



FIELD

FIELD JOURNAL



RUNNING EASTER ISLAND

From The Field

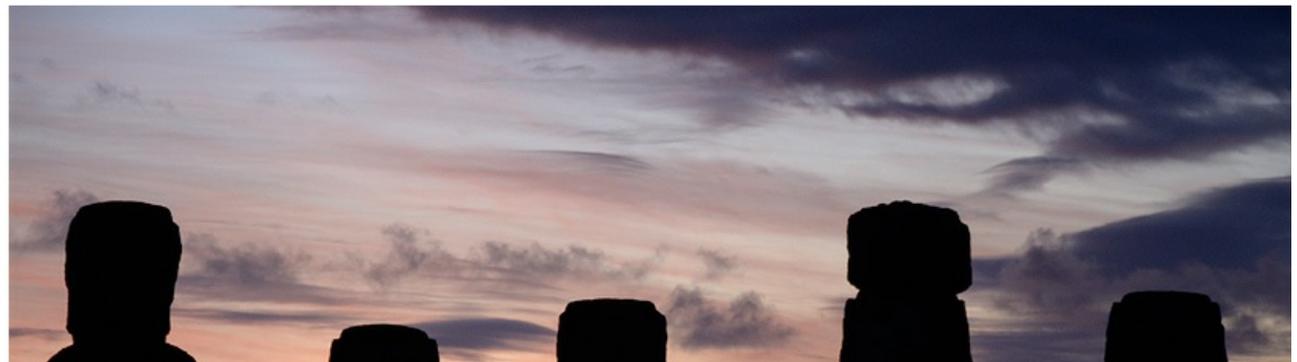
There's only one sure way to win an ultra-marathon and it has nothing to do with strict training regimes, nutritional plans or being lucky on the day. The secret is to be the only entrant, and that usually means organising the event yourself. I called mine the Nui Ultra Trail Run, or the NUTR for short. Though it was unlikely that some random running enthusiast would fly out and join me, I made it an invitational just to be on the safe side, and I didn't invite anyone.

So it was that the pre-dawn glow found me alone at Ahu Tahai, a ceremonial platform just outside Hanga Roa, Rapa Nui's only town. The coral eyes of a *moai* statue glowed menacingly from inside its silhouette, and the only sounds were the crashing of the Pacific Ocean on the jagged shoreline and the juddering of my nervous left leg against the soft earth.

I'd been searching for a way to justify a trip to Easter Island, long on my bucket list, without being just another tourist, and as a keen trail runner it didn't take long before the idea of a circumnavigation by foot arrived in my brain. I calculated the circumference of the island to be about 70km, and as the furthest I'd ever run before was 50km, I considered this a logical step up. I soon discovered that I wasn't the first to attempt this; Susie Stephen, an English running blogger based in Hawai'i, had had the exact same idea two years previously and successfully pulled it off. Initially I was a tad disappointed that I wouldn't be breaking new ground but I came to realise that Susie's experience would be very useful to my own planning and I quickly made contact with her.

Rapa Nui is roughly triangular with a volcano at each corner. The largest of these, Terevaka, I contoured as I ran north and then east. The first part of the route was relatively flat and as long as I kept the sea on my left I couldn't really get lost, so I

soon settled into a rhythm and began to enjoy myself. Although this was the only section of coast that was regularly hiked by tourists, there wasn't much of a trail to follow, just lightly-worn rocks and grass, and the presence of broken lava underfoot was a constant threat to my ankles.





The first real challenge was Poike, the volcano that comprises the easternmost nub of the island, surprisingly morphing into an incongruous red desert rutted by numerous ravines. I'd been running for over five hours by the time I left behind its baking Martian landscape and reached the halfway point at Ahu Tongariki, a ceremonial site home to fifteen standing *moai*. I was still uninjured and feeling pretty optimistic, although the hardest part was yet to come: the long, jagged south coast and its culmination in Rano Kau, Rapa Nui's last and most beautiful volcano.

Three more hours passed before I reached its flanks, with the sun low in the sky and my body tiring rapidly. Amazingly, the steep climb coincided with that most unpredictable of pace mates – the second wind. I forgot my pain and speed-strode up to the rim of the crater, at 315m the highest point of the route, where I was treated to a spectacular panorama. The volcano's opposite rim was a mile away and its marshy crater lake hundreds of metres below, glittering in the early evening light. Slightly out to sea, three small islands were the last outposts of land in an ocean that stretched unbroken all the way to Brisbane, over 9,000km away.

Unfortunately, sheer cliffs prohibited a traverse of the seaward lip of Rano Kau but

the run around the rim was one of the highlights of the day, sustaining me until the final downhill charge into Hanga Roa. The town's seafront seemed endless as I limped towards Ahu Tahai from the opposite direction to that in which I'd left, a strange realisation that threatened to overwhelm me with emotion. I blinked back a few tears, feeling silly. There was no one there to greet me anyway, to cheer me on, to even know what I'd just done, but that didn't matter. In the dying light I cruised to a standstill, hands on hips, breathing hard.

My legs felt like they'd been beaten with an iron bar, but I'd made it. I'd won! It took a few moments to realise that, despite all my careful plans, I'd also come last.

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