

CHALLENGE YOURSELF

HOME FIRES

Want to run a volcano a bit closer to home? Happily the UK is littered with the things. Though now extinct, Snowdon, Scafell Pike and even Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh were once active members of the volcano community. It has been suggested that when Ben Nevis last blew, around 350 million years ago, it had the destructive force of Krakatoa.

HOW HARD CAN IT BE?

PUCÓN TRAIL RUN 50K

HOT ON THE TRAIL OF ADVENTURE

Would you run an ultramarathon around a smoking Chilean volcano?

Words and Photos Matt Maynard



MEET THE EXPERT

Originally from the UK, Matt Maynard has lived in Chile since 2014, writing, photographing, climbing mountains and running some epic trails. www.matt-maynard.com

Every trail runner wants certain information from the organiser before heading to an event. You know the stuff... How much elevation gain? What will the weather will be like? Number of aid stations? Will there be pickled onion Monster Munch? Is the volcano likely to explode?

Races in South America, particularly in Chile – in the southern Araucanía region to be precise – have a whole different perspective

when it comes to the challenges faced on the route. The Nimbus Outdoors team behind the Pucón Trail Run 50k doesn't just tempt you around the snowy flanks of any ordinary volcano. No, they choose an active one.

Volcán Villarrica last exploded in March 2015. Lava fountained 1000m into the night sky. Molten boulders tumbled down the illuminated glacier. Residents of nearby towns watched fearfully as the surrounding forests caught fire. Indigenous Mapuche legend →



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tells how Pillán, the God of Thunder, is responsible for these catastrophic events. The Mapuche name for the volcano, Rucapillán, actually means Pillán's house. And so as the race briefing unfolded, two things were made clear. One: Pillán doesn't really like people going round his house. Two: there wouldn't be any Monster Munch.

Valley trail

I've run Villarrica's trails before as a competitor, but today I'm working as a photographer. The organisers send me in by pick-up. At 4am we turn off the Tarmac towards the backside of the volcano. Gravel turns to soil. Overgrown branches thwack from the darkness against the passenger window. In two hours' time the runners will be driven here. But for now it's just me, the river and the low-lying trees. Oh, and the pumas that the driver gleefully assures me stalk this forest.

The route, which boasts 2500m of vertical ascent, sneaks between long-limbed deciduous rauli trees and stouter, moonlight-blocking coihues. By night, the only sound is glacier meltwater, gurgling underfoot through ancient leaf mulch. But as daylight breaks through the canopy, a pneumatic kind of hammering begins. Somewhere beneath the steadily rising trail, the toddler-size Magellanic woodpecker is banging out breakfast bugs.

Nothing in this forest is quite as it seems. Ropes of scaley, green monkey puzzle arch down like umbrellas without



their fabric. Shadows here move throughout the day in mirror image to their northern hemisphere counterparts. And as the trail markers lead up to the snowline the trees soon shrink to bonsai size, before disappearing altogether. From here a rocky ridge of volcanic lava rock now begins to snake its way up the slopes. At this point slower-moving runners will have to don jackets to protect themselves from the wind.

At the front of the pack the fastest competitors are soon in sight. The front runners have something of an escaped-convict look about them. Argentinians,

Gustavo Reyes and his nephew Franco Paredes, are no different. Skidding through frigid lava-scrub and snow, they are momentarily silhouetted against the frosted buttress of neighbouring Volcano Quetupillán. Pumping their hands on their knees on a short climb through rocks, the Argentinians spy Chilean Luis Brevis over their shoulder. Brevis is a dentist by day. But they eyeball him like he's John McClane.

More runners come pouring across the ridge, their bright clothes bobbing like colourful kites over the surrounding monkey-puzzle ocean. Some, after

'For now it's just me, the river and the trees. And the pumas that stalk this forest'

clambering through rocks and bashing a few remaining bushes out the way, just stand and stare when confronted with the white enormity of Volcán Villarrica. Others stop to take selfies, struggling to frame both themselves and the giant smoking cone in the shot.

A few of the slower runners carry wooden sticks to support themselves, collected from the forest below. The first 10km of the race has already seemed to wizen these weary Gandalfs to the exact size of the challenge they have undertaken. Their faces seem lost in thought about whether they will actually make it to the finish.

Chorizo hotdogs and beer

The Pucón Trail Run 50k is a full-blooded mountain running race. From the ridge the runners must now dive between bulbous lumps of magma and through stunted monkey puzzles. These trees become taller with every metre descended into the temperate valley below. There's a pause at the 15km aid station and a momentary respite of

welcome easy dirt-track running. Competitors are then jettisoned once more on to a faint trail of snow, ice, scree and billowing orange trail markings that wind around Villarrica's precipitous skirt to the finish line.

Not so much a picture postcard race, this is more like something from the pages of *National Geographic*. For a British trail runner it's like journeying through a geography textbook come-to-life. Yet while fantastical for us, these mountains are the backdrop to domestic life. Chilean childrens' drawings of home begin with a thick jagged line for the Andes. Earth tremors – which we would call earthquakes if they happened in the UK – barely raise an eyebrow. Words such as *fumarola*, describing volcano-emitted smoke (there's no such word in English), are learnt in primary school.

It is those smokey clouds that are billowing above the finish line at the Pucón ski resort. Paredes beats his uncle by almost half an hour, winning the men's 50k race in 5hr 4min. The Chilean dentist rounds the volcano in fourth. Compatriot Cindy Ramírez is the first woman home in 6hr 48min. It's another five hours before the final competitor crosses the line. All but two of the starting 51 reach the finish.

Regardless of speed, the competitors receive a chorizo hotdog. They cheer the remaining runners in with local beer. On the doorstep of the thunder god, there's now a party in full swing. Luckily for everyone, Pillán decides to have a quiet night in. **TR**

The Andes stretch as far as Patagonia in southern Chile



SPINE-CHILLIN'

The Chilean trail scene

Chile is a land of mountains, glaciers, valleys and volcanoes. A whopping 60% of its land, between the Atacama Desert in the north and the wilderness of Patagonia in the south, has been crinkled, cooked and cracked open to form the world's longest mountain range. The Andes forms the backbone of South America. In Chile the highway Ruta 5 skirts its base connecting the central wine valleys with the adventure capital of Pucón towards the lush south. Outdoorsy types gather here for the region's rafting, volcano trekking, horseback riding and thermal mountain spas.

The trail running calendar in Chile is stuffed with eye-popping events that climb 5000m peaks, cross deserts and break new ground across previously untravelled mountain passes. It's now possible to run well-signposted, smartly organised races almost every weekend of the year. Besides the 50k race, the Pucón Trail Run offers distances of 25km, 12km and a 2km kids' race. Organisers Nimbus Outdoors have two other wild and highly recommended races: the Torrencial Valdivia Trail and the Huilo Huilo Trail Run. Series prize winners receive travel costs to other world-class races of their choice.

Chile has a booming economy and the races are largely attended by wildly motivated urban types, experiencing a safe introduction into a relatively new sport on their doorstep. There is also a fresh crop of sponsored national talent who are already making an impact on the world stage. Beyond organised events, adventurous running is accessible anywhere along the 4000km spine of the Chilean Andes – limited only by fitness and imagination.

In Chile you're never far from a smoking volcano

