



Winter Wonderland

IT MAY BE FREEZING AT HOME, BUT IT'S NOT JUST THE RACING THAT WILL KEEP YOU WARM IN A CYPRIOT NOVEMBER

BY STEVEN SEATON

We have Arctic air and Arctic winds bringing sleet and snow down from the north. That'll see temperatures plummet across the country. It's only November but winter looks like it's here to stay. Wrap up warm, it's not looking good out there."

I pull back the curtains of my hotel room and glance outside. True, it isn't looking good. An onshore breeze is whipping up the sea and the sun is only just winning its battle with the early morning clouds. We'll be lucky today if the temperature climbs above 20^o – that's Celsius rather than Fahrenheit – but for Cyprus near the end of November that's pretty cool.

Not that I'm too disappointed. For a start I can watch the UK weather forecast on my hotel television confident that here my most challenging clothing question will be hat or no hat. (Obviously hat with this little hair.) Then there's today's race, a relentlessly uphill 11-kilometre run, sheltered from the sea breeze, promising no respite from the Mediterranean sun.

This is the second day of the inaugural Cyprus International Four-Day Challenge and although I've run longer and harder races, I'm apprehensive. I made the mistake of driving over the course two days earlier with the organisers and now I know what's coming.

Generally I subscribe to the ignorance-is-bliss school of course reconnoitring so the knowledge that a 4x4 in first gear struggled over parts of the nasty 500-metre climb is information I don't need. I'm also painfully aware that when I reach the radio tower sitting mockingly at the top of the climb, my already heavy legs still have two days and two races to go. It's not enough that I have to run up the damn hill, I'll have to do it quickly for the fear of losing my spot in the rankings. Well, that's quickly for me.

The format in Cyprus will be a familiar one to anyone who has run more established multi-day events on the islands of Lanzarote and Malta: a series of short, sharp races used as an excuse for afternoons by the poolside and evenings in the bar. In this case it's four different races on four consecutive days: a 6K-road prologue, the 11K hill race, a stunningly beautiful if demanding trail half-marathon and a fast, flat 10K in and around the nearby town of Paphos.

The sunshine part of the deal is of the five-star variety at the race HQ, the sprawling Coral Beach hotel, which sits over the enticing sandy beaches on the unspoilt western corner of Cyprus. It was where the British Olympic Team based itself before the Athens Olympic Games, which explains the 50-metre outdoor pool in the gardens and the well-equipped gym and running track a short drive away. The British Olympic Association continues to use the hotel as a winter training base for a variety of national squads making for a strange mix of guests milling around the breakfast buffet. During our stay, the Lycra-clad members of the British rowing team are a frequent sight around the hotel towering over the Saga holidaymakers in their comfortable shoes and cardigans and our own group of skinny runners.

Cyprus appeals to us all. Although physically its rocky, sun-baked terrain is a mix between Mediterranean and Middle Eastern, the island still has an underlying British feel and that's not just because of the Tetley's bitter and Sky Sports on offer at many of the bars in Paphos. The British were the last in a long line of the island's colonial occupiers and our

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influence remains: most of the population speaks decent English, they drive on the left, use pounds (well Cypriot pounds) and even have three-pronged British plugs in the hotel rooms. What might also surprise you if your geography is a little scratchy is just how far away it is. It sits just off the coast of Syria in the far eastern part of the Mediterranean and is far closer to Jerusalem than Athens. It took the best part of five hours to fly there by Cyprus Airways. In practical terms that location equals year-round sunshine and winter temperatures that make tights and rain jackets exotic items of running kit.

Sun hats, though, are popular, particular with the sun sinking for the start of the late afternoon 6K that kicks off the challenge. The Tour de France-style prologue is supposed to be a gentle introduction to the competition yet is anything but. With the 50-strong field starting every 30 seconds in reverse age order the “carrot” of a runner just ahead and the “stick” of another chasing, has most of the field sprinting flat out past the palm trees and banana plantations. As well as personal pride, everyone is competing for the event’s first two yellow jerseys.

