helpless bugs.

It’s the mid-pack runners that catch my attention today. Through the undergrowth I spot a young Italian runner called Paola Castelvechio. She power-hikes the crest of the last climb, and then throws her shoulders forwards, beginning to freewheel down to the viewpoint. Maybe it’s the relief from the hard work, or maybe it’s the sight of the gently puffing volcanoes that pepper the horizon – but as she turns the corner she bellows out a whooping “Yiip!” The muffled thud of her step continues to vibrate through the forest, long after her battle cry dies away. »



Left to right: root-dodging through the forest, a jelly-legged sprint for the line

“A stage race takes away your routine. Food, sleep and mileage are likely to be outside of your comfort zone”



Forest restoration

If you are interested in helping tree replantation efforts in Chile, or wish to offset the carbon emissions of a flight to Chile for Zolkan 4 Days 2018, consider donating to the well-established charity, Reforesting Patagonia: reforestemopatagonia.cl/en

DAY THREE: MANAGED DECLINE

Last night we moved camp, returning to the regional capital of Valdivia, arriving to pre-pitched tents on the river bank. After stage two prize-giving had been completed and a three-course meal consumed, it was not until the early hours of day three when the Chilean runner Pre Diaz received medical attention to his feet. A blister bulged from his heel all the way to the arch of his foot. Diaz grimaced and sipped steadily from a local craft beer as a physiotherapist cut around the blister with a scalpel. After opening half his foot on three sides, the physio sprayed the blister with sterilising fluid, folded the skin back down and applied bandages.

The rain came throughout the remainder of the night and continued until dawn on day three. Warmer central Chile was still ablaze though, and television news reports of forest fires filtered out into the campground where competitors scoured their bags for clean, dry clothes. Diaz was soon back on the physio's table, receiving a massage while nursing a steaming coffee. An hour later he was striding revitalised to the awaiting ferry in his running gear, and soon tucking into a breakfast as

we cruised down Río Valdivia to the startline for the 11-mile stage three.

Taking care of your body and managing your decline in performance is vital to making it through the four days. A stage race takes away your routine. Food, sleep and mileage are likely to be outside of your comfort zone. But, as the man with the pulverised feet came skidding towards me through the coastal pine forest later that morning, it was clear that taking care of the basics is what keeps you moving forwards.

DAY FOUR: POSITIVE MENTALITY

Waves trundled onto the remote shore where the finish line gantry had been raised. Cows wandered down from pastureland to graze on sea kelp and a curious tractor-tyre size jellyfish washed around in the shallows, inspecting the steadily gathering crowd of colourful runners. Over the cumulative distance of 55 miles and four days of racing, the Chilean Francisco Pino had beaten the Frenchman Chaigneau to the finish by just two minutes with a winning time of seven hours and 47 minutes.

Out on the course though, one of the very last to arrive was the senior category runner Angela Temi. When



I had seen the Argentinian woman running during the last four days, she was almost always in deep conversation with another competitor. The one time I spied Temi alone, she was speaking to herself, coaching her body along with a constantly positive pep talk. It had been a happy race for Temi. But as she came through the raised tunnel of hands at the finish, her face creased with emotion. The fight she had been secretly waging against her body and mind became abundantly clear.

As Zolkan 4 Days came to a close, more news came in of the forest fires. A giant international plane known as the Supertanker was now flying missions over the blazes, dropping water like rain to help extinguish the flames. As Temi cried on the remote beach, it seemed that the far greater struggle fought by brave, beautiful and enduring Chile was coming to an end too. 🇨🇱