

# Trail Running: East Point Reserve to the Himalaya

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As the dust begins to settle on the devastated villages of Nepal my calves, hands and arms have nearly finished peeling and the fatigue is slowly easing. I recently returned to Darwin after a high-altitude multistage 200 km trail run in Upper Mustang, Nepal, which coincided with the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit on 25 April 2015. A succession of earthquakes would continue for several weeks.

**The bet**

I came to be in Nepal because of a bet—or poor negotiation skills on behalf of both parties. In May last year my friend, Ruaridh, promised to enter the 2014 Darwin Gran Fondo with me only if I would enter a running race in May 2015, innocuously titled the Mustang Trail Race. The pictures looked beautiful. Without further thought I agreed to the bet, paid the \$500 USD deposit and put the matter (and any semblance of a training schedule) out of my mind for the next eight months.



**The training** As January 2015 rolled around I thought that I should see a physiotherapist to see if my body was up to a high altitude running race. The physiotherapist thought I should see a podiatrist, who thought I should also see a remedial masseuse, who thought I should consult a professional athlete. Advice fell on deaf ears. I did however eventually start running every day, ninety days out from the race. I also tried to give up alcohol. Tried.

People were generally supportive of the run but I also got the impression they thought us deliriously ill prepared and ignorant of the training required. I cannot disagree. For all its beauty and convenience, hindsight proved that running the East Point loop twice daily does little to prepare for altitude running.

**The run** The race took eight days averaging 25 km per day at altitudes between 2900–4300 m with 8200 m of elevation change. I ran (or managed to move somehow) between three-and-a-half and seven hours a day. Indeed much of the ‘run’ consisted of willing one foot in front of the other while trying to breathe with a constant heart rate of 150 bpm or higher. Some days it felt as though the ‘hill’ would never end and I would continue to count to four over and over in my mind for three hours—just to get one foot in front of the other. Each evening we would consume pasta, rice, dhal bhat, potato and roti in offensive proportions with unmannered speed and then I would hopefully sleep for nine hours while my body went into heat overdrive trying to repair the daily damage.

My sister calls this ‘Type II’ fun: “fun only in retrospect, hateful while it’s happening.” However there was a trance like beauty about the experience; the majesty and hostility of the landscape, the remoteness and simplicity of our existence, the ebb and flow of positive self-talk which had an incredibly humbling and I suspect lasting impact on all twenty-five runners. There were of course many times that I cursed Ruaridh in my mind for getting me into this. However this experience has been one of the most exciting, challenging and dangerous adventures I have ever encountered and for this I am grateful.

**The earthquake** It may come as no surprise to some that I did not feel, or rather, I did not notice the earthquake while many of the other runners did. I think I was so preoccupied with looking for the next spray-painted marker that I failed to give any urgency to the local man waving and shouting at me. It was snowing but this stage I was cold and I had about 18 km to go. There was no time for small talk. I had found the next marker and that was all that seemed to matter. I did not give any significance to the fallen walls in the villages I ran through.

As we crossed the finish line for the day in Lo Manthang, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Mustang, there appeared to be an unusual number of people out in the village which was odd given how cold it was. But again I made nothing of it, nor the mattresses being set up in the fields.

I soon learned that there had been a 7.8 magnitude earthquake not far from Pokhara and Jomsom (which were the two towns with airports we were scheduled to use four days later in order to get back to Kathmandu) and that the death toll was likely to exceed 10 000. We would learn nothing more for four days. Our isolation and limited communication sheltered us from the factual gravity of the disaster; however, rumours and local hysteria made it difficult to judge the best way forward.

I managed to call mum and dad to let them know we were safe—it was Anzac Day and they had not yet heard the news. The conversation was very brief and stoic (I held my tears because I didn’t quite understand why I was upset) and we did not have communication for another four days. We were unaware of the media coverage that the world was seeing and the distress that was unravelling. All we knew was that we were safe (after an unnerving aftershock) and were advised not to return to Kathmandu unless absolutely necessary; so we carried on running for another four days (which was also in the direction of the airstrip we hoped had not been destroyed).

Landslides altered the planned course though not significantly. Seeing the fallen rocks and the columns of dust rising from the mountains was a constant reminder of the precarious situation we were in but again due to our remoteness and the panoramic calmness I dismissed the possibility of immediate danger, rightly or wrongly, on all but one occasion.

**The aftermath** A constant raft of earthquakes and tremors has continued in the weeks since April 25. Hundreds of thousands of homes have been destroyed and media reports of mismanaged funds and disaster response capabilities are certainly not hard to come by. Nepal relies on tourism for ten per cent of its GDP and roughly half a million jobs; while time is needed for Nepal to grieve and rebuild, if you have any interest in visiting Nepal, trailing running or trekking, make sure this beautiful country stays on—or is added to your to-do list. It boasts an incredible landscape and people and by visiting you will help rebuild an energetic and spiritually rich country—although it may not be for the faint hearted.

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