There is another for the leading man and woman after each of the following days’ races. That’s about as far as the cycling analogy goes: there is no polka dot jersey for best climber or green for most consistent finisher and no one seems interested in being my *domestique* for the four days. The trouble with running is that you have to do all the hard work yourself.

That hard work starts the next morning. We leave the luxury of our hotel with the knowledge that there’s only a marathon to go – actually it’s 44K, to be precise, plus a big hill. No, make that two very big hills because I’ve seen the half-marathon course as well. But I’m not the only one who knows what lies ahead.

Although the majority of us have travelled from the UK specifically to take part in the event, our numbers are bolstered by a

handful of Cypriot-based ex-pats and British servicemen. Four of the latter are using the Challenge as the first stage of their preparations for the 2007 Marathon des Sables. They seem apprehensive although I sense that’s mostly because they have to run all four days wearing a striking red white and blue, Union Jack vest and shorts combination.

I doubt the ruggedly beautiful Akamus nature reserve has seen anything like it before. The area must be the only extended stretch of land in

Cyprus where you won’t find a half-built concrete villa somewhere on the horizon. Its steep, rolling hills are a magnet for recreational walkers, trail runners and mountain bikers, although not too many would tackle the hill we are about to run up.

The first three kilometres offer the false promise of a flat sandy path beside the sea. Then the real hill starts. It’s not quite the hands-on-thighs steep that would justify a walk, but it’s steep enough to torture your calves and quads. Still, it’s surprising how quickly you climb vertically even if the big orange kilometre boards and the drinks stations on the roadside pass painfully slowly. Most of the 500m climb is in the middle 5K and it’s slow going. The views back down to the sea are stunning but few are inclined to look around, focusing instead on the grey paved road rising relentlessly in front. Then slowly the climb flattens out for a relatively comfortable final 2K to the finish.

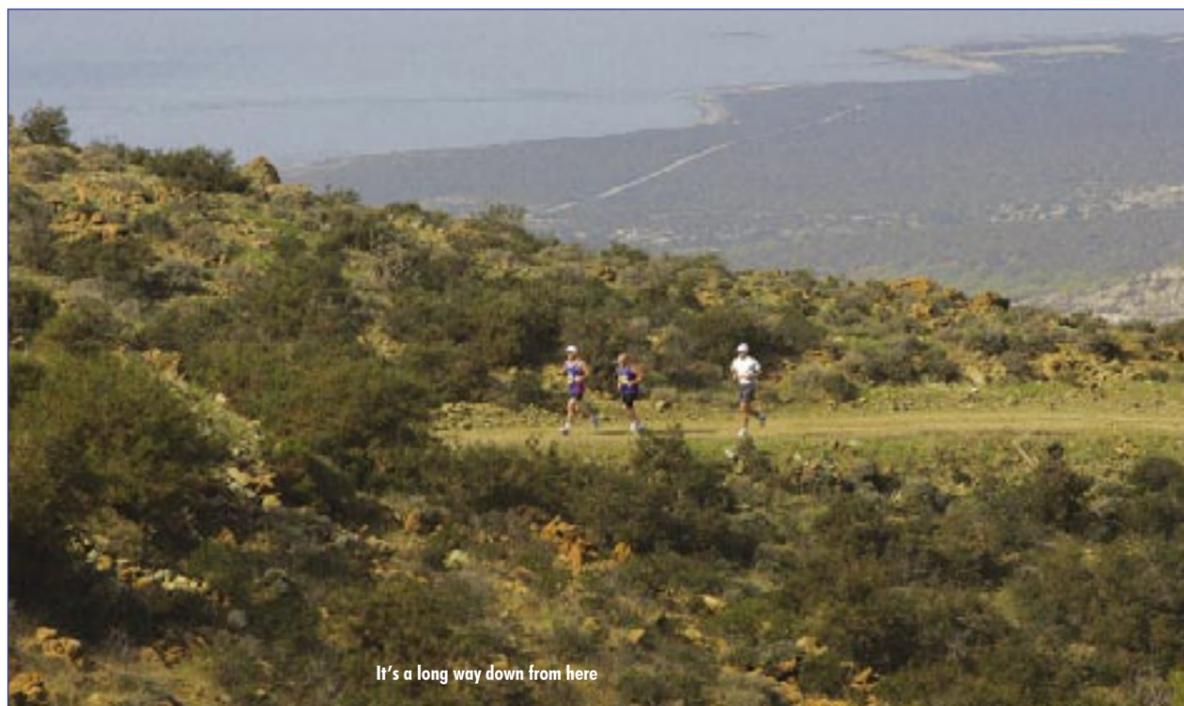
The hill is a metaphor for the whole challenge, appearing harder than it really is. It’s steep and tough but it’s not impossible or debilitating. Everyone in the field – and it’s a mixed group from experienced marathon and ultra runners to those who have never done a half-marathon before – is done inside an hour and three-quarters and back on the bus to share their war stories beside the hotel pool in the afternoon.

