



DREAMRUN

ULTRA FIORI - CHILEAN PATAGONIA

WORDS: HART PATRICK

WHY DO WE GO TO THE MOUNTAINS?

Ultra Fiord asked this question of many runners who made the journey to Patagonia for this inaugural race.

Before the event, some answers seemed obvious. There was the draw of running in the shadow of Torres del Paine, the 8th Natural Wonder of the World. There was the chance of seeing a puma, wild bulls and condors. Competitors' reflections would be mirrored in the glacial fiords once navigated by Charles Darwin and Sir Francis Drake. An ascent of a glacier would take them into the remotest of valleys where five months previously, no human being had trodden.

However, there were also additional sensations and deprivations to come. The reality of the race would question the division we seem to draw between our independent forays in the mountains, and those we make when there are people to take our number, refill our water bottles, mop our brow, and tell us everything is going to be alright.

A tally of 14 countries was represented at the start lines for the 30km, 70km, 114km and 174km races. Northern Hemisphere runners shivered in the smudged-out late autumn sunrise. Chilean

runners from Santiago had flown nearly three hours south through their own country. Latinos had arrived, impressed by the most southern depths of Patagonia. They too were wrapped up against the cold that morning, and looked out apprehensively through the rain to where course markers disappeared into the mist.

After 30km of leg-swallowing muddy single track, a chest-deep river crossing and wading through a frigid lake, runners were moving far slower than anticipated. They were cold and fatigued. Behind the shield of clouds obscuring glaciers, tower blocks of ice could be heard collapsing into inland seaways below. Some runners began to question their motivations for coming to these mountains.

Handfuls of gorse and steep steps kicked into peat soil bought runners above the treeline. They emerged into a mess of boulders, where the wind whistled and the temperature dropped further.

From here they climbed up onto a glacier. The race director dubbed this area 'The Fortress' due

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to the number of expeditions he needed simply to find a passage through it.

The descent was laced with narrow crevasses, thinly veiled by a dusting of snow. Runners relied on whatever mountain knowledge they had gleaned over past time on trails to cross them. Skill and luck played equal part.

From here the course direction changed dramatically. Without maps or compasses, many runners became confused in the fog that had washed into the valley, obscuring sparsely placed markers. It was another yojim through the wooded valley to the nearest dirt road. Night fell. Footfall and breathing accompanied the steady shudder of a nearby river, one that five months before had never been heard by human ears.

In the 174km distance, only 11 of the starting 33 runners finished. So tough was it that some felt that the race lacked proper consideration of runners' safety. All agreed the terrain was wild and beautiful. Those who clamoured for the glaciers to be covered, the markers to be clearer, and the food to be more plentiful may have a point. This is what we have come to expect for an entry fee. But that is organised ultra-running. Perhaps this, in many ways, wasn't. It was a more solitary experience. More remote. Harder, perhaps. More dangerous, even. Runners were out there for a very long time, looking out for themselves. It was nature in the raw.

But when we first went into the mountains, wasn't that what everyone was seeking? **EN**

Matt Maynard is a South American-based journalist.

Follow his adventures at www.greenbeantrails.com

Ultra Fiord takes place in April each year. www.ultrafiord.com

Page 96 - Photo by Patricia Ainol. Page 99: Top - Alexis Gaicía; Bottom Left - Leonardo Chavarria (cziphoto.com.ar); Bottom Right - Alexis Gaicía