Another day, another race – and this is the long one. Any suggestion that yesterday wasn’t that bad would raise an argument from your legs this morning. It certainly looks that way as the field wobbles away from the start on to a half-marathon that promises “spectacular views over gently undulating terrain”.

The part about the spectacular views is no lie. This is an area of Cyprus that few tourists find, rich in fauna and wildlife, where tree-lined forest paths lead on to rocky mountain trails and stunning vistas open up around every corner. What looks great from the comfort of a 4x4 is less so on foot, particular if you’re desperate to hold off the runner one place behind in last night’s ranking. For “gently undulating” read “a hilly 10K climb up one side of the Akamus peninsula and an 8K descent to the sea, with a flat 3K to the finish”.

While few PBs are in evidence it is hard not to run the second half much faster than the first. I am quite happy with my 1:41 finish considering it takes nearly 54 minutes to reach the second drinks station at 10K and I hold my place in the rankings. Remarkably I manage the frighteningly quick descent with all my skin intact. Not everyone is so fortunate.

Other than the odd bloodied bandage, what strikes you at the finish is how smoothly the Challenge runs. That despite the fact that it’s being



It's a long way down from here

held in a relatively inaccessible remote part of the island and Arena, the local tour company organising it alongside the UK-based 2:09 Events, has never put on a running event before. You would not know: kilometre markers and water stations pop up at metronomic regularity; the routes are clearly marked with enthusiastic marshals at every ambiguous point; finishing times are shouted out as you cross the line and pinned up in the hotel a few hours later: there’s even a sweep bus and ambulance discreetly following behind the last runner.

What’s also evident is the camaraderie throughout the field of runners. The group is small enough that by the end of the first day everyone knows everyone else and, since the coach back to the hotel won’t go until the last finisher is in, the biggest crowds always await the slowest runner.



It is the same on the final day when there’s definitely an end of term feel to the early morning gathering in Paphos. The final 10K, which the organisers want to turn into a mass-participation event in its own right, is bolstered by a handful of extra local runners (and more servicemen who have lost a bet and have to wear the funny kit) but it’s still a small field. In distance and running time it’s much shorter than the previous two days but no less effort. The fast, flat course goes out past the tourist bars, restaurants and hotels of Paphos and, after skirting the countryside, comes back the same way. Its best part, both in terms of scenery and emotionally, is the finish alongside the harbour and in front of the town’s quietly imposing medieval fortress.

It’s not super-fast at the front but it is competitive. Yesterday’s big faller, Scott Kennedy, earns the individual trophy for the Paphos 10K and lifts himself back into the overall top three behind the overall winner, Stephen Tompkin, and Tony Vout. Kennedy’s final-day effort pushes Deborah Webb, a Cypriot-based Briton, down to fourth, but she has the consolation of taking the women’s yellow jersey ahead of Anita Cavelle and Rebecca Dicker. The grand trophies handed over at a big post-race dinner

are surely symbolic of where the Challenge will be in a few years time. The courses, organisation and hotel complex all have the capacity for 10 times our number.

Next year the numbers will definitely multiply as word leaks out that this is not just a real challenge, but a really fun one too. Of course that’s only going to escalate as those cold fronts from the Arctic continue to bring snow, sleet and sub-zero temperatures to the UK.

So you want to take part in the Cyprus Four-Day Challenge...

This year’s event will take place from November 30 to December 3.

For full details and prices, see www.209events.com